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Phonics Instruction to Close the Gap between Students in 4th and 5th Grade Special Education

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Phonics Instruction to Close the Gap between Students in 4th and 5th Grade

Special Education

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Capstone Project: An Action Research Project

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

Abstract

Action research was conducted to determine if explicit phonics instruction would bridge the gap between students and their grade-level peers. Fourth and fifth-grade students were taught for six-weeks utilizing Really Great Reading's HD word program. Grade-level fluency probes were used to monitor student progress at the beginning and end of the six-weeks as well as the Diagnostic Decoding Survey (DDS). Findings concluded that all students' fluency improved on their correct words per minute and accuracy as well as on the DDS. Further research would be needed to determine how long it would take for students to close the gap between them and their grade-level peers.

Keywords: Phonics, Explicit Instruction, fourth and fifth-grade students

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Phonics Instruction to Close the Gap between Students in 4th and 5th Grade Special Education

Introduction

“Phonics is the knowledge of the regular relationships found in English. Phonics is the practical application of the alphabetic principle. Phonics knowledge allows students to read words that they have not encountered before.” (Really Great Reading, 2015) Phonics teaches readers how to understand how to figure out how to read words that they have not seen or heard before. Instructions are focused on phonics in k-2 and less, if at all, in upper elementary.

Students miss this instruction due to processing, behavior, moving schools, or extended illness. Phonics is important to not only struggling readers but all readers no matter what their ability is. When students understand how sounds make words and the relationship between them, it makes them stronger readers. Trends in reading instruction changing from year to year make inconsistent expectations of teachers being Master of Teaching phonics instruction with fidelity. (Mesmer & Griffith, 2006)

The research conducted will focus on fourth and fifth-grade students who are struggling with reading and may not understand the relationship between sounds and words. To become better readers, explicit phonics instruction could be utilized to bridge the gap in learning for different factors that made it so that students did not receive that instruction when it was introduced. Different methods of teaching children have been utilized, such as the whole language, but this research is to determine how explicit

phonics instruction will improve reading fluency for fourth and fifth-grade students who are entitled to special education services.

When conducting this research, there were few resources that focused on upper elementary, middle school, or high school phonics instructions. With the global pandemic and students missing out on their important years of learning, phonics instruction in the upper elementary and beyond is more important than ever to help with filling any skills students may have missed in those milestone years. Articles that were peer-reviewed were found in the DeWitt Library. These articles were focused on explicit phonics instruction, special education, and upper elementary students.

The research will show knowledge of phonics is an important skill to have, especially for struggling readers. Diving into phonics with older students who may have missed the instruction when they were in the primary grades will be able to make further connections and comprehend the material more than when they were younger or first taught these skills. With the explicit instruction of phonics, fourth and fifth-grade students will be able to decode words and recognize parts of sounds that go together to form words.

In the past, there have been different viewpoints on how to teach children how to read and the best way to go about getting the best outcome possible for students. Fourth and fifth-grade students who are lacking phonological awareness may benefit from explicit instruction that is focused on phonics. This will help their fluency and to be able to decode and encode words to gain meaning which will ultimately lead to understanding what they are reading and for what purpose. Teacher preparation and fidelity with teaching phonics instruction. Students missing that core instruction in lower

elementary and struggling to meet grade-level standards in reading. The continued need for phonics instruction in upper elementary to address the need for meeting grade-level standards by closing those gaps by explicitly teaching phonics skills.

Review of the Literature

Phonics Instruction vs Whole Words

Throughout the years the trends in how reading is taught have changed from whole words and phonics. Many have debated over the science of reading, which has been implemented in many state policies since implementation in 1987. Science of reading means that students will use word recognition, phonics, direct instruction of a certain skill, fluency, comprehension monitoring, vocabulary instruction, and background knowledge. (*Nationwide Leadership on the Science of Reading for Over 35 Years*, 2015)

In a study, it is explained that everyone has heard the term explicit systematic phonics but has different ways of interpreting what it is. This can cause confusion and inconsistent explicit instruction among children resulting in different results on how effective phonics instruction is. It was stated that it has two meanings, a “system of encoding speech into written symbols” and “teaching learnings the relationships between letters and sounds and how to use this system to recognize words.” (Mesmer & Griffith, 2006) The English alphabet is a code and when students know this code, they can “unlock a large proportion of the system of English orthography.” (Mesmer & Griffith, 2006)

A study was done with kindergarteners and reading sight words, the teacher wrote the words on the board and the students orally repeated the words after the

teacher stated them. They broke the word up by each phoneme while tapping up their arm with each sound. The teacher went through the grapheme as well with the students. Then cover the first row, the row that the students previously learned, and read a new line with the same words to practice. After eight sessions, the students showed successful improvement on the 35-word list. Before the intervention, students were only able to read 3.8 words out of 10. Whereas after the intervention, students were reading an average of 8.6 correct out of 10 words. (Rubin, 2018) Site word intervention and teaching how certain sounds in one word have only made a positive implication on those 10 site words over eight sessions. Phonics instruction teaches the relationship between sounds and letters with how they work together.

An author discusses that the science of reading is only getting to a small part of what it takes for children to learn how to read not only for academics but for pleasure reading. They believe that reading is more than just learning whole words and phonics. Learning to read, especially in the digital world we live in where so much reading is through text messages, email, social media, blogs, and tweets, is more about accessing written language through different forms. (Alexander, 2020) The author goes on to say that children, no matter the age, develop as readers as they progress through school and the level of text becomes increasingly more challenging. (Alexander, 2020) When students are not progressing through school at the same rate as their peers, some type of explicit intervention needs to be in place so that students are not falling further behind their grade-level peers.

Teacher preparation

Before teaching a class or group of students, teachers go through college to gain the knowledge to be effective teachers. A concern for students is that they are not

learning how to read. A study was done to observe their knowledge of phonological awareness, phonics, comprehension, and vocabulary in two teacher college education programs. (Clark, Helfrich, & Hatch, 2017) The study found that there were large differences between the two programs regarding the number of courses completed. The study challenged that education programs need to include more content-related courses and balance them out with pedagogical knowledge. (Clark, Helfrich, & Hatch, 2017) Education programs may need to evaluate their programs to address the need of current as well as future students to ensure that their preservice teachers know and understand the basics when teaching how to read.

Special education teachers are trained to deliver specially designed instruction for students with disabilities. A study explored the effects of preservice special education teachers on their knowledge of teaching literacy, which includes phonics. (Englert, Mariage, Truckenmiller, Brehmer, Hicks., & Chamberlain, 2020) The coursework for preservice teachers was given courses with field experiences to utilize the literacy skills for phonics instruction. The study showed that preservice special education teachers and their tutored students benefitted from the preservice teachers implementing phonics protocol. (Englert, Mariage, Truckenmiller, Brehmer, Hicks., & Chamberlain, 2020) This demonstrates that not only general education teachers, but special education preservice teachers need further instruction on what phonics is and how to teach it, as well as experience teaching it to readers who struggle before going out in their classroom.

Preservice principals have indicated different areas in need of improvement and some of those areas are reading comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, literacy skills,

and phonics. (Bickmore, Roberts, & Gonzales, 2020). The preservice principals recognized that students were struggling with reading and that monitoring students' knowledge of phonics was important. (Bickmore, Roberts, & Gonzales, 2020). From their study, they created school improvement plans that included instruction and monitoring of phonics, along with the other areas identified in language arts as well as math. When all stakeholders, which include principals, are on board with implementing plans to aid struggling readers benefits all students.

After teachers have completed their course of study, it is up to the teacher to continue their learning through courses on their own or through school-wide professional development. Teachers' understanding and teaching are looked at for effectiveness on their students. A study has shown that the best phonics instruction is in a small group with explicit instruction, but this study discovered that teachers were teaching phonics in whole groups with students who have learning disabilities. From this study, it was found that only a small amount of time was geared towards explicit phonics instruction, students have not grouped appropriately as well as time was wasted due to teacher redirection. This study demonstrates that all teachers and administrators need to be on the same page to effectively provide explicit instruction to their struggling readers to ensure the best possible outcome for their students as lifelong readers. (Folsom, Reed, Aloe, & Schmitz, 2019).

How Phonics Instruction Has Impacted Students

The screener of preschool children was assessed to see what the students' phonemic understanding was and that they master the foundational literacy skills that are vital for early elementary. (Double, McGrane, Stiff, & Hopfenbeck, 2019) These

same students were reassessed 1-4 years later to assess their comprehension skills in upper elementary school. (Double, McGrane, Stiff, & Hopfenbeck, 2019) The author found that students who struggled with their initial foundational phonics skills continued to struggle with these skills as they got older. (Double, McGrane, Stiff, & Hopfenbeck, 2019) This author shows that it is important for students to receive explicit instruction in phonics as early elementary students but if those skills are not learned while the student is in the primary grades, they will need to learn this skill to ensure comprehension.

A study that focused on students in fourth and fifth grades that work with a special education teacher that delivers explicit phonics instruction to fill in gaps was done with minimal off-task behavior and instruction done with fidelity. (Ciullo, Ely, Alves, & Kennedy, 2019) The teachers focused on skills that were not usually a focus with upper elementary students but combined that teaching with comprehension to ensure grade-level material is not missed. The students who went to a lower-performing school had lower state average reading scores. (Ciullo, Ely, Alves, & Kennedy, 2019) Students who are entitled to special education services may need those foundational skills in fourth and fifth grade to be able to access the general education curriculum.

In a study on first-grade students, it was found successful with the initial decoding skills of students who were behind their grade-level peers. (Bradley & Noell, 2018) Through constant time-delayed instruction of phonics, this study found that students made further gains toward grade-level peers. (Bradley & Noell, 2018) It was also stated that the explicit instruction of phonics through constant time delay was beneficial for grade-level peers as well as students who have a learning disability. (Bradley & Noell, 2018) Phonics instruction has shown success with all students if done

with fidelity but there have been multiple ways to deliver that instruction that makes the results inconsistent if teachers are not delivering that instruction consistently. If students are not receiving the instruction, then the gap becomes larger by the time they are in fourth and fifth grade.

Students on a Tier 2 intervention received 20 minutes of one-on-one phonics instruction from a trained tutor. The study focused on progress monitoring and how different forms of those measurements will focus on oral reading, and nonsense-word fluency. (Van Norman, Nelson, & Parker, 2018) When districts or schools are deciding which tool to monitor, different students' responses to the intervention may be different from the scores of a different district. (Van Norman, Nelson, & Parker, 2018) The study found only a small difference between students depending on the form of progress monitoring used but there was a small difference between them. (Van Norman, Nelson, & Parker, 2018) When comparing student data, the same instruction and progress monitoring needs to be done with fidelity to ensure that students' knowledge that they have gained is accurately represented.

Continued Need for Phonics Instruction

Students may need further instruction in phonics due to missed instruction in the primary grades for multiple reasons and one of those may be due to a student having an emotional or behavioral disorder. (Garwood, McKenna, & Ciullo, 2020) Students with or who have EDB are either a grade or more behind their peers. These students may not react positively to early intervention. Research-based, direct instruction that is explicit, and proactive behavior management supports are critical to increasing engagement with students. (Garwood, McKenna, & Ciullo, 2020) The author speaks

about how at the beginning the student should feel successful in their learning. Students who struggle with reading at an early age are at a higher risk of not graduating high school. Reaching students, especially those who are at a higher risk, with explicit phonics instruction is critical to ensure they are successful.

A study of middle school students who were tutored by high school students for 15 minutes daily in phonics, sight word phrases, and story passages. The study states that even though there are interventions in place for the general education setting as well as the special education setting, students are still struggling with reading. (Lingo, 2014) It goes on to state that fluency is critical for students to be able to read. With the practice of repeated readings, the study focused on building up the student's fluency level. (Lingo, 2014) This study found success with peer tutors to deliver supplemental instruction that may not be time that is available from teachers.

Students from elementary as well as middle school who have moderate intellectual disabilities received instruction for a study that analyzes skills that are phonological awareness, letter-sound correspondences, and blending. (Fredrick, Davis, Alberto, & Waugh, 2013) The study states that students with moderate intellectual disabilities were not provided explicit instruction on phonics but on sight words. The study found that all students improved when explicitly taught phonic skills, with giving more opportunities to generalize phonic skills. (Fredrick, Davis, Alberto, & Waugh, 2013) Consistent with Bradley & Noell, this author agrees that explicit phonics skills aid all students in learning how to become fluent readers.

Rural sixth, seventh, and eighth graders were a part of a study that focuses on explicit instructions within three different programs. (Shippen, Miller, Patterson,

Houchins, & Darch, 2014) Overall, the study found that improving the reading scores of students greatly depends on evidence-based practices and they found that their initial performance was based on where they started. The author that's that "adolescent learners who struggle tend to achieve only modest gains in terms of improving basic reading skills, which suggests that reading deficits appear to be relatively fixed and resistant to correction by the middle grades." (Shippen, Miller, Patterson, Houchins, & Darch, 2014) Double, McGrane, Stiff, & Hopfenbeck was discussing that it is vital that students are explicitly taught phonics skills in the preschool and early elementary ages, so they are successful when they reach middle school.

Methods

Participants

Research question

Will utilizing phonics instruction close the gap for 4th and 5th graders and their grade-level peers?

Six students, five fifth graders, and one fourth grader were monitored by a weekly one-minute fluency grade-level probe. The research site was within a classroom outside of the general education setting. The room was quiet with minimal distractions throughout the lessons. The school is a Title 1 school with 98% of students receiving free and reduced lunches. There are 250 students within the school, each grade had two sections within each classroom there were about 15 to 18 students.

Students were from three different general education classrooms. Students were fourth and fifth graders with mixed groupings depending on need. There were six students in the study. All six students are on IEPs, one student has a behavior goal and

works with the level behavior program and one student is program placed in the life skills program. There were two girls, four boys, five fifth graders, and one fourth grader. All students have been with the school for at least one year.

Within their instruction, students are taught from the Really Great Reading Program HD word program. They will receive explicit phonics instruction for 30 minutes a day, Monday through Friday. Phonics instruction is taught through a gradual release of I do, we do, you do model. For the last 15 minutes, instruction will focus on practicing being a fluent reader by working through a chapter book by reviewing vocabulary as well as practicing skills taught during phonics instruction. Students discuss and practice the sounds to create the multisyllabic words that are found within the novel.

Utilizing grade-level one-minute Fastbridge weekly fluency probe, students will be given a passage to read within one minute. The progress monitor will document the words read correctly and identify words that were read incorrectly. From there, the percent accuracy will be calculated by taking the number of words read divided by the number of words read correctly. The school district utilized the data given from these assessments three times per year to drive tiered instruction.

Data will also be collected utilizing the Diagnostic Decoding Survey to monitor skills gained throughout the six-week period. The DDS gives different types of words with diagraphs, trigraphs, single syllables as well as multisyllabic words. After six weeks and assess if students have learned from their explicit instruction.

An excel form with letters for the student's name will be utilized with no identifying markers to be traced to a particular student. The data will be kept in a locked

file drawer that only the teacher has access to and will be kept electronically through an excel form.

Data collected throughout the action research was quantitative. Data that was collected starts with the baseline and final score from time data was collected. Monitoring was done through the Fastbridge grade-level one-minute fluency probe. The DDS will be utilized with a pre and post-test. The data will be analyzed by looking at the pretest and post-test to determine if the student had improved from the beginning of the research to the end. Grade-level norms will be evaluated to determine if students are progressing closer to their grade-level peers.

Data Collection

The data collected was quantitative which was grade-level fluency. Each student was monitored individually for their grade-level probe. They were given the title of the story and were given one minute to read the passage as fast and accurately as they can. After one minute, they were told to stop. While the student was reading, the teacher would mark each word read incorrectly or skipped. Each of those would be marked as an error that counted against their correct words per minute as well as their accuracy.

When the student had completed their reading, the student and teacher would count the words read correctly and the words that were read incorrectly. The total would then be divided by words read correctly to get an accuracy score. They discussed what went well in the reading and go through the errors to see what parts of the word were giving the student trouble. After six weeks, the same procedure for collecting the grade-

level fluency probe would be the same to see how the student improved on the post-test.

For the diagnostic decoding survey, students were given the survey to read from that is sectioned off based on the skill that is being assessed. Students will then read each line while the teacher is marking for accuracy. The words are nonsense words and students will have to rely on their phonics knowledge to be able to read the words provided. The last six words are real words.

After the student completes the survey, the teacher will calculate their score. For the post-test, the same procedure will be utilized, and the scores will be compared to determine if the student did make an improvement.

Findings

Data Analysis

The data collected during the six-weeks, students were given a pre and posttest on their grade level progress monitoring probe that demonstrated if students improved their correct words per minute (CWPM) and accuracy.

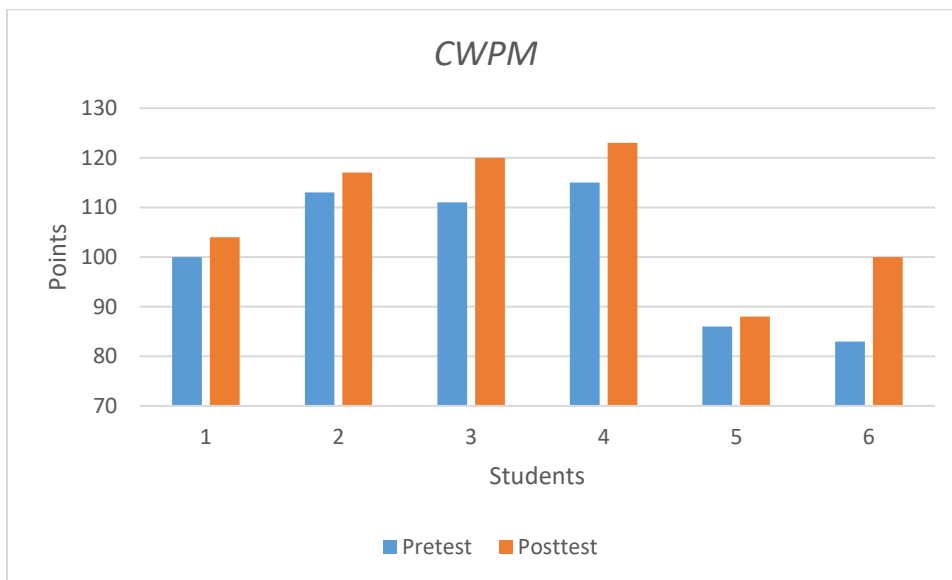
Student one read 100 CWPM on the pretest and 104 CWPM (Figure 1) on their posttest with their accuracy starting at 100% and posttest accuracy of 99% (Figure 2). Student two read 113 CWPM on the pretest and 117 CWPM (Figure 1) on their posttest with their accuracy starting at 100% and posttest accuracy of 98% (Figure 2). Student three read 111 CWPM on the pretest and 120 CWPM (Figure 1) on their posttest with their accuracy starting at 97% and posttest accuracy of 99% (Figure 2). Student four read 115 CWPM on the pretest and 123 CWPM (Figure 1) on their posttest with their accuracy starting at 98% and posttest accuracy of 99% (Figure 2). Student five read 86

CWPM on the pretest and 88 CWPM (Figure 1) on their posttest with their accuracy starting at 97% and posttest accuracy of 97% (Figure 2). Student six read 83 CWPM on the pretest and 100 CWPM (Figure 1) on their posttest with their accuracy starting at 97% and posttest accuracy of 100% (Figure 2).

On the Advance Diagnostic Decoding Survey, there are 30 total points that students can score that measure their knowledge of phonics. (Figure 3) Student one earned 20 points on the pretest and 24 points on the posttest (Figure 3). Student two earned 22 points on the pretest and 26 points on the posttest (Figure 3). Student three earned 21 points on the pretest and 27 points on the posttest (Figure 3). Student four earned 21 points on the pretest and 27 points on the posttest (Figure 3). Student five earned 22 points on the pretest and 25 points on the posttest (Figure 3). Student six earned 18 points on the pretest and 20 points on the posttest (Figure 3). Student six earned 19 points on the pretest and 25 points on the posttest (Figure 3).

(Figure 1)

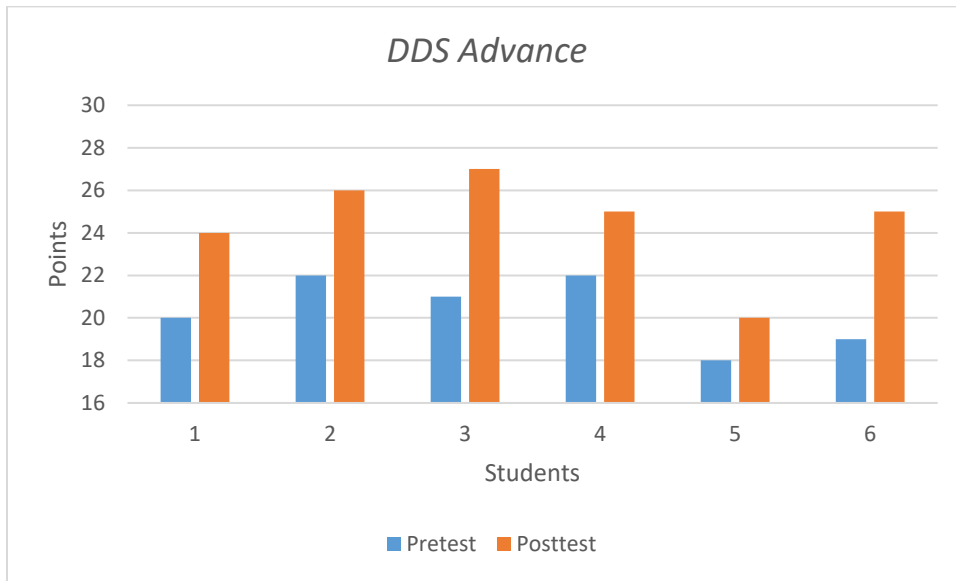
Correct Words Per Minute



Note: Correct words per minute on a grade level probe for pre and posttest scores bar graph.

(Figure 2)

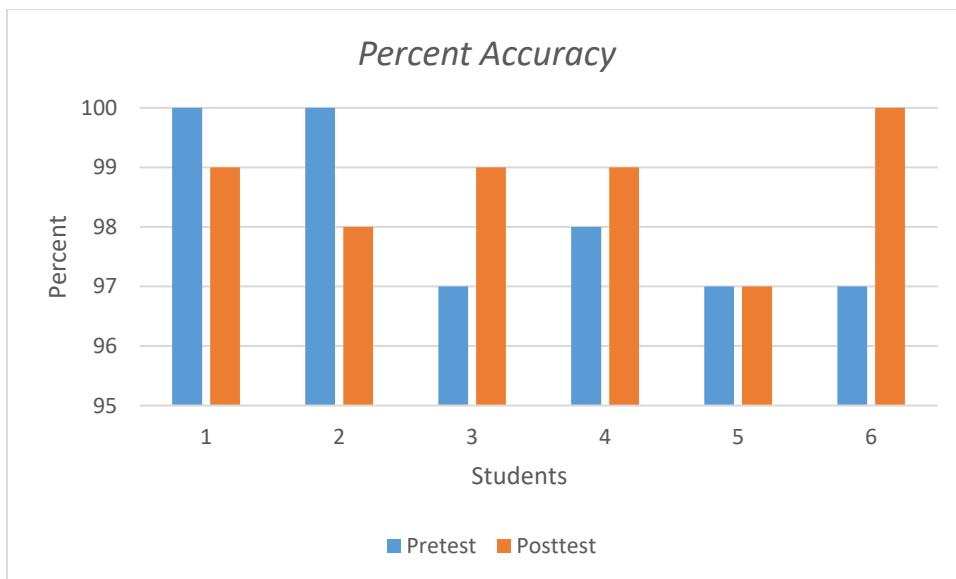
Diagnostic Decoding Survey



Note: Diagnostic decoding survey pre and posttest scores bar graph.

(Figure 3)

Accuracy on a grade level probe for pre and posttest scores bar graph.



Note: Accuracy on a grade level probe for pre and posttest scores bar graph.

On the grade-level fluency passages, all six students improved. Two students improved by four CWPM, one student scored nine more CWPM, one student scored eight CWPM, one student scored two more CWPM, and one student scored seventeen more CWPM from their pretest to posttest (Figure 1). Students' accuracy was less consistent with two students' accuracy decreasing by one or two percent from their pretest, which was 100% accuracy (Figure 3). Three student's accuracy improved, and one student remained the same from the pretest to the posttest (Figure 3).

Fourth-grade students are considered high risk if they read below 84 CWPM in the fall, 101 in the winter, and 113 in the spring. They are considered at some risk if they read less than 115 CWPM in the fall, 133 CWPM in the winter, and 147 CWPM in the spring of their fourth-grade year. Students are considered at grade level or above if they read more than 144 CWPM in the fall, 161 CWPM in the winter, and 175 CWPM. (Fastbridge, 2022) At the time of the study, it is the fall of the student's fourth-grade year.

Fifth-grade students are considered high risk if they read below 100 CWPM in the fall, 114 in the winter, and 127 in the spring. They are considered at some risk if they read less than 132 CWPM in the fall, 149 CWPM in the winter, and 162 CWPM in the spring of their fifth-grade year. Students are considered at grade level or above if they read more than 163 CWPM in the fall, 178 CWPM in the winter, and 192 CWPM. (Fastbridge, 2022) At the time of the study, it is the fall of the student's fifth-grade year.

For the Diagnostic Decoding Survey (DDS), all students improved from their pretest to their posttest. Two students earned two more points, two students earned six

more points, one student earned 2, and one student earned three more points on the DDS from the pretest to the posttest.

Overall, the outcome of the grade level one-minute fluency probe and DDS, students improved over the six-weeks of data collection. The fifth grade students improved by a few points, but the fourth-grade student had the largest growth out of the students. One student had different negative behaviors that included throwing materials and leaving the classroom as well as the building which resulted in the loss of instructional time. The data demonstrates that explicit phonics instruction done with fidelity, will yield positive outcomes as well as having mixed grade leveled students.

From the data, students should continue to improve their phonics knowledge which will improve their fluency. Over time, if done with fidelity, students should continue to bridge the gap between themselves, and their grade level peers.

Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

Throughout the six-week explicit phonics instruction, utilizing correct words per minute, accuracy on a grade level passage as well as the diagnostic decoding survey; students have improved on their reading and how smoothly they read. When students were given their grade level probe, they improved their CWPM and accuracy. On the DDS, all students improved by demonstrating that they gained knowledge in phonics

Students were engaged in six-week explicit phonics instruction from the Really Great Reading HD Word Program. Through this program, students were able to learn different aspects of phonics instruction to gain further knowledge of how sounds relate

to words. Students were given this instruction in small groups or one-on-one with fidelity five days a week with practicing reading fluently through a leveled text.

Limitations of the Study

With students are already in fourth and fifth grade when receiving explicit phonics instruction, as the Double, McGrane, Stiff, & Hopfenbeck article stated that is important that students receive this instruction during early elementary. Given that students are already struggling with phonics makes is more likely that they will continue to struggle as they get older. Lingo stated that the challenge becomes more when students enter middle school due to perceptions by peers, it is very important students receive this instruction before middle school.

One student didn't make as much growth as their peers. This student missed instruction due to negative behavior that caused a major disruption in their learning. Throughout the six-weeks, the student was out of class and would walk out while refusing instruction while causing the environment to become unsafe. While the student made some growth, this demonstrates how important fidelity in a program is to students learning.

Further Study

Further studies would be to see how long it would take for students to make enough growth to close the gap between them and their peers. Students demonstrated that the phonics instruction improved their fluency and accuracy on grade level fluency probes. Student 3 in figure 2 made huge growth and is close to meeting the 30 points on the Diagnostic Decoding Survey, this student would progress to the next program.

Another study that would be beneficial would be to gauge the fidelity of instruction based on attendance, interruptions due to behavior, interruptions due to school events, or how teachers work through the programs at different paces due to student needs. The school where this research was conducted is a Title 1 building with students who require more support for behavior. There is also a large population of students who will move in and out throughout one school year and monitor students as they move from school to school.

Conclusion

Phonics instruction is important for students to be able to access grade level materials to read. This study supports the importance of explicit phonics instruction done with fidelity with fourth and fifth-grade students. The six-week action research improved all students' fluency in reading a grade level passage by improving their correct words per minute and accuracy. The results are that 100% of students who participated in the explicit instruction of phonics improved over the six-week period.

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