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**EMERGENT LITERACY INTERVENTION IN FIRST GRADE STRUGGLING  
READERS**

by

Colleen McGettigan

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Education  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Master of Arts in Reading Education  
at  
Rowan University  
December 18, 2015

Thesis Chair: Susan Browne, Ed.D.

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## **Dedications**

I dedicate this thesis to my husband and two children. Thank you for your love, understanding, and patience. Additionally, I would like to thank my classmates, who without their support, this would have been impossible.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to acknowledge the two students who allowed me to work so hard to explore how best to help develop their reading abilities in First Grade. I would also like to acknowledge their teachers, who rearranged schedules and worked with me in an effort to benefit First Grade readers.

## **Abstract**

Colleen McGettigan

EMERGENT LITERACY INTERVENTION IN FIRST GRADE STRUGGLING  
READERS  
2015-2016

Dr. Susan Browne

Master of Arts in Reading Education

Because of the documented positive impact of small group intervention on student success, this research investigates the impact of participation in teacher research on emergent literacy intervention grounded in student data. This research focused on exploring how dedicated, meaningful, targeted instruction based on assessment can foster reading readiness and increase reading potential for two low achieving 1st grade students. The research design consisted of student and teacher interviews, diagnostic testing, and teacher journaling. The research inquiry was: 1) What are the effects of intensive small group instruction in phonemic awareness, coupled with deep conversations about culturally responsive literature for struggling 1st grader students?; 2) How can using multicultural or culturally conscious literature expand students' attitudes toward reading?; and 3) How can systematic, explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and alphabetic principle strengthen overall reading success?

Qualitative data was used to plan systematic lessons and followed a specific sequence in order to create motivation and engagement for 30-40 minutes. This study demonstrated the positive effects of targeted interventions in phonemic awareness, multisensory strategies for sight word recognition, and choosing culturally responsive text to build listening and retelling skills can impact struggling learners.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

There are many reasons one pursues a career in education. My experiences are typical, but they have shaped me into the educator I am today. I do not want to be cliché, but my childhood was not very promising. School is where I found my refuge. It was not to learn, but to pretend everything was “normal.” I always held it in high regard, never missed a day (those poor teachers!), and I even imagined certain teachers were my parents. This experience, coupled with being a struggling student myself, has helped me on my journey as a literacy teacher. Having this experience has allowed me to recognize struggling behaviors (that do not promote literacy) in my students, and seek out the reason for them. In the past 20 years, I have confirmed that the once size fits all direct teaching method does not foster reading and writing motivation. The social-constructivist view aligns to my beliefs, and I now understand that this is what has fueled my teaching. My teaching experience and evolution of beliefs that drive my pedagogy have been a 20 year work in progress. I am proud of the work I have done, and as a Literacy Resource Specialist, work to spread the knowledge and insight I have gained over the years. This type of work is imperative to the future of education and overall literacy in our nation.

It has always been my mission to provide differentiated instruction for my students. This did not come easy. Each year we encounter a wide array of challenges. How we choose to cultivate those challenges determines the success of our students. Most of my career has been focused in 2nd and 3rd grade. I have also taught

Kindergarten and 4th grade. This wide range of teaching has allowed me to understand where readers come from and where they are going. My position as the Literacy Resource Specialist, aka Reading Specialist, has allowed me to work with many teachers and students from Pre K to 6th grade, but I focus on 1st through 3rd grade literacy. Additionally, I currently serve as the team leader for Intervention & Referral Services. In addition to supporting teachers with strategies to strengthen pedagogy, teachers come to me to work with students who are struggling readers. I have noticed that often times, teachers notice that some children are not performing to the classroom expectation, and are looking for Basic Skills Instruction or extra help, anything to remove the child from the classroom to get them to where they need to be to have success in their classrooms. When I ask what strategies have been explored or what they are struggling with, I often hear, "Everything! They just can't read on grade level." The solution is to sign them up for Basic Skills or send them to the Child Study Team for classification. Additionally, we are clinging to the new buzzword dyslexia. A child who is not reading at grade level or higher, must be dyslexic. This thinking is raising many questions for me as an advocate for young readers. Students are not getting what they need, simply because the teacher does not know what that is.

This is where my inquiry is born. I believe many students are struggling because they have not had a strong phonemic awareness background, and have not been taught to think deeply about text. Students are reading independently for 30 minutes per day. This reading time has no substance and they are actually fake reading. Struggling students who receive attention that is more academic perform better, therefore using supplemental instruction to reach all learners is worth considering (McIntyre, Jones, Powers,

Newsome, Patrosko, Powell, and Bright, 2005). Daily systematic reading instruction that targets student needs while exploring culturally responsive literature will improve reading success (Collins, 2004). As a consequence, systematic, explicit instruction in foundational skills and conversations about literature that is meaningful to the children who struggle is key to building a skilled reader. As a teacher researcher, I am focused on exploring how dedicated, meaningful, targeted instruction based on assessment can foster reading readiness in 1st grade readers. From this research, I will examine how to increase reading potential for two of the lowest achieving 1st grade students, who receive no interventions at this time, in our district.

### **Purpose Statement**

First grade struggling readers who lack emergent literacy skills need intensive, individualized instruction in phonemic awareness and opportunities to engage in conversation about text that is meaningful to them. Reading skills are acquired in a predictable way, and children from literature rich homes enter school prepared to learn to read. Children who are not exposed to this type of environment have a greater chance of being delayed (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998). Students who are at risk for reading need more than typical classroom instruction. Reading problems are among the most prevalent concerns in schools; poor readers in elementary school who do not receive special assistance are particularly at risk for dismal academic careers (Wang & Algozzine, 2008). According to the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) children who enter school with strong language skills and emerging literacy skills such have greater success in acquiring beginning reading skills. A strong foundation in phonemic awareness and phonics will ensure reading success, and can avoid reading problems faced by

adolescents and adults. Providing intensive, explicit instruction based on the individual needs of these students is the basis of this study.

Working in a school system that educates 190 first grade students has provided many opportunities to observe the needs of the learners. Many students are at risk, scoring below grade level in emergent literacy testing. Researchers are concerned with the large amount of children whose educational careers are imperiled because they do not read well enough to ensure understating and to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive economy (Snow, Burns, & Griffin. 1998). Struggling students who receive attention that is more academic perform better and using supplemental instruction to reach all learners is worth considering (McIntyre, Jones, Powers, Newsome, Patrosko, Powell, and Bright, 2005). Based on diagnostic testing, both students identify as concerns and will benefit from an intervention plan that includes supplemental instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, and focused discussion about culturally responsive text. Providing our lowest-achieving children supplementary individual help will help close the gap between students performing at grade level expectations by the end of the first year of formal schooling (Clay, 2001). Long-term gains are noted in children who receive phoneme instruction, not only in phonemic awareness but in long term reading success in second grade (Murray, 2012). The goal is to provide enough support to bring two struggling readers to grade level and close the gap between their peers.

Both children in this study are described as uninterested in literacy, or books. In order to promote motivation and engagement, while listening to and reading text, it is important to choose books carefully. The text chosen should be meaningful to children so that they are motivated to listen and interact with the text. Because both children claim

that they are not being read to at home and do not complete their at home reading assignments, it is important to provide them with opportunities to engage in and discuss culturally responsive literature. This will enable the children to build interest in and retell text. The two children involved in this study are from low socioeconomic, non-traditional homes. Culturally responsive instruction can make school literacy meaningful and rewarding for students of diverse backgrounds and can improve students' higher level thinking about text (Au, 2001). Text that respects the diverse backgrounds of our students connects home to school and values all learners.

This research is being conducted to explore how intensive pull-out instruction based on individual needs in emergent literacy, coupled with responsive practice, can provide struggling first grade readers with the skills to close the gap with on-grade level peers.

### **Statement of Research Problem and Question**

When teachers consider struggling first grade readers beyond help in the classroom, we have to provide insight that allows children to have the success they deserve. Many children are not prepared to meet the demands of education due to circumstances beyond their control. I believe it is the goal of an educator to reflect on what each child needs, and develop a plan to achieve these goals. In this particular study, I am exploring the effects of intensive small group instruction in phonemic awareness, coupled with deep conversations about culturally responsive literature. I want to explore the use of multicultural or culturally conscious literature to expand students' attitude toward reading and develop desire to want to learn to read independently. Many

struggling first grade readers are not proficient with emergent literacy skills necessary to reading success. In this study, I am looking at using systematic, explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and alphabetic principle to strengthen overall reading success, coupled with opportunities to listen to and discuss carefully chosen text.

### **Story of the Question**

Throughout my 20-year career, I have been faced with many challenges. The biggest challenge was learning to meet the needs of all learners within the confines of a classroom. The real inquiry began when I moved from Kindergarten to 4th grade. The curriculum demanded that we use whole class novels for teaching reading. Being a new, eager teacher, I made journals, activities, projects and even connected the novel to math lessons. These children knew *Stone Fox*, *The Titanic*, and *There's a Boy in the Girls Bathroom* inside and out. The children were allowed to read aloud, partner read, or read independently. It really seemed to go well because all of the children could match the vocabulary and comprehension questions on the test just fine.

Two years later, we adopted a new series. It consisted of a basal reader and small guided reading books. Because this was new to me, I began researching guided reading. This was an eye-opening experience. The new program included leveled books and to my surprise, I needed to find books that were harder and easier to meet my student's needs. I began to explore reading workshop and real learning evolved. I began by building a strong community of readers who could work together and solve problems on their own. We reorganized our library by genre, topic, and author, in an effort to promote interest and motivation around common topics. During small group, I learned to meet the needs

of all learners and scaffold learning in a way that respects each and every child. This thinking trickled in to my writing and math lessons too. I began to work toward writing and math workshop models. This work took years of trial and error. I have noticed that working to build of community of readers and writers who respect each other and move along a continuum at their own pace works. It is not easy, but it works.

In my new position, I am required to assist teachers and students. My inquiry stems from my concerns for students and the teachers who continue to do what isn't working, but do not explore alternative ways to instruct. Why aren't they reflective learners? All teachers need to be responsive to their children. I did not always have an effective classroom, but I reflected on it, asked the kids, and I learned from them. We had years that we learned together. It has taken a long time to get where I am, and I am concerned that many educators are not even seeking out answers they need. My inquiry comes from wanting more for children. Educators need to be responsive advocates for the children, and provide instruction based on performance.

### **Organization of the Paper**

Chapter two provides a review of the literature surrounding the use of small individualized instruction in phonemic awareness and how culturally responsive literature is important to use for motivation. Chapter three describes the design and context of the study, including my plan for implementing this intervention for two struggling first grade readers. Chapter four reviews and analyzes the data and research and discusses the findings of the study. Chapter five presents the conclusions of this study.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter reviews literature on the relationship between emergent literacy instruction and culturally responsive text exposure to success in reading and writing. First, research that promotes systematically teaching phonemic awareness to struggling, emergent readers is explored. After examining the effects of using culturally responsive literature with struggling students, the relationship of learning systematic phonemic awareness instruction, while facilitating deep conversation about culturally responsive text to strengthen emergent literacy skills in struggling first graders will be determined. The two struggling first graders that are being studied have entered first grade lacking phonemic awareness skills and are unable to read independently, and use pictures to read emergent text. This study is to determine if systematic, daily intervention based on phonemic awareness, sight word recognition, and using culturally responsive literature to interact with text will lay the groundwork for reading success.

Reading problems are among the most prevalent concerns in schools; poor readers in elementary school who do not receive special assistance are particularly at risk for dismal academic careers (Wang & Algozzine, 2008). According to the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) children who enter school with strong language and emerging literacy skills have greater success in acquiring beginning reading skills. Based on the research of Roskos, Christie, and Richgels (2003) the article, *Setting the Stage for Purposeful Communication: Fostering Emergent Literacy*, shares important components of

instruction that allow children to succeed in formal literacy settings. These activities include rich teacher talk, storybook reading, phonological awareness, alphabet activities, and shared book experiences (Haggard, 2014). In a study of Kindergarten through twelfth grade readers who have a strong ability to match discrete and integrated phonetic segments using a sequence of colored blocks to represent auditory stimulus, or Elkonin boxes, it was determined that this ability bridges reading success (Calfée, Lindamood, & Lindamood, 1973). A strong foundation in phonemic awareness and phonics can ensure reading success, and help avoid reading problems faced by adolescents and adults.

Researchers are concerned with the large amount of children whose educational careers are imperiled because they do not read well enough to ensure understanding and to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive economy (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Typically, reading skills are acquired in a predictable way and children from literature rich homes are prepared to learn to read. Children not exposed to this type of environment have a greater chance of being delayed (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998). Struggling students who receive attention that is more academic perform better, therefore using supplemental instruction to reach all learners is worth considering (McIntyre, Jones, Powers, Newsome, Patrosko, Powell, and Bright, 2005). Daily systematic reading instruction that targets student needs while exploring culturally responsive literature will improve reading success (Collins, 2004).

### **Emergent Literacy**

Emergent literacy is a term used to describe the acquisition of literacy as a continuum with its origins in early life, or the reading and writing behaviors that precede

and develop into conventional literacy. Reading, writing, and oral language development develop concurrently and interdependently in social interaction in which literacy is a component, but not taught directly (J.Whitehurst & Lonigan , 1998). “We know that many preschoolers have hundreds of hours of literacy interactions during which they develop understandings critical to success in beginning reading” (Cunningham, 2013, p. 6). This may be the case for some students, but for those who do not have the same experiences; teachers need to work toward providing these experiences in school. A strong focus in Kindergarten and First Grade should be on functions of print, desire to learn to read, print concepts, phonemic awareness, concrete word, and letter names and sounds (Learning to Read and Write: What Research Reveals, 2015). Shared reading of predictable books and charts are important because they have repeated patterns and rhyme which allows children to experience reading before they are able to decode on their own, as well as encouraging them to write. Encouraging writing allows a child to explore concepts of print, phonemic awareness, and letter-sound knowledge (Cunningham, 2013).

Based on Marie Clay’s emergent literacy research, reading is not learned at the point a child attends school, but has a developmental history before formal instruction (Mcnaughton, 2014). Clay’s seminal work helped pave the way for understanding how children use their environment to explore the details of print long before they understand how to use alphabetic principle to read. These experiences lead to understanding advanced concepts in reading (Clay, An Observation Survey, 2005). To avoid undervaluing children’s cultural and linguistic diversity, Clay promotes using observation assessment to drive reading instruction. Using close observations of reading to instruct

each child to move along the continuum, allows children to be successful at their own pace. “The major concept of emergent literacy draws on a particular view of the nature of children and children’s learning and development” (Mcnaughton, 2014, p. 90). The Observation Survey allows the teacher to respond to the students’ needs through observation tasks in early literacy awareness including Concepts of Print, Running Records, letter Identification, Writing, and Phonemic Awareness (Clay, An Observation Survey, 2005). This research has led to the use of diagnostic testing to monitor students’ progress over time. “Student progress monitoring is a practice that helps teachers use student performance data to continually evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching and make more informed instructional decision” (Safer & Steve, 2005, p. 81) The Emergent Literacy Survey used to assess the students participating in this study mirrors The Observation Survey and has the same components. It will be used to monitor the progress of the phonemic awareness goals for these struggling readers. Making the students aware of their goals will create aware of their own performance and will create accountability.

According to Clay (2001), “A shift has occurred to reduce the incidence of literacy problems among the lowest-achieving children in their first years at school and to provide supplementary individual help for children to catch up to classmates by the end of the first year of formal schooling.” The goal is to provide enough support to bring at-risk students to grade level and close the gap between their peers. “Early intervention is based on the premise that low-performing students can be identified and provided supplemental support after a relatively short exposure to classroom literacy instruction” (Schwartz, 2005). Early intervention provides opportunity for short-term services that may help avoid long-term literacy problems. One early intervention program for First

graders is Reading Recovery (RR). “The (RR) treatment, delivered individually and designed to suit the individual’s strengths and pace of learning, is designed to iron out differences and avoid the negative effects of any prior variables” (Clay, *Change Over Time in Children's Literacy Development*, 2001, p. 248). The RR program is 12-20 weeks in duration, conversation meets individual oral language needs, and instruction is based on observation. Many students struggle in the classrooms because they are not showing a large enough gap for special services, often suffering without support until they show a two-year gap in instruction. Providing opportunities for first grade students to receive daily, explicit instruction based on observation and diagnostic testing, modeled after Reading Recovery, can close the gap between struggling readers and their peers who have emergent literacy skills in place.

### **Phonemic Awareness**

Phonemic awareness is the oral ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds in spoken words (Cunningham, 2013). The National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that early literacy programs that include phonemic awareness components are recommended over ones that do not. Additionally, the NRP recommends teaching children to manipulate phonemes explicitly and systematically to enhance phonemic awareness and reading skills. Children who come from environments rich in literature are prepared to succeed in the discourse of American education because this lays the foundation for strong phonemic awareness. It is important to connect phonemic awareness skills to reading and writing tasks. “Teachers should recognize that acquiring phonemic awareness is a means rather than an end. PA is not acquired for its own sake but rather for its value in helping learners understand and use the alphabetic system to

read and write” (National Reading Panel, 2000, p.24). Long-term gains are noted in children who receive phoneme instruction, not only in phonemic awareness but in long term reading success in second grade (Murray, 2012). “Preschool and early Kindergarten are prime times for teaching PA to lay the groundwork for decoding” (Murray, 2012, p. 143) Providing PA instruction that is explicit early on can help prevent reading difficulties before they start, therefor avoiding the need for early intervention (Foorman, 2007).

Developing phonemic awareness is essential to reading and writing success. Children use sounds to decode and write words. In a short-term longitudinal study measuring the effects of phoneme and onset-rime awareness as predictors of early reading, it was determined that phoneme awareness is a stronger indicator of reading success (Hulme, et al., 2002). Having a strong phonemic awareness foundation bridges the transfer to alphabetic principle. To develop phonemic awareness, it is important to focus on rhyme. Singing songs and nursery rhymes are effective instructional strategies for teaching rhyme and concepts of print. Singing with access to visual displays of words is an effective way to teach beginning readers, however these activities declining in our primary classrooms (Iwasaki, Rasinski, T., Yildirim, & Zimmerman, 2013). Music has a positive impact on learning. Music education has a positive impact on phonemic awareness, specifically phoneme segmentation fluency, in young children (Gromko, 2005). While standards are being raised, important instructional strategies are becoming past practice, and the effects are detrimental to our emergent readers. Two activities that need attention are blending and segmenting phonemes, onsets, and rimes. “Sound boxes, also known as Elkonin boxes, teach the student how to hear the phonemes in words in

sequence by connecting the slow verbal stretching of a word's sounds to the simultaneous pushing of tokens into boxes, one of each sound as it is heard" (McCarthy, 2009, p. 346). Children need to understand how sounds go together in words and be able to manipulate words in their head in order to increase their ability to become fluent readers and writers. Explicit phonemic awareness instruction is imperative to the success of struggling readers.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Kathryn Au's culturally responsive instruction serves to "improve students' opportunities for academic success by letting their existing strengths serve as a bridge to the new learning offered by the school" (Au, 2009-2010, p. 30). To create motivation and engagement in reading, we must be responsive to the interests of our students when choosing text. First graders are supposed to love to read. However, many children who struggle are losing interest in reading because they are unable to meet the demands of the classroom. Being culturally responsive will create respect and motivation. Through conversation about text, we will be able to choose text that compliments the learners. Boys need special attention because many struggle with literacy and do not have a positive attitude toward reading (Senn, 2012).

Names are an important part of each child's identity. Using text to explore the names of the students is an avenue for discussion. Using their names as a springboard for learning can help emergent readers identify with text. Using multicultural literacy that includes names and traditions of the children provides respect for all learners (Stone &

Chakraborty, 2014). Using books that explore other cultures that children can identify with provides opportunity for rich conversation and retell.

Finding what our children, both boys and girls, are interested in will create enjoyment and motivation. Offering choice will create meaningful work for struggling learners. Having deep conversations that explore text that varies in subject and genre will create understanding of story structure. Working through retelling and inviting written response will provide opportunity for the students to develop stronger comprehension.

### **Summary**

Upon reviewing the literature, it is clear that providing these struggling readers with instruction based on observation and emergent literacy testing will provide foundations for success in reading. First grade emergent readers need a strong phonemic awareness background and culturally responsive literature to enhance comprehension.

This study has as its goal the aim of discovering the relationship between systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, and rich literature discussion that capitalizes on existing strengths.



## Chapter 3

### Research Design/Methodology

The qualitative research paradigm is the framework for this study. This paradigm considers practitioner research conducted in the natural setting of a first grade classroom where two children are struggling in all areas of reading based on academic performance data that analyzes emergent literacy knowledge. Using small group instruction to meet the literacy needs within the classroom, coupled with exposing the whole class in learning phonemic awareness and phonics skills will enhance the learning of struggling readers. “Questions emerge from day-to-day practice and from discrepancies between what is intended and what occurs” (Conchran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 42). These questions provide opportunities for educators to take on the role of the researcher to investigate their questions. Qualitative research is appropriate when our focus is children. “Observing students closely, analyzing their needs, and adjusting the curriculum to fit the needs of all students have always been important skills demonstrated by fine teachers” and qualitative teacher research stems from questioning and good teaching (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 3).

“The view of teacher-researcher as a careful gardener is the image we hold in our minds of the ideal teacher-researcher-not a scientist in a lab coat, staring down a research subject (a kid!), but a human being in the midst of teaching, carefully weighing the value of different way of teaching and learning” (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 5). Qualitative teacher research lends itself to discovering student needs in their natural setting, our classrooms, and working within those confines to improve student learning. Working

within a professional learning community, focused on strengthening emergent literacy skills in struggling first graders, is the basis for this study. The teachers of these two struggling readers have concerns for these particular students success in first grade. After observing children in during the ELA block in their classrooms, my question flourished. What essential emergent literacy skills are absent and hindering these children from reading? Because we are looking at improving student learning in the classroom, qualitative research is the paradigm that best suits this study.

Teacher research methods used to gather information about emergent literacy skills, reading enjoyment, and motivation to read is the framework for this study. To determine the needs of these two learners, I observed the students in their classrooms and administered diagnostic testing. Emergent readers need a strong foundation in phonemic awareness in order to become successful readers. Providing struggling students with supplemental instruction is worth considering (McIntyre, Jones, Powers, Newsome, Patrosko, Powell, and Bright, 2005). Daily, systematic reading instruction that target student needs while exploring culturally responsive literature will improve reading success because it will create meaningful opportunities for the children to engage in reading that they can relate to. The qualitative inquiry methods used to collect and analyze data will include a data collection sheet, research journal, and observations.

### **Research Context**

In a small southern New Jersey town, there are two K-6 elementary schools and a three and four year old full-day preschool that house a total of 1652 students. The area is considered low socio-economic with 48% of our students receiving free and reduced

lunch. The community is 95% white with a population of 15,900 (12K owner-3K rent). It is considered 89% urban and 11% rural. Many of our students live near or on lagoons in The Great Bay Inlet and were displaced due to Hurricane Sandy. Years later, we have 6 homeless families and many staff members who are rebuilding while they live in temporary housing. This community is in the midst of rebuilding and is transient. Additionally, this district has a year-round Community School that provides before and after care for working families and is open from 7 am to 6 pm, Monday through Friday. Classes are available for cooking, running, yoga, lacrosse, drama, and robotics. Additionally, a four-week summer school program for Basic Skills and LEEP (gifted) students is in place. Through the Special Education Program, there is a 5 week Extended School Year (ESY), which busses students to and from school and provides free breakfast and lunch to every student who attends. Throughout the school year, there are several intervention programs provided by teachers for Orton Gillingham, Wilson, and Homework Club. This is limited and no bussing can be provided.

The students in this district are 97% white, with 48% receiving free and reduced lunch. There is a small ELL population that receive pull out and/or Basic Skills instruction. ELL's do not receive instruction in their native language, as our ESL teacher does not speak another language. The language diversity in the study site consists of 97.1% English, 1.9% Spanish, 0.6% Chinese, 0.2% Polish, 0.2 % Russian, and 0.2% Tagalong. One ESL teacher travels between the two elementary buildings. The Special Education population is 36%. This number is skewed due to Preschool and Kindergarten population being included in the total. Economically disadvantaged students make up 37% and the average attendance rate is 90%.

In 2013-2014, the district did not meet AYP for the total population with only 56% proficient in Language Arts and less than 1% Advanced Proficient. In Language Arts, neither school met the NCLB progress target in any subgroup: school wide, white, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students, with the exception of Hispanic subgroup in the non-study site. In Language Arts Literacy, the study site met 0% of the targets. Of the schools with similar demographics and characteristics, we outperform 10%. The entire population is bussed due to the location of the schools. Parental involvement is very low even with many incentives for parents to come to workshops including babysitting, dinner, and prizes including bikes, kindles, and gift certificates. The attendance is always very poor (as low as 1-5 families). Many parents never even meet the teachers at all throughout the year.

The teachers are predominantly white, with one African-American female teacher and one Middle-eastern male on staff. There is very low turnover and everyone is highly qualified. The district provides Professional Development and coaching for the staff based on needs and request for LAL through the Literacy Resource Specialist, which is currently my position in the district. Additionally, there has been ongoing training for the new programs that have been brought in such as Journeys, Language and Literacy Intervention, American Reading Company, and Zaner Blozer.

Literacy in this district is constantly changing. Six years ago we adopted a program called American Reading Company (ARC) 100 Book Challenge. It was decided that our students needed to spend more time on independent reading so we replaced our McGraw Hill basal program with 100 Book Challenge. The children are leveled into a color based on decoding and vocabulary knowledge. Once leveled, children are to read

from those bins only and through mini-lesson and conferring, move along the continuum and through the colors. In addition, the students were to respond to reading verbally and in writing using rubrics to grade themselves. These rubrics are based on the 10 Common Core Reading Standards. Teachers are expected to provide students with a mini-lesson (I DO), guided practice (WE DO), and independent reading (YOU DO)-but have no materials for instruction other than the leveled bins of books for independent reading. The children are to meet individually with their teachers during 30 minutes of uninterrupted silent reading in grades K-6, with no variation between grade levels. In addition, the children are expected to read for 30 minutes each night and log their steps in school and at home. Teachers have to keep track of their steps online and record evidence of learning in the electronic E-IRLA, an online tool provided by the American Reading Company. After assessing American Reading Company reading levels of our students we found that about 35% of our children are not on grade level. The overall literacy is in need of attention.

### **Participants**

Both participants are six years old and in first grade. Student 1 is female, and student 2 is male. Both students attended two years of preschool and one year of full day Kindergarten in our district. Neither student received poor grades in Kindergarten or were brought to the Intervention & Referral Service (I&RS) team for concerns. Both students are from the same Kindergarten class and were flagged immediately as at risk by their first grade teachers. These students are described as immature and unaware of their struggles. They both come from divorced, low socioeconomic homes with two siblings. They receive free breakfast and lunch, and have difficulty finishing their food and getting

to work. Both teachers were set on completing I&RS paperwork in September to ensure some other placement for these strugglers.

Student 1 and 2 entered first grade with a score of 2% and 1% respectively on reading on the MAPS Testing. Both students were described as having little to no skills and their teacher was extremely concerned when they came to me for help. In September, our Reading Recovery teacher used the Marie Clay Observation Survey to screen both students and was concerned with their emergent literacy knowledge and abilities. Both students had poor phonemic awareness skills and knew no sight words when tested. Student 1 scored 14/24 on Concepts of Print, while student 2 scored 5/24. Both students could identify most upper and lower case letters. Student 1 and 2 missed five letters, and student 1 made five self-corrections.

At the beginning of the study, I observed the students in their classroom during independent reading time, whole group instruction, and centers. Upon observation both students are in classrooms that are structured and the teacher is in control. Centers are completed in their seats, small groups are pulled as needed, and the rooms are quiet. Often, you hear Student 1 and 2's name called to redirect their attention to the lesson. During the 30 minutes of silent, independent reading, both students looked at pictures for no more than 4 minutes total, and were unfocused and fidgety. Both children are often off task and disruptive to the lessons, demonstrated by talking, looking in desk, getting out of seat, asking to use bathroom, or to get a drink. The settings that these two children are in do not seem to work well for them. I felt that working in a small group setting that focused on their zone of proximal development would work well for these two students, who struggle not only with reading, but with the discourse of American education.

As we progressed through the study, it became clear that student 1 was grasping the foundational skills quickly. As I observed periodically in the classroom, it is clear that this is a focus in whole group and one on one with the teacher. Student 1 has an experienced teacher who understands the importance of text structure and teaches it daily, however talking about text and retelling was a struggle for student 1. Student 2 needed more support with all skills taught but has a great understanding of how text works and is proficient in discussions about text. He is in a classroom with a first year teacher who works one on one to complete work, opposed to skill work.

### **Data Collection**

Collecting qualitative data is important to the validity of this study. In the beginning of the study, I interviewed the children and teachers who work with them. I went back in their Kindergarten files and gathered information about their success in Kindergarten. MAPS testing was available from Kindergarten and after the study began, new MAPS data was obtained. Initial concerns allowed the Reading Recovery teacher to assess both children using The Observation Survey (Clay, 2005). At the beginning of the study, I administered the district's Diagnostic testing, the Emerging Literacy Survey that focuses on phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, sight words, and a running record. The data gathered was used to drive the instruction for phonemic awareness, sight words, and reading component of the lesson. Notes were kept throughout the study on the note section of my planning pages. The data collected throughout the course of this study was used to help draw conclusions about the practice of using differentiated small group instruction to meet the needs of struggling learners and how that can help close the gap in reading in first grade struggling readers.

## **Data Analysis**

Interviews were used to assess the attitudes of students and teachers involved toward learning. In analyzing the interview and note taking data, I have realized that these children are somewhat unaware of their struggles. They know that they can't read as well as their peers but seem comfortable with the fact that they will get there. This is a good sign that they are still motivated to learn, but need to become active learners. In contrast, the teachers are not sure that they will be successful, or how to go about guiding them toward success. Throughout the study, I compared student performance on the Emerging Literacy Survey and looked for trends within individual students. I looked for patterns in student learning that reflect mastery of phonemic awareness skills. I charted this progress in an effort to observe the growth in phonemic awareness. I observed student attitude toward text in small group and in class over the course of the study and took notes to observe motivation and engagement. During shared reading of culturally responsive books, I noticed patterns of understanding of text, specific to the student's ability to approach text with eagerness, interact with text, and retell the events of a story in detail. Observing and comparing all data over the course of the study allowed me to reflect on the practices' effectiveness. The interview with the teachers shed light on the effectiveness of this instruction for the child in the classroom.

## **Procedure of Study/Timeline**

In my capacity as a Literacy Resource Specialist and Team Leader for I&RS, I often hear from concerned teachers who have students that are struggling in the classroom. Because I provide Professional Development, model lessons, and work with



struggling learners, there is opportunity to strengthening pedagogy in the classrooms. However, often times, teachers notice that some children are not performing at grade level expectation, and are looking for a label to remove them from the regular education setting. When I ask about the strategies that have been implemented or what they are struggling with, I often hear they can't read and need basic skills instruction or special education services to help them. This is frustrating for me, because I feel that these students are not getting what they need, simply because the teacher does not know what that is.

After observing these two students in their natural classroom settings and conferring with them one on one during independent reading and looking at the district data, I wanted to explore the option that these strugglers would benefit from exposure to systematic phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, while engaging strategies that support thinking deeply about text. I noticed that text read during independent reading time had no substance and they were actually fake reading. I felt that systematic, explicit instruction in foundational skills and engaging these children in topics and about literature that is meaningful to them would be key to building reading readiness success. As a teacher researcher, I am focused on exploring how dedicated, meaningful, targeted instruction based on assessment can foster reading readiness in first grade struggling readers. From this research, I will examine how to increase reading potential for two of the lowest achieving 1st grade students, who receive no interventions at this time in our district.

After assessing the students with our district Emergent Literacy Survey, the students demonstrate weakness in phonemic awareness, letter sounds, sight word fluency,

and use the picture clues to read text independently. Running records were attempted at the beginning of the study, but were ceased due to difficulty. Using the teacher survey and observation, both students are not reading independently and do not choose to read on their own. While working with the children in the classroom, it's clear that both children struggle with retelling a read aloud in sequential order. Comparison surveys for the teachers and students were conducted at the beginning and conclusion of the study to measure reading engagement and motivation. The children were surveyed on how they see themselves as a reader, their likes and dislikes, and if they feel they have improved as a reader. The teachers were asked about the students success in the classroom, their attitude toward reading, and what they noticed about how their attitude toward reading has changed.

Throughout the 15 sessions, the students participated in 30-minute lessons with a predictable format. Each session began with 10 minutes of phonemic awareness skills. We then moved into 10 minutes of multisensory sight word activity with writing. Each lesson concluded with 10 minutes of topic engagement, reading, and discussion focusing on comprehending literature that was culturally responsive.

The activities began based on the assessments, and were planned based on lesson reflection each day. The phonemic awareness was all based on oral interaction, while the alphabetic principle portion involved games, letter tiles, sight word cards, movement, rice tins, Elkonin boxes, wipe off boards, writing journals and writing utensils. The sight words focused on were from the Emerging Literacy Survey and of the 40 words, 25 were considered entry level for first grade. The following chart (figure 1) demonstrates the plan that evolved throughout the study.

<b>Day</b>	<b>Phonemic Awareness Activity (oral)</b>	<b>Alphabetic Principle/Multisensory Activity (hands on)</b>
<b>1</b>	Listening to and identifying sequence of sounds Developing memory attention to sequence of sound	Letter Image Sound  Matching objects with beginning sounds
<b>2</b>	Listening: awareness of hearing expectations Rhyme recognition	Letter Image Sound  Letter Formation with raised Letter cards
<b>3</b>	Rhyme Completion (review recognition) Concepts of Print-Identifying word lengths	Letter Image Sound  Vowel Focus-Sorting short vowel sounds
<b>4</b>	Rhyme Production (review recognition and completion)	Sight word recognition (I, and , in, it, on, like) RED word strategy for sight words (the, for, to, you)
<b>5</b>	Review Rhymes (recognition, completion, and production) Blending Onset & Rime	Letter Formation with rice (a, e, f, m, n) Sight word recognition (I, and, in, it, on, like, is, he) RED word strategy for sight words (the, for, to, you, she)
<b>6</b>	Syllable Blending Tapping with chin	Letter Image Sound Vowel Focus-Identifying short vowel sounds Sight word recognition (I, and, in, it, on, like, is, he, see, at, can, she ) RED word strategy for sight words (the, for, to, you, she, your, a, put, this, said, of)
<b>7</b>	Syllable Blending Tapping with chin Clapping Identifying Syllables up to 3	Letter Image Sound Blending Phonemes: Elkonin box CVC words Sight word recognition (I, and, in, it, on, like, is, he, see, at, can, she ) RED word strategy for sight words (the, for, to, you, she, your, a, put, this, said, of)
<b>8</b>	Syllable Blending Compound words NOT Compound words	Letter Image Sound Blending Phonemes: Elkonin box CVC words Sight word recognition (I, and, in, it, on, like, is, he, see, at, can, she ) RED word strategy for sight words (the, for, to, you, she, your, a, put, this, said, of)

*Figure 1.*Phonemic Awareness/Alphabetic Principle Instructional Plan

<b>9</b>	Syllable Segmentation Syllable Deletion	Letter Image Sound (long and short vowels, Q, Y) ABC order Sight word recognition (I, and, in, it, on, like, is, he, see, at, can, she ) RED word strategy for sight words (the, for, to, you, she, your, a, put, this, said, of, all)
<b>10</b>	Syllable Deletion Phoneme Isolation of Final Sound	Letter Image Sound (long and short vowels) Sight word recognition (I, and, in, it, on, like, is, he, see, at, can, she, be ) RED word strategy for sight words (the, for, to, you, she, your, a, put, this, said, of) Dictation of sight words: I can see all of the cats!
<b>11</b>	Think Sounds-Isolating beginning and ending sounds	Letter Image Sound (long and short vowels) Sight word recognition (I, and, in, it, on, like, is, he, see, at, can, she, be, had ) RED word strategy for sight words (the, for, to, you, she, your, a, put, this, said, of, have, all, ) Dictation Sentences
<b>12</b>	Phoneme Blending Onset/Rime	Sight word recognition (I, and, in, it, on, like, is, he, see, at, can, she, be, had ) RED word strategy for sight words (the, for, to, you, she, your, a, put, this, said, of, have, all, are, with) Dictation Sentences
<b>13</b>	Review Phoneme Blending Onset/Rime Phoneme Segmentation	Sight word recognition (I, and, in, it, on, like, is, he, see, at, can, she, be, had ) RED word strategy for sight words (the, for, to, you, she, your, a, put, this, said, of, have, all, are, with, what) Dictation Sentences
<b>14</b>	Phoneme Deletion of Initial Sound	Sight word recognition (I, and, in, it, on, like, is, he, see, at, can, she, be, had ) RED word strategy for sight words (the, for, to, you, she, your, a, put, this, said, of, have, all, are, with, what) Dictation Sentences
<b>15</b>	Phoneme Deletion of Ending Sound	Sight word recognition (I, and, in, it, on, like, is, he, see, at, can, she, be, had ) RED word strategy for sight words (the, for, to, you, she, your, a, put, this, said, of, have, all, are, with, what) Dictation Sentences

*Figure 1 (continued)*

To explore the student's interaction with text, culturally responsive literature was chosen to engage and motivate the students. Each text was carefully selected based on conversation and explained to the children in an effort to build knowledge about choosing text wisely. We talked extensively about how different text structures work and how to retell fiction and nonfiction text. Modeling through think aloud provided the students with opportunity to see how to engage with text. Whenever possible, the questions and thinking were directed at the children's thinking. At the end of each story, we used a retelling rope (pictured here) as a multisensory strategy.

Chapter Four of this thesis discusses the data in detail how it explored the substance of this inquiry.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter Four discusses the findings of this study, focusing on answering the question, “How can systematic instruction of phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, and culturally responsive text immersion, help two struggling first grade readers?” In looking at the data collected, such as my teacher journal, interviews, and assessments, some common themes emerge. These themes are repetitive instruction has a place in learning, multisensory strategies support learning, and choosing text that children can connect with is important for struggling learners.

#### **Revisiting the Study**

Before the study began, both children surfaced as concerns for Intervention and Referral Services. The teachers came to me because the children were not able to keep up with grade level work, but did not have any specific skills that they could name. Because meetings do not begin until mid-November, I spend the months prior to our first meeting working with struggling learners, concentrating on first grade. The two children in this study were lacking in emergent literacy skills and seemed disinterested in reading. Questions began to emerge about the motivation to

#### **Investigating Student Performance**

**Initial testing.** First, I looked at the districts’ MAPS (NWEA) testing. Student 1 was in the 2% range and student 2 was in the 1 % range in reading consisting of low scores in foundational skills, language and writing, literature and informational, and vocabulary use and functions.

**ELA in the classroom setting.** In order to understand how the children were in a whole group setting, I began observing them in the language arts block in both classrooms. While observing both students in their natural classroom setting, questions began to emerge about how these two particular children would best be serviced. I noticed that during their independent reading time, both children looked at pictures, but did not attend to text. They spent most of the time off task and disrupting other students. During direct instruction lead by the teacher, both students were unengaged and easily distracted. When asked a question or to participate, both student could not participate because they either did not know the answer or what was being asked of them. Student 2 could not complete the word family or rhyming activity in whole group. Student 1 did not have the opportunity to demonstrate any foundational skills in class. The only evidence I observed was sounding out the word *seed* to fill in a blank in their reading workbook, and student was disengaged. Student 1 had to complete the next three fill in the blanks based on the story, and was unable to do so.

I spent a few sessions sitting with each child during reading in an effort to engage in the lessons. In whole group, I was able to clarify lessons for the children. Student 1 was able to complete written work with support, while student 2 was not. Student 2 was able to interact with text conversation with purpose with a short retell of what was read. Once student 2 was able to follow the story structure, he was interacting and raising his hand to discuss the story. Student 1 was disinterested in the story and told me she didn't really care about that story.

During independent reading time, I talked about book choice. Student 2 said he could read any book he wants. I sat with him and discovered he did not have one-to-one

correspondence and did not attend to any text. He told detailed stories from the pictures. We talked about looking at the words to try to make sense of them, but he said it was too hard. The expectation was to keep this pace for 30 minutes, a very difficult task. For Student 1, book choices were controlled by the teacher. She attempted to attend to words. These books were decodable with sentence stems. Her teacher would make sure she knew the stem and then moved to another student. Because reading was 20 minutes long, this student would read the text once through and spent the remainder of the time off task, or fake reading.

While in both classrooms, I noticed that the routine did not include small group instruction based on needs. Both teachers did pull individual students and work on helping them complete the classwork, which was not differentiated apart from book choice. These students needed a lot of support to complete work, and are often behind in independent work. Student 2 had a stack of work that he needed to complete during Friday Free Time because he could not finish it in class. Much of the work was writing stories from a word bank, handwriting practice for names and sight words, and workbook pages. Student 1 does not have morning work. Both students receive free breakfast and eat it upon arrival, which takes about 25 minutes. This was a concern for both teachers.

**Reading recovery.** Before deciding on my study, I had the Reading Recovery teacher test both students for eligibility. She reported that both children were very weak in all Kindergarten skills including letter sounds, sight word recognition, concepts of print, word writing, and did not have success with a level 1 or 2 running record. It was determined that they were too low for Reading Recovery at this time, but may qualify them for round two.



## **The Question Evolves, A Plan Emerges**

From this work, my inquiry evolved. What are the effects of systematic instruction of phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, and culturally responsive text immersion, for struggling first grade readers? Both children were lacking in motivation, engagement, basic phonemic awareness, sight word recognition, and the ability to choose books. Because the children were both disengaged in the reading, I wondered if using multicultural or culturally conscious literature expand students' attitude toward reading. All of the data gathered throughout the study focused on responsive planning to maximize teaching and learning. Lack of emergent literacy skills for first grade children effects reading success in first grade, and efficiency is key in strengthening overall reading success.

## **Teacher and Student Interview**

I began with an interview (Figure 2 and 3) of the child and teachers in order to observe patterns in attitude toward learning and approach to struggling learners. From this interview, it is clear that both children feel more confident in their reading. Student 1 disliked reading in any form and did not even connect it to the classroom. By the end of the study, she could articulate her learning by saying she knows how to sound out and read words. She feels like a reader, but still looks to the teacher to read her the weekly story, however, they are above her level so this makes sense. Both students have developed motivation to read because they feel confident with their strategies. Student 2 was not able to articulate answers about reading without prompting and was frustrated with the questions in the beginning of the study. However, at the closing interview, he was able to express that he likes to read and the skill set he has developed. He enjoys

being read to and participates in the discussions which has minimized the disengagement in class. Both students need support with independent reading, but understand the importance of reading books at their level.

Both teachers note improvement in the children, but are concerned because they are not on grade level. We discussed the importance of teaching all children from where they are and moving them along the continuum. Conversation about specific needs of both children is leading to targeted instruction in the classroom.

Before-Student 1	After-Student 1
<p>Do you see yourself as a reader? <i>I'm learning to read. I'm learning sight words. I'm sounding out.</i></p> <p>What do you like/dislike about reading? <i>I like nothing really. I don't like sounding out and reading is hard.</i></p> <p>How do you feel about the reading activities you do in class? <i>The Halloween party was fun, but that's it.</i></p> <p>Do you have a good sight word vocabulary? <i>I think.</i></p>	<p>Do you see yourself as a reader? <i>Yes. I can read the words. I know sight words and I sound out words.</i></p> <p>What do you like/dislike about reading? <i>I'm doing good now.</i> How? <i>I can read better.</i></p> <p>How do you feel about the reading activities you do in class? <i>I like my teacher reading to me and helping me do stuff. I like to write about stories. I like doing tests with Mrs. B.</i></p> <p>Has your sight word vocabulary improved? <i>Yes. I know a lot now from doing it with you. I know a, I, of, you, your, said, put. That's all I can remember.</i></p>
Before-Teacher of Student 1	After-Teacher of Student 1
<p>What kind of reading students is ID? <i>She basically can't read and doesn't try.</i></p> <p>How is his/her attitude toward reading? <i>Indifferent.</i></p> <p>How is her confidence or attitude towards reading? <i>She is not very motivated to learn to read. She really doesn't pay attention when we are doing reading.</i></p> <p>What do you notice about her sight word vocabulary? <i>She has not memorized sight words yet.</i></p> <p>How is her/his comprehension? <i>She doesn't read so she struggles to comprehend anything independently, and when I read to her she generally struggles with what is going on in the story.</i></p>	<p>What kind of reading students is ID? <i>She is still low but she is working on breaking down letter sounds to decode. She is limited for independent reading and is still at end of K level.</i></p> <p>What is her attitude toward reading? <i>She has a poor attitude when independent. She looks around and does not want to do it on her own. She enjoys working with me on decodable readers.</i></p> <p>Has her confidence or attitude towards reading changed? <i>More confident. Guessing less. If the word is pig she used to say any p word but now she attends to word more.</i></p> <p>What do you notice about her sight word vocabulary? <i>Not really using sight words as much that I notice. I use decodables with her.</i></p> <p>Do you feel his/her comprehension has improved? <i>Yes. With the weekly story she is doing better on the tests, but I have to read them to her.</i></p>

Figure 2. Reading Attitude Inventory: Student and Teacher 1

Before-Student 2	After-Student 2
<p>Do you see yourself as a reader? <i>I don't know.</i></p> <p>What do you like/dislike about reading? <i>You get smarter! I like Magic School Bus.</i></p> <p>How do you feel about the reading activities you do in class? <i>Yes and No maybe. My legs get tired.</i></p> <p>When you read the stories in your Journeys book or your teacher reads to you, do you enjoy anything you do at that time? <i>I don't know what you are talking about.</i></p> <p>Do you have a good sight word vocabulary? <i>I can read some: all is can.</i></p>	<p>Do you see yourself as a reader? <i>Yes. I can read better because I know sight words.</i></p> <p>What do you like/dislike about reading? <i>I like when she reads to me. I can answer questions.</i></p> <p>How do you feel about the reading activities you do in class? <i>Yes. It is fun. I like it.</i></p> <p>Has your sight word vocabulary improved? <i>Yes. I learned tap it out and now I know a lot.</i></p>
Before-Teacher of Student 2	After-Teacher of Student 2
<p>What kind of reading students is ID? <i>He really can't read independently yet. I am very concerned for him. He can talk about the stories we read, but he does not generally know what is happening unless he is interested in the story.</i></p> <p>How is his/her attitude toward reading? <i>He really doesn't want to do anything but play and chat.</i></p> <p>How is his/her confidence or attitude towards reading? <i>Not very confident-unsure-fidgety when we do 100 book challenge (30 minutes of independent reading)</i></p> <p>What do you notice about their sight word vocabulary? <i>It's limited. He doesn't really know any.</i></p> <p>How is her/his comprehension? <i>Since he can't read for me, I have to say I'm not sure.</i></p> <p>How about when you read to him? <i>He does know what is happening and makes many connections, but he does not answer questions unless it just happened on the previous page.</i></p>	<p>What kind of reading students is DC? <i>He guesses words and doesn't use strategies and is a lazy learner. Not motivated. Does volunteer to read aloud now.</i></p> <p>How is his/her attitude toward reading? <i>Not motivated-really not interesting in anything in the classroom, but does well with one on one. He seems drained.</i></p> <p>How is his confidence or attitude towards reading? <i>Yes. He knows more words. He tries hard compared to before this intervention. He used to get very frustrated, cry, twist body around, etc.</i></p> <p>What do you notice about his/her sight word vocabulary? <i>I'm not really sure. I haven't focused on that. We are working on CVC words.</i></p> <p>Do you feel his comprehension has improved? <i>Yes. He was able to sequence events this week and he could not do that before. I notice he can tell a simple story in order. We are working on BME. Can definitely answer questions about stories.</i></p>

Figure 3. Reading Attitude Inventory: Student and Teacher 2

## **Emerging Literacy Survey Testing**

After the interview, district Emergent Literacy Testing was administered to each child individually. The same test, the Emerging Literacy Survey, was given again at the end of the study to determine acquisition of the skills. This test was chosen specifically to show the value in using testing results to plan instruction and monitor progress. The testing covers rhyme, beginning sounds, blending onsets/rime, segmenting onset/rime, phoneme blending, phoneme segmentation, concepts of print, letter naming, and word recognition. This testing is appropriate for young readers and can help determine what pre-reading skills the children need to master. The word recognition portion focuses on 40 sight words important to beginning readers, and is a requirement for exiting Kindergarten. The result of the initial testing helped determine a starting point for instruction. While keeping these skills in mind, interventions were planned based on the understating of each skill through notes taken during and after each lesson. The data was graphed to show growth over a four-week intervention period (see Figure 4 & 5).

At the beginning of the study, Student 1 struggled with all phonemic awareness skills except beginning sounds. She could name 48 letters and knew five sight words. She confused many letter sounds and did not know any vowels. Each skill was covered daily and repetitive in nature. Student 1 needed each skill reinforced, but was able to complete the activity independently (see figure 6). Final testing results (see figure 4) show the growth in phonemic awareness scoring perfectly in all areas except segmenting onsets and rime, which still had 50% growth. She knows all letters and their sounds and in four weeks, mastered 21 more sight words. Student 1 has automaticity with words, letters, and sounds she knows, but can be inconsistent at times with what she knows.

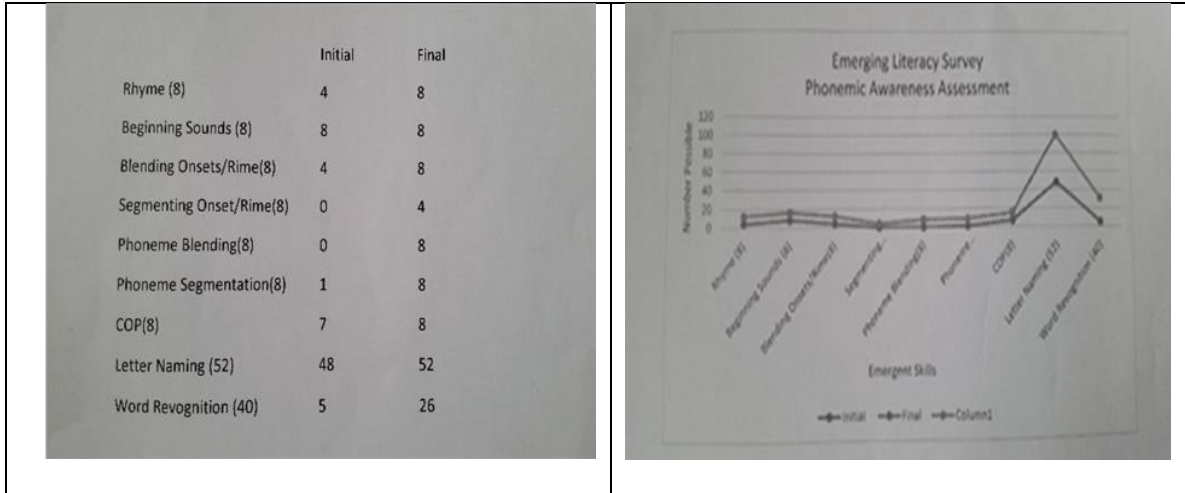


Figure 4. Student 1-Emerging Literacy Survey: Pre and Post Test Results

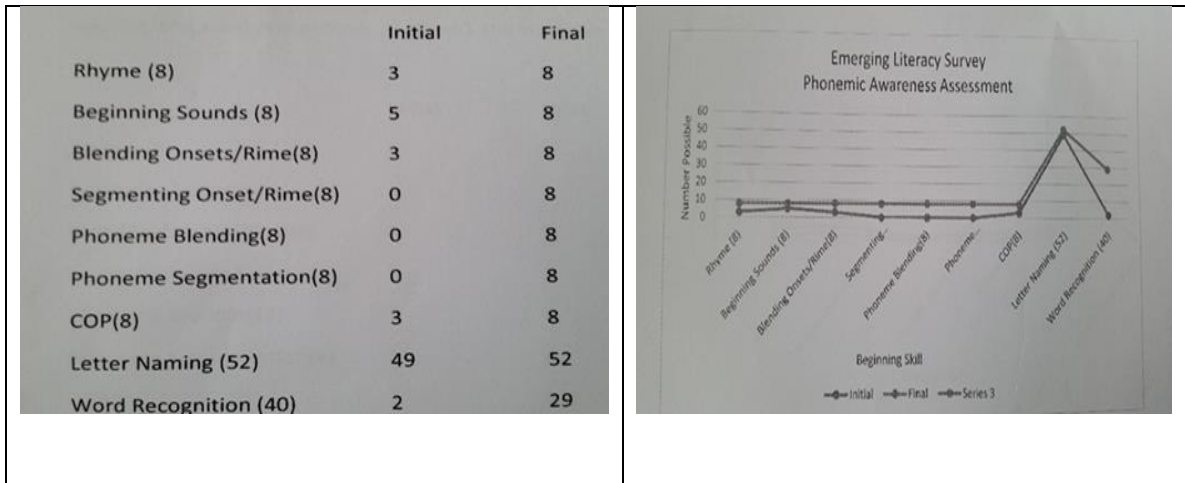


Figure 5. Student 2-Emerging Literacy Survey: Pre and Post Test Results

Student 2 struggled with all phonemic awareness skills and had limited understanding of concepts of print. He knew 49 letters, but struggled with many letter sounds. He did not know any vowel sounds and could only identify 2 sight words.

Student 2 needed each skill reinforced, and extra support to master the tasks (see figure 6). Final testing results (see figure 4) show the growth in phonemic awareness scoring perfectly in all areas. He knows all letters and their sounds and in four weeks, mastered 27 more sight words. Student 2 needs the multisensory strategy to learn sight words. He does not have the automaticity we strive for, but with a few seconds of processing time and patience, he is on target and accurate.

In analyzing the data throughout the course of the study, I was able to use my teacher journal notes to implement strategies that pinpointed specific skills and moved quickly from one to another. The phonemic awareness activities moved rather quickly. If there was some misunderstanding, I planned a short review to start the next lesson in order to reassess their knowledge. Each new skill needed more than one way to solidify understanding. The sequence of phonemic awareness skills followed a precise order, building upon each skill (see figure 6).

<b>Phonemic Awareness Activity</b>	<b>Procedure</b>	<b>Notes Student 1 &amp; Student 2</b>
Listening to Sequence of Sounds	Use various sounds and mimic sequence back	1-Built up to 4 sounds but only consistent at 3. 2-could do 3, but when attempted 4, couldn't retrieve 1 & 2.
Developing Memory of sequence of Sound and Language	Close eyes and listen for sound. Identify	Both did very well

*Figure 6. Phonemic Awareness Data*

Rhyme recognition	Use word sets to determine rhymes. Clap the desk if it does rhyme	1-could identify 8/8 2-could identify 4/8
Listening-Awareness of differences in what you expect to hear and what you actually hear	Read Rhymes w substitution, reversals, and swapping order.	Both children are not very familiar with nursery rhymes 1 & 2-after reciting rhyme, could identify substitutions easily
Review recognition Rhyme Completion	Thumbs up/Thumbs down Complete a rhyme: The airplane can fly, high in the _____.	Both 5/5 1-5/6 2-4/6
Concepts of Print-Identifying word lengths	Discuss how different words are different sizes and why. Give 2 different length cards and decide which card represents which word.	1-can choose which card demonstrates the word, but struggles with articulation 2-needed support but was able to identify word length after 5 examples or corrections.
Review completion  Rhyme Production	Draw a rhyme, one line at a time-Read the rhyme and students draw the completion rhyme until story is done: Once there was a creature named Ed, He stared out with a great big _____. etc Identify an object, name it, and generate a rhyme	1&2- loved activity, but needs guidance for how to complete it, although they did know the rhymes  1-easily generates rhymes 2- struggles to say a rhyme other than the ending (ball-all, cat-at) Modified by writing word, covering up initial sound, and placing in next to alphabet.
Review Rhymes (recog, completion, and production)	Quick review of all three	1-grasps concept 2-needs support at times with production, but much improved.
Blending Onset & Rime	If you are happy and you know it, say my name /c/ /ake/. ____	1-7/8 2-6/8 needs time to process
Syllable Blending Clapping Tapping with chin	Use names to explore syllables clap out syllables Modified to use chin so that they feel the mouth drop at every syllable.	1-could do 2 syllables with clap but confused phonemes several times. chin helped 2- stuck on phonemes, chin helped.
Syllable Blending Tapping with chin Clapping Identifying Syllables up to 3	Use chin to identify how many syllables Play syllable game and use strategy	1-can identify up to 4-10/12 2-can identify some words but often gets confused, but there is no consistency. He uses phonemes, onset/rime, and guessing. 4/12
Syllable Blending Compound words NOT Compound words	Use compound words to solidify syllables, then move to 2 syllable word with out compound	Both did great 1-10/10 2- 9/10

Figure 6 (continued).



Syllable Segmentation	Paper plates as syllable disks to show how many syllables (2-5)	1-Needed a lot of support at first, but did get it. 9/12 2-Struggled, kept saying da-i-nosaur. 4/12
Syllable Deletion	1-Oh where oh where has my little part gone? Using compound words to 'lose' a part and name what is left. 2-Use puppet as a syllable thief-he stole pen from pencil! What's left?	1-did ok with compound words, needed more support with non-compounds. 2-ok with compound, could not grasp other words.
Review Syllable Deletion	What's happy without hap?	Both did ok
Phoneme Isolation of Initial/Final Sound	Jack in the Box-Use D and I initial sound words )dog donut, igloo, it, etc, If I say an initial phoneme with their name, they jump up. Repeat with final. Use 2 picture cards at time and name a sound, the child points to one that has the sound at beg/end and names it.	Easy for them both!  1-fine 2-fine but processes slowly
Think Sounds- Isolating beginning and ending sounds	I say a word that ends in /th/ and child has to think of a word that begins with same sound, then I have to think of a word that starts with same sound of the ending of their generated word	This was difficult, but with a lot of support they could do it.
Phoneme Blending Onset/Rime	Using pencils tap /b/ with one, /ack/ with other then together to say /back/.	No problem!
Review Phoneme Blending Onset/Rime	Im thinking of a word, It ends with ock. It starts with cl, The word it ____.	1 & 2-Struggled with blends. But got it.
Phoneme Segmentation	Hippity Hop- For each phoneme in their word, they hop. IE_ hop- 3 hops.	No problem
Phoneme Deletion of Initial Sound	Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Word- Take the /p/ off pout, /c/ off /old/. etc	1-after 3 examples, she could do it. 2-needed support, and could do it with visual word.
Phoneme Deletion of Ending Sound	Roll Away Sound. Roll ball to each child and say word. The child has to say the word without the last sound.	1-needed a lot of support in the beginning, but got it 2- needed support, and again, had to see the word so I wrote them on a small wipe off board.

Figure 6 (continued).

## **Using Culturally Responsive Text to Improve Retelling**

To gather data about both students' approaches toward reading and ability to retell, the children each chose a book for me to read to them from an extensive library. We talked about book choice and the importance of choosing books that you might enjoy. Student 1 chose David McKee's wonderful text about embracing your individuality, *Elmer*, because she 'loves elephants' and thought he was 'pretty and colorful'. She also admitted that her teacher had read the book last year. Student 2 chose from a large basket of Magic School Bus books. He chose *Magic School Bus Rides the Wind* from the level 2 Science Reader's collection. He chose this text because he 'likes to learn' and he 'loves the show' and was very excited about reading it together. During these informal, individual reading assessments, I looked at the attitude toward choosing books, interaction with the text, and understanding of text, and ability to retell the story verbally. This information is noted in the teacher research journal and progresses over time (Figure 7). Over the course of the study, I noticed that both children began to choose text with a purpose. Student 1 commented that she is choosing books about baby brothers and elephants for 100 book challenge because she likes to learn about her brother and wants to know more about elephants. Student 2 is choosing Magic School Bus books because they teach you lots of information about dinosaurs and water. This type of talk demonstrates that both children are thinking about interests them and that it motivates them to read for a purpose. Student 2 demonstrated his ability to make prediction on several occasions. Questions were pretend to elicit predictions such as, "What do you think will happen now?" and "How do you think he will solve this problem?" Student 1 did not interact as much, but did become involved in conversations often.

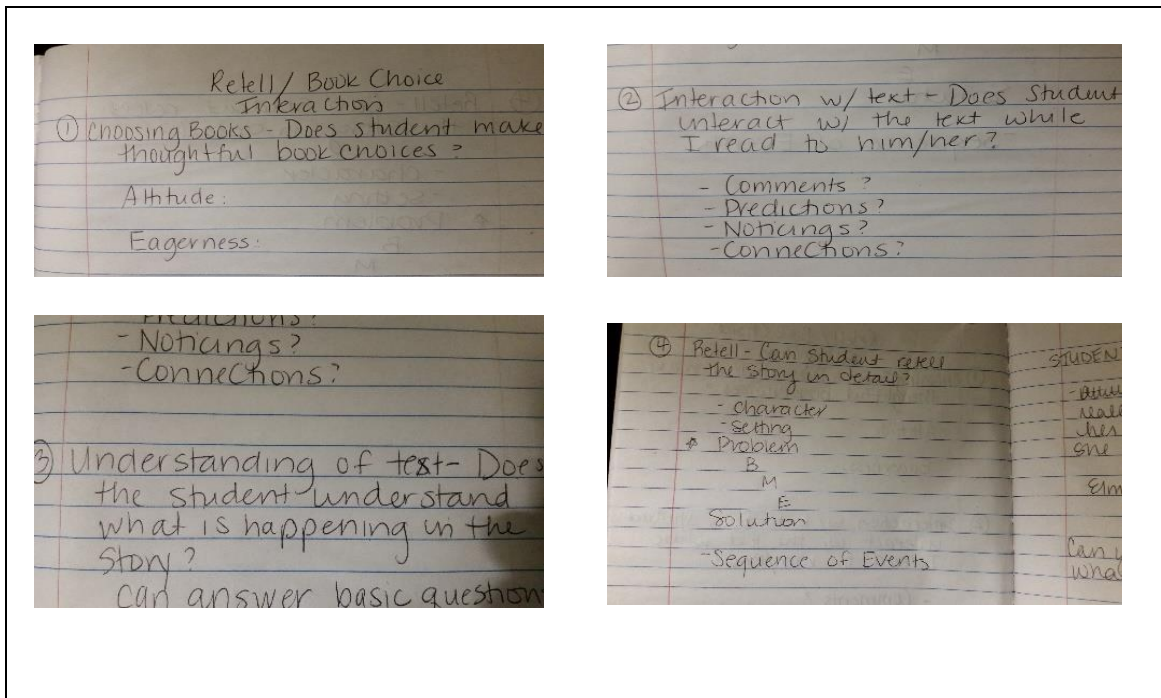


Figure 7. Teacher Research Journal

To ensure motivation throughout the literature portion of the study, books were chosen based on student interest and ability to make connections to their own life. During our sessions and on the way back to class, conversations took place and books were chosen based on interest and ability to connect to the text (see figure 8). The Retelling Rope was very helpful with the retelling of each story. Because both children had difficulty remembering the characters names, setting, and details, we began writing them on a sticky note and placing them next to the icons. They were best at identifying the problem and solution but it was supported through our conversation. By session 10, both children were efficient in retelling books that were chosen for them purposefully in a read aloud format.

1	Elmer David McKee	Student 2 saw the book on the ledge and asked if we could read it. I asked Student 1 if she would like to use her text as a starting point for our lessons and she said, “Yes!”
2	Same	We ran out of time reading Elmer, as they were both very engaged. They really wanted to finish reading it. This was important to continue.
3	Time For School Nathan! Lulu Delacre	Student 1 was having a problem with another classmate who lives next door and is his best friend. Since student 1 loves elephants, and student 2 was having a problem with best friend jealousy, this was a perfect pick.
4	Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star Poem	This text was chosen due to the rhyming aspect. When we were walking back to class after session 2, we were discussing rhyming. I asked if they had favorite nursery rhymes, but had to explain and demonstrate what they were. I would hum one, and they would guess. They both like Twinkle, Twinkle.
5	The Crayon Box That Talked Shane Delrolf	After working with highlighters for <i>Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star</i> , the children glued the copy into their notebook. Both students wanted to color a picture to go with it using the highlighters. We talked about writing utensils and looked at the various bins with different choices in the classroom. We talked about how much fun they are and how boring life would be without color. <i>The Crayon Box That Talked</i> was a perfect choice!
6	Spaghetti on a Hotdog Bun Maria Dismondy	Both children are learning to make better choices in their classrooms. Their teachers are frustrated with them and this text talks about making good choices and not to be reactive to other children.
7	The Name Jar Yangsook Choi	Our last session ended with conversations about classmates and siblings being mean to each other based on a <i>Spaghetti on a Hotdog Bun</i> character. We talked about being proud of who you are and respecting that all children are unique. The Name Jar shows a child doubting herself, facing new situation head on, and with the help of her new classmates-becoming ok with her name. Some research in early literacy promotes using names to engage children. We used this text to begin exploring our names and relate to being comfortable with who you are.

Figure 8. Choosing Culturally Responsive Text

8	Magic School Bus Flies With Dinosaurs-Lvl 2 Reader Martin Schwabacher	Every day Student 2 asks to read another MSB book. Before we finished the session with <i>The Name Jar</i> , I told him to feel free to take one home with him. Student 2 asked if she could too. Of course, I said yes. Because all books have a lesson, I decided to choose a text to share. I offered 3 level 2 texts of MSB at the beginning of the session. They agreed on the dinosaur one. All MSB books are easily related to topics kids enjoy, research, and writing about them.
9	Book Fiesta Pat Mora	Because the children loved the MSB book, and are generally enjoying all of our reading, I thought Book Fiesta would be a nice way to infuse the joy of books into our conversation. This book is short and shows the text in two languages. My purpose was to link the love of books for people all over the world.
10	Shades of People Shelley Rotner	With the discussion of the last text, we had a quick conversation about how people celebrate the same things in all different places of the earth. Student 1 talked about how the people look different too. We talked about how we look different, that everyone is different. We compared our skin and noticed how different we are. This text will solidify this thinking.
11	We All Have Different Families Melissa Higgins	Because both children are from families with different dynamics, reading a book that explains several different typed of families will help both children relate and connect, while understanding that we are all unique.
12	Rene Has Two Last Names Rene Colato Lainez	The First Grade is working on a family unit. They are discussing family trees. This text shows that even teachers can misunderstand what is unfamiliar to them. It is an excellent story that explains that we are who we are because of our family background. The main character, Rene, tells about what he had learned from both sides of his family, and this was the basis for thinking deeply about what we learn from our parents and grandparents.
13	The Carrot Seed Ruth Krauss	Both children are struggling in their classrooms with independent work. This text shows how believing in something and perseverance is important to success. This text is a springboard for thinking about believing in ourselves, and how we have to nurture our learning as the boy nurtured his carrot plant.
14	I Love My Hair Natasha Anastasia Tarpley	On the way back to class, I asked the question, "Do you love yourself?" It made the students almost uncomfortable. I rephrased and asked if there was something about themselves that they loved. We talked about how student 1 always has cool shoes and student 2 loves to sing. <i>I Love My Hair</i> is an excellent book that demonstrates to be proud of who you are and what you look like.
15	Same	This book is long and we did not finish due to discussion. We will be using it tomorrow too!

Figure 8. (continued)

Both students have learned to talk about books and understand that they have a purpose. The retelling rope was very helpful in focusing the discussions and what readers need to look and listen for when reading. Student 1 worked on remembering names and sequence of events, and still needs to learn to interact with text on a deeper level. Student 2 has great insight and loves talking about books. He makes connections naturally and listens for the sequence of events. At about lesson 7, he began to ask to go back into the text when he could not remember something. As noted by student 2's teacher, he has become a very active listener and will even ask to read in the classroom. Student 1 is not as focused during whole group, but is blossoming with independent reading. Student 1 and 2 both prefer to have the teacher read the reading assessments to her and needs the one-on-one to focus on the task.

### **Reading & Writing Connection**

When we talk about phonemic awareness, sight words, alphabetic principle, and reading, conversations about writing naturally emerge. Although this was not being measured in the study, the children were interested in writing. Because they were so motivated, I presented each child with a journal and we began dictating sentences using the sight words and CVC words. If time was available, they had opportunities to write and draw pictures to represent the read aloud. This became the most cherished time of the lesson for both children. The writing component allowed me to see the transfer of sight word knowledge, ability to sound out words, and to assess knowledge about the story. During this lesson structure, the children responded with eagerness and motivation throughout the lessons because they wanted to use what they were learning in their journals. Both children responded very well to producing work in written form. I have

often believed that reading-writing has an innate connection, and this experience has proven that it is a natural connection in the learning process.

## **Conclusion**

After each session, time was spent journaling about how the children fared with each component of the lesson. From there, activities were planned that would support learning in the areas of phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, and reading for retelling. Overall, the data shows that planning responsive instruction is effective for children. In a short period of time, these students demonstrated mastery of emergent literacy skills, letter-sound recognition, sight words, and retelling. In the small group setting, lessons are very focused on the specific student's needs regardless of the grade level standards. Both children were engaged for 30-40 minutes per day in activities with no down time. Because the lessons were focused on the student's needs with quick and smooth transitions, the children were very motivated to work. The disengaged behaviors exhibited in the classroom were rarely apparent. Both children showed eagerness to come to the sessions. This study demonstrates my initial inference that repetitive instruction has a place in learning, multisensory strategies support learning, and choosing text that children can connect with are imperative to the success of struggling learners. Systematic, small group intervention focused on student needs, coupled with immersion in culturally responsive literature can support emerging 1st grade readers and build a foundation that allows them to see themselves as capable growing readers.

## Chapter 5

### Summary, Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications for the Field

#### Summary

At the conclusion of this study, I discovered that these two struggling first grade readers showed tremendous growth in phonemic awareness, sight word recognition, and retelling stories read to them. Each lesson provided opportunities to grasp necessary emergent literacy skills through repetition, multisensory strategies, and instruction that was responsive to their needs.

The basis of this inquiry comes from observing some first graders struggle throughout the year, with no plan of intervention in place. Often times, first graders emerge as struggling readers or deficient in their reading ability. They struggle with grade level text and are not independent readers, lagging behind their peers throughout first grade. Often, struggling emergent readers continue to experience difficulty with becoming skilled readers as they progress through school. Their experience ranges from confusion to frustration and ends with accepting mediocrity in themselves. I feel that at this young age, it is damaging. Young readers emerge at different rates and using the rigorous common core standards as universal benchmarks that determine success or failure is not going to create readers that are more proficient. This work explored how meeting the needs of the diverse learners, regardless of the standards, can begin to build the skills needed to become a capable reader. The two children in this study were described as unmotivated, reluctant, behavior problems, and/or uncooperative, suggesting that both children be referred to basic skills or child study team. After spending a short



amount of time with both children, I felt that they were both capable students who lacked skills needed to meet the demands of their classrooms without support.

To determine the emergent literacy needs of the students, I administered the districts Emerging Literacy Survey, an early reading assessment that mirrors The Observation Survey (Clay, 2005). Results of the testing indicated severe deficit in phonemic awareness and sight word knowledge. Additionally, running records were too difficult due to lack of these skills. I looked at the MAPS testing and both students were performing below 5% in Language Arts Literacy and Mathematics. Because both children were struggling in the classroom with whole group and independent reading, I felt it was important to build understanding with how text works using text that were meaningful to the student to. Using culturally responsive text provides opportunity to engage and motivate readers.

### **Lesson Components**

In measuring their motivation and engagement, I noticed that both children were very eager to come work in their small group setting each day. Through conversation with the children, it was clear that both students felt challenged, but not overwhelmed as they did in the classroom. Hindering behaviors exhibited in the whole group setting were not observed in small group.

The phonemic awareness segment of the lesson included multisensory, game like activities and proved to be an engaging way to begin each session. The phonemic awareness activities built on each other and were reinforced daily. This provided the children with success and confidence. Student 1 enjoyed music and movement, while

student 2 responded better to tactile and movement activities. All activities were quick and purposeful, which held interest. Both students benefited from quick, engaging activities. Student 2 often commented on how fast the activity was and was eager to know what was coming next. The repetition was purposeful and allowed time to revisit each skill and build upon it.

The second part of the session focused on very repetitive multisensory sight word recognition. To memorize sight words, we used a tapping out strategy in which student looks at the word, taps the letters down the arm and swipes while saying the word three times worked for one student, while the repetition worked for the other. Each sight word was introduced as a whole word. The children were encouraged to match the shapes of the words and tap out the sounds while looking at the word three times. We repeated this activity daily and read the words in context. Additionally, sight words were included in dictated sentences during the writing component. The tapping out was a trigger for student 2 and allowed him to use the motions to activate his knowledge of the word. Student 1 relied more on the shape of the word. Regardless of the strategy that triggers memory for each child, it is clear that systematic, multisensory instruction that is quick and responsive is effective. Building the sight word vocabulary allowed the children to have success with independent reading in the classroom.

Both the phonemic awareness and sight words provided enough knowledge to move into writing, which ended up being both children's activity of choice. Student 2 was extremely proud of his writing journal and asked to take it home daily so he could work in it. Student 1 often asked to have "just one more minute." Both children learned

to use the phonemic awareness to stretch words out and the sight word work did transfer to writing most of the time.

The excitement observed when listening to and talking about books improved over the course of the study, especially in student 2. Working with the multisensory strategy for retell using the retelling rope, provided the students with a reference to retell stories thoroughly and sequentially. Special attention in discussing setting and character's names helped both children to remember the importance of how the setting effects the character, and how the character interacts with the reader. Because both could identify the problem and solution, but could not name the steps to solving the problem in order, the retelling rope B-M-E needed the most focus. Using culturally responsive text over the course of the study, sequential order improved, with minimal confusion about the events that lead to the solution. Both students tend to remember one detail that leads to the solution. Most importantly, both students understand that readers read with a purpose and is a social act, best discussed with a friend.

In their classrooms, both teachers noticed that the children are applying skills to decode and reading has improved. Student 2 demonstrates tremendous growth in retelling and participates in class. He is even volunteering to read. Student 1 prefers reading with teacher support but is reading one level above where she started in October.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, both students have demonstrated that they have the ability to learn and apply knowledge to reading. Continued intensive instruction is needed to continue to move these learners through the reading and writing process. Opportunities to read

voraciously in a social setting will continue to provide motivation and engagement in reading. Having a wide array of books on topics of interest on their level is imperative for their continued success during independent reading time.

The use of pre and post testing to drive instruction shows where to instruct the children and using it as a monitoring tool allows the teacher to move the children through the skills efficiently. This work was reflective and efficient. The children respected the predictable pattern of teaching and benefited from the skills reviewing and building upon each other as necessary. Following the learning patterns developed in this intensive intervention would provide support for continued reading success. This type of work should be supplemental and ongoing for these emergent readers, who need more time to flourish in the classroom.

### **Limitations**

Major limitations to this study are time and consistency. These students would benefit from continued support in learning and applying emergent literacy skills into authentic work. Working in a supplemental small group daily throughout their First Grade year will allow them to continue building the skills they have not grasped to work at grade level. Additionally, they need to have modifications made to their work in the classroom in order to meet their needs. Working within text that supports their learning and supporting and challenging them along the way is going to help provide opportunity to read with purpose.

## **Implications for the Field**

Educators continue to feel the pressures of meeting high standards; however, we need to keep our consumers at the forefront of our minds. We cannot expect children to meet these high standards unless we build a strong foundation in reading and writing in the early years. Expectations for our students need to be high but realistic. Using reflective teaching strategies that meet the needs of our children, using data to drive instruction, and efficient planning is the key to raising confident readers who are strategic and purposeful when reading.

In a world that is closing in on education and raising the standards so that children are college and career ready, we need to be reflective and purposeful. Being culturally aware is important when striving for motivation and explicit teaching provides foundation for engagement. Struggling learners' needs must be met and it is the regular classroom teacher's responsibility to meet those needs. This is an extremely difficult task because there is not a one size fits all program. Small group instruction and culturally responsive teaching empowers children to feel valued and without it, we are losing our children and hindering their success in reading.

In conclusion, this study has allowed me to explore the effects of being responsive and explicit in my teaching, and how that practice can positively affect children's reading readiness in first grade.

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