

The Effects of Small Group Phonics Intervention on Low Achieving Kindergarten Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether daily small group intervention in the area of phonics would positively impact achievement of selected Kindergarten students enrolled in the class. The measurement tool used was the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) benchmark assessment. This study involved the use of a pre-test/post-test design to compare data from January 2013 (before the intervention was administered) to May 2014 (after the intervention was completed). Achievement gains were significant, though results could be attributable to a number of intervening factors. Research in the area of small group instruction should continue given the connection between early phonics intervention and future reading achievement.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Early intervention for struggling reading students is something that everyone in the education community can agree on, though the means of how we grapple with it vary. Early intervention is promoted as a way of preventing the gap between poor readers and their peers as they move through school. In order for students to be successful in their academic future of reading, it begins in the foundation of phonics and phonemic awareness. If students are unable to grasp the base skills, they are destined for difficulties in their future reading success. My study will focus on the idea of small group intervention, and how it can positively impact low achieving Kindergarten students.

In the researcher's experience at a Title 1 school, there are always academic struggles for some students. As a part of "best practices" of teaching, small group phonics intervention should always be a part of the daily routine. By doing this, students are given the opportunity to receive one on one attention. The researcher is able to hone in on their needs and act accordingly. In the past, without fail, low achieving students' scores on the DIBELS benchmark have improved in all measures. This study will give the opportunity to document where students began and show their progress as they receive intervention each day. It will also help to identify those students who may need intervention beyond the classroom (special education services, including speech and language). This study will show that low achieving students are able to make gains, whether small or large, when intervention is present. Features of this study will be identification of low achieving students in the area of phonics, the need for small group intervention, strategies and means of providing intervention, and the results of benchmark assessments and progress monitoring from start to finish. Positive implications will come from this study, as students'

below benchmark scores improve. It will also show that with daily attention to need, all students are able to make positive growth.

Overview

Students at a Title 1 school come from a wide variety of backgrounds. The majority reside in poverty stricken conditions with little to no home support, directly effecting students' academic ability. Because of this, students begin their school experience in Kindergarten with no prior knowledge of phonemic awareness and phonics. In some cases, students pick up very quickly and have natural ability to distinguish letters, sounds, and word building. However in most cases, students struggle to understand the material being presented. This problem proves to be very pervasive in that as the school year continues, students are unable to keep up with the rigor of the curriculum and fall below benchmark. Understanding that phonics in Kindergarten is the foundation that leads to future reading success is key. Without a strong base, students are destined to struggle in later grades.

In the researcher's five years of teaching at this Title 1 school, there are large challenges every year to get students where they need to be in the areas of letter naming, initial sound fluency, and nonsense word fluency. There has always been great interest in bridging the gap between those low achieving students and average/above average students. Each year it is a goal to push students as far as they are capable so they persevere through their challenges. It is imperative that students are able to move on to their 1st grade year with little struggle and to provide them with the tools and strategies when their phonics knowledge presents difficulties. With the proper research and action to the problem, anything is possible.

Statement of the Problem

The ultimate purpose of this study is to show student growth and success in the area of phonics. It also will show that daily small group phonics instruction can create a positive impact on student achievement, as measured by the DIBELS benchmark assessment. Students who are considered “at risk” in the areas of letter naming fluency (LNF), initial sound fluency (ISF), and nonsense word fluency (NWF) are in need of intervention.

Hypothesis

Low achieving students who participate in daily small group phonics intervention will not show a positive change in their benchmark scores in the area of letter naming fluency, initial sound fluency, and nonsense word fluency, as measured by the DIBELS benchmark assessment.

Operational Definitions

The independent variable for this study was small group phonics intervention. *Small group phonics intervention* can be defined as a daily group of 5-6 students who will work on skills such as letter naming, initial sound fluency, and nonsense word fluency through a variety of games and strategies.

The dependent variable for this study was student performance. *Student performance* can be defined as how well a student does on the DIBELS Benchmark Assessment, which is the phonics assessment used in primary grades to show where students perform (below, on, or above benchmark). It can also be defined as how well a student does (improvement or regression) based on progress monitoring and classroom observation.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Early intervention for struggling reading students is something that everyone in the education community can agree on, though the means of how we grapple with it vary. Early intervention is promoted as a way of preventing the gap between poor readers and their peers as they move through school. In order for students to be successful in their academic future of reading, the process begins with a foundation of phonics and phonemic awareness. If students are unable to grasp the basic skills (letter naming, initial sound fluency, phoneme segmentation, and nonsense word fluency), they are destined for difficulties in their future reading success. The following review of literature will aid in supporting the belief that early phonics intervention is key for low achieving students.

The review begins with a discussion of the importance of phonics instruction and the impact it has on reading achievement. Following this will be the characteristics of at-risk students and how to detect low achieving learners early on in their academic career. From here, the review will discuss the need for early reading intervention and strategies that are effective for small group instruction.

The Importance of Phonics Instruction

A child's phonetic abilities begin very early on their lives, with things as simple as recognizing signs and words that they see everyday. When cultivated by parents or teachers, a child's ability in phonics can grow quickly, beginning with letter recognition and spanning out from there into more complex areas. The struggle in this culture is that students come to school less and less prepared, leaving those basic early literacy skills up to being taught in their first

school experiences. According to a study done on assessing teacher practices and development, researchers explain that there is growing evidence that the quality of instruction matters, and that what is done in the classroom effects student achievement (Hough, Kerbrow, Bryk, Pinnell, Dexter, Hung, Scharer, & Fountas. 2005). Educators are given a set curriculum to follow, but there are many cases where that is not enough for struggling learners. At the early childhood level, in order to encourage student attention and help them to make gains, learning needs to be fun.

These researchers (Hough et.al., 2005) also discuss the true purpose of phonics instruction and that without phonics skills, students are unable to be successful in their future academic careers. The goal of phonics instruction is to help students develop the alphabetic principle, meaning that letters make sounds and that they come together to form words that have meaning. As students develop understandings of this principle, they can make sense of the need for letter-sound correspondence to figure out words new to them. Without the understanding that letters have a purpose, students cannot move forward in the reading process. Command of the alphabetic principle is the foundation for accurate word recognition and a prerequisite for fluency. It is from here that students develop the characteristics to be skillful readers in their future. Once these baseline skills are mastered, starting in the early grades (Pre-K and K), students can move on in their learning to more challenging tasks such as reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

At-Risk Students

Often, at-risk students slip through the cracks and ultimately are at a disadvantage in the grades following Kindergarten. Many students enter school lacking the necessary baseline

skills needed to begin their Kindergarten year successfully. An important factor in research is the identification of students who are considered “at-risk” for reading difficulties.

Within the research, it is hard to pin-point characteristics of an at-risk student, although there is agreement that such children need to be identified. Correct identification of children at risk for reading difficulty in kindergarten and first grade can trigger early intervention prior to the onset of significant problems, which in turn, can place children on the path of normal reading development (Bouton, Compton, Fuchs, Fuchs, & Gilbert, 2010). Typically, “at-risk” decisions are made by selecting a critical-cut point along a continuum of scores on a single screening measure. The measure that is used in this study is the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy (DIBELS). Under this measure, students can be identified as “low risk”, “some risk”, or “at-risk”. It is the “at-risk” students that call for the most interventions, based on the area of need. When looking to the fall benchmark, the areas of testing include initial sound fluency and letter naming. A student may be low risk in one area of testing, but be at-risk in another and come out in the end as “benchmarked”. It is imperative that educators dissect the data in order to pin point where a student’s need is. Without knowing the data of each student inside and out, an area of need can be overlooked and cause significant problems in the future when testing moves to more difficult skills such as phoneme segmentation and nonsense word fluency.

Another study looking at the importance of early intervention was undertaken by Cooke, Kretlow, & Helf (2010). This study supported the need for early academic intervention for students at-risk of reading failure to ensure academic success in later grades. The researchers suggested that intervention should begin within the first semester of kindergarten and focus on reading readiness skills, such as letter identification. This allows

students who have deficits in more than one area some time to adjust to school expectations and routines. In another study focusing on identifying students at-risk for reading difficulty, Jenkins and Randi, (2001) explain that skilled readers can read single words fast and accurately, given their ability previously to decode and master basic phonetic skills. When students do not have a strong background in the beginning stages of reading (letter naming, sound recognition, etc.), successful reading comprehension ability and access to background knowledge will suffer in the future. It is in the early stages that we must identify these at-risk students and respond to their needs. Studies measure a range of children's pre-literacy skills in kindergarten or first grade and then calculate the strength of the correlations between these skills and reading ability. Virtually all studies in which letter knowledge was measured in preschool, kindergarten, or early first grade, its significant contribution to reading was cited. The first step is to identify these “at risk” students. From there, it is up to educators to fill in the gaps.

Early Reading Intervention

Early reading intervention is often stated as the key to helping struggling at-risk readers become confident readers. More specifically, results of experimental studies also support the need for early academic intervention for students at-risk for reading failure to ensure academic success in later grades (Cooke, Kretlow, & Helf, 2010). There is a difference of opinion between researchers about what is important to focus on during early intervention- academic skills or early readiness skills. However, there is not a difference of opinion on when it should start. The key here is the earlier the better. The potential cost of delaying reading intervention is loss of progress that might be made with supplementary small group instruction across the full year.

Early intervention in reading, if properly designed and delivered, should act as a vaccination, inoculating children against the later occurrence of reading failure. (Coyne, Kame'enui, Simmons, & Harn, 2004). The intervention design that is used in this research study begins early. Children deemed at-risk are placed in an intervention program within the third week of school. Effective early reading intervention instruction includes teaching children to break apart words, teaching them that that sounds are represented by letters of the alphabet which can be blended together to form words. Within this study, the reading resource teacher who is providing the intervention is working in all of these areas to improve the children's ability to identify letters.

Another study conducted by Ball and Gettinger (2009), shows that response to intervention (RTI) is key. They explain that using progress-monitoring techniques is a successful way to monitor improvement, tracking students' growth through bi-or tri- weekly assessments. As soon as a student's delays are evident, action needs to be taken in order to prevent future reading failure. Changes in classroom practice and the literacy environment will aid in improved achievement. This study also used DIBELS as a measurement tool, where benchmark assessments are used as the checkpoint to see if students are below, on, or above grade level. It also uses the bi-weekly progress-monitoring technique. The study shows that there are mixed results in the use of this technique, dependent on the way teachers used the data to respond to students needs. When teachers used the data to pull small groups and work one-on-one with students, there was significant improvement. When teachers used the monitoring technique as an additional way to assess without responding with intervention, little growth was made.

Strategies for Small Group Intervention

Large numbers of students are not benefiting from current reading curriculum and practices, which is the driving force behind the need for action and intervention. According to Amer, Bursuck, Damer, Munk, & Smith (2005), the number of students in need of additional support is growing and there are many students no longer benefiting from the mainstream curriculum practices. In their research, a program titled “PRIDE” (Preventing and Remediating Reading Problems Through Early Identification and Direct Teaching of Early Literacy Skills) was put into place. Students selected were those who were not meeting state standards and falling below benchmark. The program consisted of three models of teaching, including whole class instruction, whole-class instruction with extra help, and intensive small-group instruction using alternative reading strategies. Results showed that students who participated in the small group outperformed the students who were in the other two models. Results were significant in showing that small group intervention had a positive impact on student achievement (Amer, et al, 2005).

Another study by Cooke et al., (2010) showed that offering intervention to struggling students as early as possible has a significant impact on student learning and improvement in phonics. This study was conducted at two different schools, where students who scored “at-risk” on the DIBELS benchmark assessment were placed into small group intervention daily, one school beginning after the fall benchmark and the other group beginning after the winter benchmark. Results showed that students who began intervention immediately following the fall benchmark scored significantly higher on the Spring benchmark than those who began intervention in the fall.

There is also research that shows that strategies, such as visual phonics, can serve as a strategic intervention to increase early literacy skills for kindergarten students. Cihon, Gardener,

and Morrison (2008) conducted a study also using the DIBELS assessment as a measure to determine early reading success. They note that, unfortunately, many teachers do not know what to do with the results of the DIBELS assessment, particularly how to modify instruction or provide more intensive instruction in problem areas. Because of this, teachers continue teaching the regular curriculum, never addressing the needs of struggling students. With this in mind, the study focused on five Kindergarten students (out of 12 who were struggling) who fell the furthest below benchmark in the winter. These five students were pulled into a small group and were instructed using a program that involved learning letters and sounds associated with repetitive hand signs. Results show that, from the winter benchmark to the spring benchmark, students who participated in the small group intervention made positive gains, rivaling their peers who didn't receive intervention. With that said, this study also supports the belief that small group intervention has a positive impact on student achievement.

The final research cited in this review focuses on effective strategies used in phonics instruction in early childhood classrooms. Morrow (1997) begins by explaining that the debate over the importance or necessity for phonics instruction is a long-term debate. However, time after time it has been proven that phonics instruction and response to intervention are essential to a child's reading ability. The debate can no longer be whether it is important or not, but rather which approaches educators take to teach this area of instruction. Morrow explains that with the combined approach of phonics instruction, whole language instruction, and stepping to the plate to meet students' individual needs, children can be successful in their learning.

Morrow's study focused on educators using basic alphabetic principles (letter naming and sounds), while also incorporating symbols for each letter. Instruction was delivered explicitly and contextually. Previously, students had participated in daily activities learning letters/letter

combinations (digraphs, blends) in isolation and also participated in guided reading. The study showed that while students were successful using these combined methods, it is truly up to the teacher to make a conscious effort to know what works best for his/her students. By collecting data and observing students, “best practice” decisions can be made to assist them to be successful in phonics and the development of future reading skills.

Summary

The importance of phonics instruction is something that will be debated for years to come. Many primary educators focus in on examining curriculum, teaching with best practices in mind, and knowing student need. By simply examining data without any response to intervention and continuing along with no changes, students are unable to successfully progress. With early detection of at-risk students in mind, educators are able to identify the gaps in phonics instruction and make the necessary changes to positively impact student achievement. The above review of literature solidifies the idea of supporting low achieving students and the belief that with response to intervention, students can be academically successful in the area of phonics.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to witness student growth and success in the area of phonics. It will show that daily small group phonics instruction can create a positive impact on student achievement, as measured by the DIBELS benchmark assessment. The study began by conducting the DIBELS benchmark assessment, focusing on the areas of letter naming fluency (LNF), initial sound fluency (ISF) and nonsense word fluency (NWF). Each student's scores were examined and then identification of students with deficits was determined. Selected students who met the criteria for treatment met daily for small group intervention, where they were given strategies for success in phonics. After eight weeks of intervention, students received the spring benchmark assessment, considered as the post test for this study. From there, scores were analyzed to see if progress had been made or not.

Design

The design used for this study was the pre-experimental method. Before beginning testing, there was an apparent lack of knowledge in the area of phonics for many Kindergarten students. Through observation and prior data collecting, it was determined that classroom-based intervention would be beneficial to bridge the gap between students achieving on grade level and students falling below the mark. Constraints before testing included two students who entered Kindergarten already receiving separate services for speech and language, therefore both on IEP's.

Scores were examined from the DIBELS benchmark assessment to determine the group that would receive intervention. The design used was shown as follows:

O X O

Pre-test (DIBELS scores)- O

Eight weeks of treatment (small group intervention)- X

Post-test (DIBELS scores)- O

The pre-test included assessment in letter naming fluency, initial sound fluency, and nonsense word fluency. From these scores, students were placed in intervention groups to receive treatment for 12-15 minute periods a day. Several students were in more than one group, based on need. This occurred for 8 weeks, 5 days a week. After the treatment ended, students were given the post-test, including assessment in the same areas (LNF, ISF, and NWF).

Participants

Students for this study were selected based on need in the area of phonics, specifically letter naming, beginning sound, and word fluency. After being given the DIBELS benchmark assessment, scores were examined to identify deficit. Of 22 students, 6 students were selected, 3 boys and 3 girls, to be included in this study. All 6 students attend a Title 1, Baltimore County public school in the Dundalk area. All students also qualify under FARMS (free and reduced meals) and are considered to reside in low-socioeconomic households. Of the students included, 4 were Caucasian and 2 were African-American. At the time of the study, 4 students were 6 years of age and 2 were 5 years of age. All students included fell below benchmark on the DIBELS benchmark assessment, placing them all in need of small group intervention.

Instrument

The instrument used for this study was the DIBELS Benchmark Assessment, which stands for Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills. The assessment is a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade. They are designed to be short, timed fluency measures used to regularly monitor the development of early literacy and early reading skills. DIBELS has been used county wide and is still used in grades K-5th at the elementary school in this study. The instrument was used as the pre-test and post test assessment on one group of students, and normed using a dependent *t*-test.

Reviews discuss that much of the research on validity and reliability are unusable because the developers do not describe the methodologies used in the studies. Nonetheless, the developers discuss subjects related to alternate-form and internal consistency reliability. The developers do not describe any studies investigating the predictive relationship of DIBELS scores to state assessments of reading standards. The articles show that there is further digging and personal researching that are necessary for student results to be used effectively. The article also discusses concurrent validity and how effective results from one benchmark (beginning of the year) compare to the following benchmarks (winter and spring). The reviewers agree of the usefulness of this measure. They have very similar views, one touching more heavily on the lack of connection to DIBELS data and how it drives future instruction. The first reviewer focuses on the pieces of the assessment and how inter-rater reliability fails to be mentioned. The second reviewer bridges the gaps as to why this is the case. For example, at the Kindergarten level, Letter Naming Fluency is the beginning of the year focus with an emphasis on how many random letters a student can name in a minute. It focuses on the speed, rather than accuracy. So, if the first line reads “X L k a E Y T u J S X” a child may ‘luck out’ and know all of those

specific letters and on final data measures it shows they meet benchmark. This does not necessarily mean the student knows all letters of the alphabet. Students could go an entire school year not knowing all of their letters and still meet benchmark. Both reviewers discuss that this is where a teacher's job plays a huge role- collecting further data and knowing your students. The researcher of this study included mastery of all letters and letter sounds to ensure success on the DIBELS benchmark, to deter from false "lucky" scores.

Procedure

At the beginning of the research, times were selected to work with the selected students for small group intervention. During center time, an hour time block of the day, four different groups rotate to different areas of the room, participating in work/play activities. This is done independently to allow for groups to be pulled and worked with, receiving one on one attention for areas of need or acceleration. There are four time slots available for small group instruction, two of which were dedicated to this study. While students were participating in center time activities, they would report to the back table to meet with the teacher. When their name was called, they knew it was their turn to come back and work. four out of six students participated in one intervention group per day, while 2 students participated in both. These selected two students were in more severe need of intervention, causing the need for more than one session.

Before beginning, interventions in the form of games were prepared in order to accommodate what skill would be worked on each day. Every day, letter naming was incorporated into the beginning of the intervention. Initial sound fluency served as the main part of the intervention until students began to grasp letter concepts. After this, nonsense word fluency activities were able to be included. When working with letter naming, students were taught sign language to identify the letter with an eventual incorporation of an action to name the

sound of the letter (example: Students make the sign language symbol” for letter B; to show it’s sound, they make a bouncing motion like a ball and say “/b/ /b/ /b/”).) With incorporating this strategy, students were able to make a kinesthetic connection and remember the letter name. In the beginning of the research, there was a heavy focus on mastery of letter names, which eventually tapered off to learning sounds (ISF) and applying their knowledge to saying sounds together to blend words (NWF). Initial sound fluency games included, “Nutty Squirrel”, “Lightening Letters”, “Guess that sound!”, “Sound Train”, and “The Odd One Out”. All of the games focused on the sounds letters make at the beginning of words. For example, “The word is baby. What sound do you hear at the beginning of baby?” Students would respond with “/b/”. From here, students would rename the letter with sign, reinforcing the base skill. Another example would be students listening to the beginning sound of three words. Two words share the same beginning sound, one does not. Students would have to choose the one that did not belong and explain why.

Nonsense word games included, “Shaving Cream Letters”, “Meltdown!”, “Touchdown!”, “Crazy Carrots”, “Crash!”, and “Pizza, Pizza”. All of the games were prepared prior to intervention with nonsense words written on them. For example, in the game pizza, pizza, students draw a “slice of pizza” from the pile and sound out the letters on the card. If the word were bav (nonsense word), students would repeat the sounds one at a time, “/b/-/a/-/v/, /b/-/a/-/v/” until they were able to blend it. If they got the word correct, they were able to keep the slice in order to make a whole pizza. The goal of all initial sound fluency and nonsense word fluency games were to mimic the expectations of the assessment, adding an engaging, fun aspect to it. As students played the games, they learned the necessary skills to be successful on the benchmark

assessment without the pressure of it being a test. At the end of the eight week period, students were given the post test to determine if progress had been made in each area or not.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The hypothesis for this study stated that low-achieving students who participate in daily small group phonics intervention will not show a positive change in their benchmark scores in the area of letter naming fluency, initial sound fluency, and nonsense word fluency, as measured by the DIBELS benchmark assessment. When research began, the goal of this study was to show that daily small group phonics instruction can create a positive impact on student achievement, as measured by the DIBELS benchmark assessment. After completing the study and reviewing the results, it is clear that the goal was successful. In all areas of testing, including letter naming fluency, initial sound fluency, and nonsense word fluency, selected students made gains. The table below displays the means and standard deviations of the pretest and posttest measures from the DIBELS Benchmark assessment.

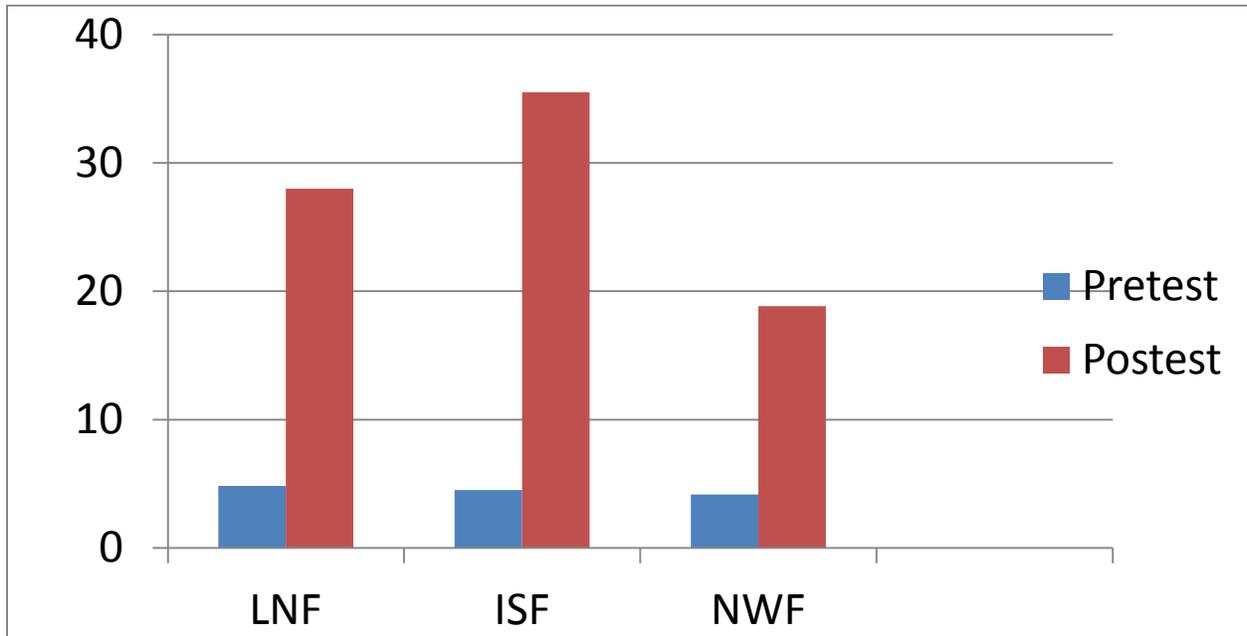
Table 1

Means and Standard Deviation of Pretest and Posttest Measures

Measure	Pretest	Posttest
Letter Naming Fluency	4.83 (2.29)	28.00 (.910)
Initial Sound Fluency	4.50 (1.51)	35.50 (22.59)
Nonsense Word Fluency	4.17 (3.48)	18.83 (10.67)

Table 2

Mean of Pretest and Posttest DIBELS Benchmark Results



Dependent *t*-tests were run to determine if any significant differences existed in letter naming fluency, initial sound fluency, and nonsense word fluency at post-test as compared to pre-test. Results showed there was a significant difference in letter naming fluency [$t(5) = -4.467, p > .00$], initial sound fluency [$t(5) = -3.453, p > .01$], and nonsense word fluency [$t(5) = -4.103, p > .00$], at post test. The null hypothesis was rejected. These results and their implications will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The original null hypothesis was not supported. The study showed that daily small group phonics instruction resulted in an increase in student achievement as measured by the DIBELS benchmark assessment. Students were able to make gains based on pre-test and post-test measures.

Implications of Results

After reviewing the results, this study showed that daily small group instruction makes a difference in student ability to make gains in phonetic knowledge, creating a positive impact on the scores of DIBELS benchmark assessment. Results show that as a whole, student scores increased significantly. The production of positive results rests on the small group instruction given to students. Without this, students may have made small gains from receiving daily whole group instruction. However, their needs at the beginning of the school year were too significant to be addressed in the way that only small group instruction allows. The results indicate that low-achieving students are capable of achieving on and above benchmark results.

Threats to Validity

As previously discussed, even though students are being tested in areas of phonemic awareness, the DIBELS benchmark assessment relies heavily on speed and not as much on accuracy in the area of letter naming fluency. The letters provided during the assessment are randomized and often repeated, rather than providing all of the letters of the alphabet to show accuracy. If a student happens to know all of the letters provided on the assessment, then their results will be high. The timed aspect of the assessment also poses a threat to its validity. Students have one minute to “show what they know” in all areas of the assessment. If a student is

fast-paced, they are given more opportunity to move through the assessment and fair better with a score on or above benchmark. If a student is slower-paced, their score is going to reflect that pace. This is why it is important to review results of the assessment and see where students may have lost or gained points, as well as knowing student abilities prior to testing. Based on the sample type, there are other outside threats that could have affected pretest and post-test measures. This includes things such as how much sleep students received the night before testing, any extenuating circumstances during the day of testing, where administration of testing took place (ie: lunchroom, classroom, hallway), etc. The history and maturation of the design (O X O) could also pose a threat to results. Given the time lapse between pre-test (O₁) and post-test (O₂) measures, students grow older and therefore the differences obtained would be attributable to these changes, as opposed to the given treatment (X).

Connections to Previous Studies/Existing Literature

There is a significant amount of literature that supports early intervention being an essential piece to a child's academic future. Early reading intervention is often stated as the key to helping struggling at-risk readers become confident readers. More specifically, results of experimental studies also support the need for early academic intervention for students at risk for reading failure to ensure academic success in later grades (Cooke et al., 2010). When students enter Kindergarten, there are vast differences in their phonetic schema. Some students already have a strong base for letter naming, sound manipulation, and reading fluency. Other students begin without the ability to even identify the letters in their name. An educator's job is to bridge the gap, providing rigorous whole group instruction, while also providing intervention and accelerated small group instruction. Without this, low-achieving students are unable to keep pace with the intended curriculum and high-achieving students

lack the option for challenge beyond the basic skills. Early intervention in reading, if properly designed and delivered, should act as a vaccination, inoculating children against the later occurrence of reading failure (Coyne et al., 2004).

This study poses a strong connection between small group instruction and academic success. This study mirrors other studies that use RTI (Response to Intervention) techniques, such as progress monitoring, that aid in tracking student growth. By using this strategy, teacher(s) are able to see quickly where students are making gains and where there is still a deficit. This can assist in driving future small group instruction. By creating routine, purposeful daily intervention, students are given the opportunity to feel comfortable working beside peers with similar needs and begin to lay the foundation for their future reading skills.

Implications for Future Research

After conducting this study that shows clear, positive growth with low-achieving students, future research will be conducted in a similar manner with future Kindergarten classes. The data shows that by using small group phonics instruction, students are able to make gains, whether small or large. By taking the time to meet with struggling readers, teachers/resource staff are able to address specific areas of deficit and help students develop successful strategies. This study can be replicated with multiple populations of learners, including special education inclusion classrooms and other specialty instruction, such as Adaptive Learning Support (ALS) and Behavior Learning Support (BLS) programs. The nature of this study is one that leaves open doors to many facets of small-group instruction and can be used as a base for creating purposeful, fun, and simple teaching strategies. As a whole, this study can also be used to drive whole group instruction, adding techniques that assist in student memory of rote skills (ie: using nicknames for letters (i.e., Bump bump B,

Curvy C, Big hump D.) and sign language to tap into student's schema. By using these simple strategies, struggling readers develop a method that assists them in their phonetic abilities. Finally, this study can be used in the future for any primary educator as a means to aid instruction and develop the foundation for small group instruction.

Conclusions/Summary

In conclusion, this study proved to be very successful. Students who began with little to no phonetic knowledge were able to participate in daily small-group instruction, make small gains each week, and successfully meet benchmark based on the DIBELS benchmark assessment. It is important to keep in mind that the students participating in this study come from a demographic that classifies as poverty level on the socioeconomic scale. Without any additional aid of home instruction/tutoring, students were still able to make gains and move on to 1st grade meeting benchmark. It is reasonable to say that without the small-group instruction and nurturing classroom environment, students wouldn't have been able to reach the same goal. The researcher in this study created meaningful strategies that students could grasp and retain, which in turn aided them during whole-group instruction where the expectation was to meet on-level, curricular goals. This study is one that shows that with a strong daily routine and unconditional support for all students, achievement is possible.

In the future, this study will be used as a basis for driving small-group instruction with any low-achieving student entering Kindergarten. This study is one of success, where, students with little hope to meet benchmark in the area of phonics, were able to work hard, make gains, and achieve their final goal of meeting benchmark on their final assessment of the school year.

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