

The Impact of Explicit Phonics Instruction and
Decodable Text on Fluency with Third-Grade Students

By

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Abstract

This study was designed to determine how phonics instruction combined with the use of decodable text can impact fluency development with struggling third graders. Four third grade participants met daily for 20 minutes over the course of six weeks. Each session consisted of a mini-lesson on a specific phonics concept that was then reinforced with a decodable text. There were also weekly fluency lessons to assist further with fluency development. The results show a relationship between the explicit phonics instruction and an increase in their words correct per minute when monitored with grade level fluency passages. All participants made gains in regards to their words correct per minute at a higher rate than expected when compared to grade level norms and growth over a comparable timeframe. There was also a positive relationship in regards to student engagement and motivation to read. In conclusion, the results in this study show support for the use of explicit phonics instruction in combination with the use of appropriate decodable texts to help fluency development with struggling third grade students.

Keywords: explicit phonics instruction, decodable text, struggling readers, fluency, action research

The Impact of Explicit Phonics Instruction and Decodable Text on Fluency with Third-Grade Students

Although I am only in my third year teaching third grade, I can see there are a range of learners within my classroom each year. Some students are very accomplished readers whereas others are readers who struggle and have difficulties. One area of concern is with readers who struggle. The students who enter my classroom are commonly still struggling with fluency and decoding. Third grade is a milestone year in which students transition from working heavily on decoding and fluency to beginning to focus more heavily on comprehension and deeper understanding of complex text. Fluency, which includes the ability to decode (accuracy) alongside speed and prosody, has proven to be one of the building blocks to develop successful reading skills. Fluency development helps learners shift from slow and deliberate word decoding to automatic word recognition and allows readers to apply expressive elements to the text (Kuhn, 2020). Not being able to decode fluently impairs comprehension, since both word recognition and comprehension occur within short-term memory which is limited in its capacity (Pressley & Allington, 2015). This is a skill that needs to be addressed sooner than later to ensure that the reading gap does not become too much to overcome in later years.

One of the methods educators can use to help students develop their fluency and decoding skills is small group instruction. In this setting, we can work together and target the specific needs and gaps that students have. By working with these students to build fluency and decoding skills in a small group instruction setting, it can also help them build confidence as readers that will reach into the whole group setting. Another aspect to consider when looking at a student's reading development is the amount and quality of explicit phonics instruction that takes place in the whole group curriculum as well as small group instruction. The instruction also needs to meet

grade level expectations as well as being developmentally appropriate. As the years progress and the pendulum of reading instruction swings back towards an explicit phonics instruction strategy, there has been a greater focus on explicit phonics skills and using texts that support their development. There is still not enough evidence for either side to show which method is truly more effective, but through the literature review and studying the science behind reading development, I am beginning to realize that the explicit phonics instruction may be a more effective way to reach more students in regards to teaching of decoding skills as well as building fluency, which also lends a hand to comprehension development in later elementary years.

Over the past year, I have also been involved in a school-wide professional development focused on explicit phonics instruction and how it can be used within the classroom as a form of intervention, as well as a resource to boost our current whole group reading curriculum. There are students within my classroom who can benefit from more explicit phonics instruction in a small group setting, as well as continued practice with decodable texts that will reinforce the concepts being taught. Through the analysis of student work and observations, the participants are showing gaps in knowledge for skills that are taught and mastered in lower grades, and they are not able to make the progress needed towards closing those gaps without first mastering some of those foundational skills. Previously, the curriculum has included phonics concepts in the whole group setting, but those concepts are not connected to the text used in the weekly read alouds that focus on comprehension skills. The phonics instruction was also grade level appropriate but not developmentally appropriate for all students. There is guided reading instruction, but that also was not linked to the whole group instruction nor were the texts decodable. Decodable texts are those in which there is a high degree of words that are phonetically regular as well as many words that include letter-sound combinations that have been previously taught in phonics instruction. My

approach for this study focused on connecting the phonics to decodable texts that were read in order to reinforce the concepts that are developmentally appropriate for the participants.

The research that was performed in this action research project involved the following question: How can the use of decodable readers alongside explicit phonics instruction and fluency strategies in a small group setting impact the overall fluency rate of struggling readers?

Literature Review

After conducting a literature review, I have found that phonics, fluency, decoding and decodable texts as well as the zone of proximal development are all important components that will play an important role in my action research study.

Phonics

Phonics instruction has long been a part of everyday curriculum for elementary students. One of the factors surrounding a greater emphasis on phonics being included in language curricula is due to The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002), requiring schools to use research-based instruction and materials in order to receive certain federal funds; section 1,208 of this mandate specifically required phonics instruction. That legislation has gone far in stimulating much more skills instruction in kindergarten through grade three, putting emphasis on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension strategies (Pressley et al., 2004).

Phonics can be seen as one of the main building blocks of recognizing words and learning to read, along with many other working parts that all come together to help non-readers turn into successful readers. All of the pieces of the puzzle can be seen when looking at the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Within phonics, there have been 4 phases of alphabetic knowledge identified: pre-alphabetic, partial alphabetic, full alphabetic, and consolidated

alphabetic (Ehri, 2005). During the pre-alphabetic phase, students have no knowledge about the alphabetic system, but instead read words by recognizing familiar signs or symbols. The partial alphabetic stage is where students begin to recognize some letter names and sounds, using this knowledge to assist them in recognizing words. The full alphabetic phase is when students have a complete understanding of the alphabetic system, including knowing about and successfully applying most of the letter-sound correspondences. The final phase, consolidated alphabetic, is where students read many words automatically and have the skills to decode unfamiliar words fairly quickly by grouping the letters into known parts.

One way to help readers move between phases and make gains to close gaps is with instruction that is developmentally appropriate for the phase they are in or lacking skills in. With targeted instruction, students may be able to improve very specific areas of deficit to advance their overall educational performance, which in turn will afford them greater opportunities in the future (Tucker, 2010). The connectionist theory of fluent reading suggests that students should be taught to recognize common letter patterns, to map sounds onto letters and patterns within words, to understand the meanings of words, and to use context to construct meaning (Meyer & Felton, 1999).

Fluency

Fluency is a major component of learning to read. It is composed of speed, accuracy and prosody. In order to comprehend a text they are reading, a student must be able to fluently read it. In essence, reading fluency refers to the ability of readers to master processing the surface level components of text - to be able to read words with such accuracy and ease that attention can be given to meaning, which is often reflected in the prosodic elements of oral reading (Walczyk & Griffith-Ross, 2007). If the student does not read fluently by means of poor accuracy and/or

decoding, the sentences may become too broken up for the content to be understood. One researcher has taken an in-depth look at fluency to determine the effect of RTI when working with students on fluency skills. In this study, the twenty students identified as at risk for reading failure were split into two groups: a control group that received reading instruction within the classroom using the general education curriculum and an experimental group that received supplemental reading instruction using Read Naturally in addition to the general curriculum. In this particular study there was a significant difference in the reading fluency, rate and accuracy growth based on pretest and posttest scores between the control group and the quasi experimental group, showing more growth for those receiving the supplemental reading instruction (Tucker, 2010). This supports the hypothesis that fluency interventions can help students close the gap on fluency development, even at a fourth grade level.

When students transition to being fluent readers, they are able to dedicate their time and effort comprehending the text they are reading. Put plainly, if a reader is unable to recognize or decode the words in the text, they will not comprehend it. This can also be seen when looking at Scarborough's Reading Rope (Figure A1) as it illustrates the need for both language comprehension and word recognition to create a skilled reader (Scarborough, 2001). As readers decode words faster and with less effort, the attention required to recognize words diminishes. As such, the reader will have more resources available to employ higher-level thinking processes that are often critical for comprehending text (Zimmerman et al., 2019). This is a crucial component for developing readers and why fluency is focused on with transitional readers, so that they can master that skill while beginning to understand comprehension of text. It is said that in middle elementary years, students transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" as they focus more heavily on comprehension. The ability to rapidly decode text is a crucial characteristic of

early reading as it increases the likelihood that students will use a decoding strategy and results in immediate benefits, particularly with regard to accuracy.

One component of fluency is reading with a certain speed. When looking at fluency in terms of words correct per minute (WCPM), there are national norms tables for each grade level that serve as a goal and comparison to assess individual students. These norms tables take thousands of scores from students across the United States and calculate out where the high, low and averages students are currently scoring to create the comparison table. Above average students score above the 75th percentile, average students fall between the 25th percentile and 75th percentile. Those who are identified as struggling readers fall below the 25th percentile, and are flagged as being at risk. The 25th percentile for third grade is: Fall 68 WCPM; Winter 93 WCPM; and Spring 106 WCPM according to the FastBridge Curriculum Based Measurement for Reading (Christ & Borbora, 2021) norms table (see Appendix I). A weekly gain in reading rate of two to three words correct per minute is “ambitious,” or the type of gains needed by struggling readers to accelerate their reading progress toward grade-level achievement (Fuchs et al., 1993). Students who fall behind in reading will have a hard time catching up to their peers if strategic interventions are not started as soon as they are identified as a struggling reader. This is important to consider given that children who are behind their peers in terms of language and early literacy development at school entry often have a difficult time catching up to their peers as they progress through elementary school (Francis et al., 1996).

Third grade has also been identified as important to reading literacy because it is the final year children are learning to read, after which students are “reading to learn.” In one study, fourth-graders were chosen as the targeted population because research shows that many times, reading disabilities often do not present themselves and are not diagnosed until fourth grade

(Lipka et al., 2006). This is concerning because there is also overwhelming research regarding a student's reading ability at the end of first grade being a predictor of future reading achievement. Also, if they are not proficient readers when they begin fourth grade, as much as half of the curriculum they will be taught will be incomprehensible (Weyer & Casares, 2019). In addition to not being successful in later elementary and even middle school years, students who were not proficient in reading by the end of third grade were four times more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers. In fact, 88 percent of students who failed to earn a high school diploma were struggling readers in third grade (Fiester & Smith, 2010).

Fluency Instruction

There are four common elements of fluency instruction which are: modeling, extensive opportunities for practice, the use of scaffolding, and the incorporation of prosodic elements. (Kuhn, 2020). Fluency instruction begins with modeling what fluent reading should sound like. This can be as simple as reading aloud to a class or individual students. A model of fluent, expressive reading demonstrates overtly to students what fluent reading sounds like and how it can improve comprehension (Rasinski et al., 2017). Providing students the opportunity and time to read is the next step in developing their fluency, thus increasing their volume of reading per day. If educators hope to improve either the oral reading fluency or the reading comprehension of struggling readers then expanding reading volume, it seems, must necessarily be considered (Allington, 2014). Scaffolding instruction will then help support early readers at their level and challenge them with texts at or slightly above their zone of proximal development as described in the next section. Scaffolding can take place in a setting where the teacher can readily assist students with difficulties, or it can be utilized to assign texts for independent reading time. The final step in the fluency instruction process is the addition of prosody (expression) as they read.

Again, this can be taught with the assistance of modeling or in a small group setting. Repeated readings also help build prosody as students become familiar with the text and can begin to add in expression as they read, paying more attention to the punctuation and author's voice than decoding the words. Modeling fluent reading, providing assisted and scaffolded reading, supporting volume reading, and offering repeated reading for practice are building blocks to oral reading fluency and build the foundation for higher levels of reading competency (Allington, 2014).

Beyond teaching fluency, there are various ways to measure a reader's fluency score, one of which being a Curriculum Based Measurement Oral Reading Fluency (CBM-ORF) assessment. During this type of assessment, the instructor will prepare two copies of a grade appropriate passage, one for the reader and one for the instructor. The CBM-ORF measures a student's reading fluency by having the reader read aloud for one minute from a prepared passage. During the student's reading, the examiner makes note of any reading errors in the passage. Then the examiner scores the passage by calculating the number of words read correctly (Wright, 2013). Although CBM-ORF is simple in format and quick to administer, its results are sensitive to short-term student gains in reading skills and predictive of long-term reading success, making this assessment an ideal progress-monitoring tool for classroom use. Furthermore, up through grade 3, reading fluency is arguably the best predictor of future reading success (Hosp et al., 2007).

Decoding and Decodable Text

Along with the more recent inclusion of explicit phonics instruction within classrooms came the focus on the ability to decode unfamiliar words. Decoding is the ability to break words down and recognize the graphemes and match them to their phonetic sounds before blending them into the spoken word. This is an important building block on which all future reading

development can be built. A decodable text is one that is designed for students in the full and consolidated alphabetic phases (Ehri, 2005) and has particular characteristics intended to provide students with opportunities to apply phonological skills so that they are more likely to become successful readers who effortlessly process all of the letters within the words. When students read decodable texts they can more readily apply their knowledge of letters and sounds, making it more likely that they will process all of the letters within words and develop fully specified orthographic representations of words (Cheatham & Allor, 2012). Therefore, for students in the partial or full alphabetic phase, reading decodable texts not only allows them to apply their phonics instruction to connected reading more than students who read less decodable texts, but also makes them more successful, independent readers. Also, When the initial texts used with core reading instruction matched the method of instruction, students were better able to apply and develop their phonics skills than when the texts did not match instruction (Juel & Roper, 1985). Supporters posit that regular reading practice using decodable texts reinforce student's alphabetic knowledge, resulting in increased word identification, phonemic awareness, spelling proficiency and reading fluency (Beverly et al., 2009).

Although a decodable text is said to be one with a high percentage of decodable words, it is not explicitly stated what the percentage has to be in order for the text to be considered a decodable text (Cheatham & Allor, 2012). Two characteristics have been identified when determining the decodability of a text: a high degree of words that are phonetically regular and a high degree of words that include letter-sound combinations that have been previously taught in phonics instruction (Mesmer, 2001). It is important to remember, however, that one major conclusion of this review is that decodability should be considered a *characteristic* of text and not a *type* of text used with beginning readers (Cheatham & Allor, 2012).

In one study, it was shown that all students were more successful readers with texts with higher percentages of high frequency words and average students were also more successful readers with texts with high percentages of decodable words (Cheatham & Allor, 2012). It seems likely that average skilled readers were more accurate in decodable texts because they had the decoding skills needed to read those texts. The lower readers may not have had the decoding skills necessary to decode words with more advanced phonics patterns included in the decodable texts (Compton et al., 2004). One way to approach a decoding deficit is by teaching phonics and decoding skills explicitly. One may then hypothesize that students would be able to improve their performance on higher level decodable texts if their instruction is matched with the level of decodability of the text. Although developing readers may use several strategies, a decoding strategy is critical because it requires students to process the complete spellings of words, which leads to unitization (Cheatham & Alloy, 2012).

Many studies compare decodable vs. leveled texts showing that decodable texts were more effective at a younger age and/or for those who are beginning readers, and leveled texts seemed to show better results in the higher “levels” when compared to higher levels of decodable texts (Cheatham & Alloy, 2012; Compton et al., 2004). I question for many of these studies if the students tested were exposed/taught the phonics that was being tested in the higher level decodable texts, as they are designed to provide practice with the phonics concepts they have been taught. Also, one of the areas to consider is in regards to sight words and high frequency words. Leveled texts include a higher percentage of high frequency words, thus improving performance if the students have been practicing high frequency words continuously (Ehri, 2005). This would explain why they would show a better success rate of higher leveled texts compared to decodable texts.

Zone of Proximal Development

The ability to develop skills with the appropriate guidance and support is known as the zone of proximal development (ZDP), which is a concept that was developed by Soviet psychologist and constructivist Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978). The definition for the zone of proximal development is “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). When in this zone, it is believed that the student or learner needs assistance to achieve the new task. To assist a person to move through the zone of proximal development, educators are encouraged to focus on three important components which aid the learning process:

- The presence of someone with knowledge and skills beyond that of the learner (a more knowledgeable other).
- Social interactions with a skillful tutor that allow the learner to observe and practice their skills.
- Scaffolding, or supportive activities provided by the educator, or more competent peer, to support the student as he or she is led through the ZPD (Mcleod, 2019).

Curriculum design in general takes into consideration grade level skills that are appropriate for a majority of students within the grade itself. In my study, I targeted my instruction to match the ZDP of the individual participants that I was working with. I matched their current levels of knowledge to the content we focused on during our sessions to help build in missing pieces through supportive activities and scaffolding.

The current study was designed to take a deeper look into how teaching phonics explicitly, paired with decodable texts and supportive fluency strategies, can help close gaps with students

who are performing below grade level expectations. With many studies looking only at the use of decodable texts and not paired directly with phonics explicitly, I hope to discover how the combined effort of decodable texts used in conjunction with explicit phonics instruction can affect student learning. This study will focus on students in third grade who are still struggling with the mastery of some early reading skills, specifically decoding and fluency, to see if it is possible to build up lacking or missing skills and knowledge by utilizing phonics instruction and decodable texts to support their development. In the next section, I will outline how all of these ideas fit into my study.

Methods

In this study, my purpose was to determine if additional small group time working with struggling readers on phonics skills and continual practice reading a decodable text could help improve their overall grade level reading abilities. I did this through an action research study to answer the following question: How can the use of decodable readers alongside explicit phonics instruction and fluency strategies in a small group setting improve the overall fluency rate of struggling readers?

Setting & Participants

This study took place in a small, rural upper Midwest elementary school. This school serves 200 students in grades pre-kindergarten through fifth with a student to teacher ratio of 15:1. The student population is mostly white while enrollment of racial minority students is 9% of the student body. Most of these students are American Indian or Hispanic. This minority rate is lower than the state average of 30%.

The research took place in my third grade classroom, with four of my current students. We worked together for six weeks during the months of January and February, 2021. Within the

classroom, desks are spaced apart and there is little to no group work due to physical distancing guidelines that were in place during the time of the study due to the outbreak of COVID-19. The atmosphere of the classroom was light and inviting with seasonal decorations to help set a welcoming atmosphere, while remaining educational to promote student learning. This class had a total of 12 in-person students at the time of the study. Out of the 12 students, there were two boys and two girls included in this study. Schoolwide benchmarks identified these four participants as at risk or struggling readers, as they scored below national norms and benchmarks on their winter assessments. FastBridge Curriculum Based Measures in Reading (Christ & Borbora, 2021) was used to benchmark students for the WCPM scores. Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010) was used to determine reading levels for all students (Table 1). The initial benchmark scores used to identify the participants were obtained from a schoolwide assessment that was previously given, which was not a part of my study. Informed consent was obtained from students via verbal consent and guardians via signed consent prior to beginning this study.

Table 1

Benchmark Scores

Participants	Age	Gender	Winter FastBridge WCPM (Benchmark (25% - 93))	Winter Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark (Benchmark N/O)
Participant 1	8	F	8	B/C
Participant 2	8	M	31	E
Participant 3	8	M	64	I
Participant 4	9	F	88	J

Data Sources & Collection

During this action research study, I collected quantitative data related to oral reading fluency by means of words correct per minute, running records to show accuracy, phrasing and rate, and finally observational notes for qualitative data.

Oral Reading Fluency

Oral reading fluency was measured by the student's oral reading accuracy and rate through a CBM Oral Reading Fluency assessment. Participants read a third-grade passage (Figure 2A) aloud while I listened and timed the reading. They began reading as the timer started and read for one minute after which I asked them to stop. The incorrect words were marked and removed from the total words read score, and the remaining words read were then used as the words correct per minute score. This data was collected via digital means, utilizing the FastBridge Curriculum Based Measurement in Reading (CBMreading) to assess their WCPM, using the progress monitoring feature of the program. The quantitative data that was collected through the use of the FastBridge CBMreading progress monitoring tool that allowed me to accurately assess the participant's WCPM based on a grade level text. FAST Benchmarks are test-specific scores that indicate the student's risk of performing below a future (usually end of year) performance target. FastBridge defines two (or three) benchmark cut scores for each assessment in each season and grade, resulting in three (or four) levels of risk. FastBridge default benchmark settings are based on the national norms and correspond to the following percentile ranges.

- High-Risk: Below the 15th percentile
- Some-Risk: 15th – 39th percentile
- Low-Risk: 40th – 99th percentile (FastBridge, 2019)

Running Records

I also collected running records data that was taken during the first and last weeks of the study as well as two additional collection points during the study that helped show not only WCPM but also prosody (including phrasing and rate) and accuracy. During the running records, students read aloud a short passage or section of a text that is at their reading level, while I took notes on errors, called miscues, as well as their fluency phrasing and rate. Self-corrections were also tracked to show the participants awareness of miscues and their ability to make corrections without prompting. Running records are also often utilized to check comprehension of the text read, although that is not the primary focus of this study.

Observational Notes

In addition to fluency and running record assessments, I took observational notes regarding participant engagement and growth throughout the study. I surveyed the participants in regards to their feelings about reading and their reflection of their abilities. Notes were recorded to reflect their participation and motivation while reading in our sessions. I also collected feedback from parents regarding the participant's motivation and attitude towards reading during the study. Qualitative data was collected throughout the study to examine learning seen over the course of the study.

Procedures

On the first day of the study, I asked the participants to meet with me individually and administered the digital FastBridge Formative Assessment to collect the initial WCPM scores. I also administered a running record using a short passage to get a beginning point for fluency including phrasing, accuracy and self-correct ratio. This gave me a solid baseline as to their reading fluency profile prior to beginning the lessons.

For the entirety of the study, I met with the four students as a small group for 20 minute sessions, five days a week. These 20 minute sessions were in addition to the regular reading curriculum and time spent doing reading activities each day. I began each session as a short mini-lesson focused on a specific phonics generalization that also correlated to the text we read for the day's small group lesson. Some of the phonics features I focused on were long vowel patterns, r-controlled vowels and diphthongs. I explicitly taught the phonics generalization in the small group mini-lesson format and then we read through a decodable text that focused on the phonics concept for the day, as well as ones previously taught. The books used had a provided scope and sequence. I was able to match the starting point with the student needs within the scope and sequence. While reading the text, each student would take a turn reading a section or page of the text aloud while I monitored for fluency and assisted as needed. Some days the students would also read with a partner or read chorally as a whole group. Each week, participants also had a fluency strategy to work on that was taught on Monday as a part of our small group session. I would model the specific strategy and continue to reinforce each day as they read aloud. These strategies ranged from the beginning level of tracking the words as they read to more difficult strategies where they would read the sentence entirely without pausing, and finally adding in expression to match the text. There were days that we practiced repeated reading of the text to build confidence while reading smoothly. Throughout the weeks of the study, the texts also progressively increased in difficulty, while remaining developmentally appropriate. I recorded observational notes throughout the study regarding participant engagement as well as strengths and any review that was needed. Participants repeated this process each day of the week until the last day of the study, when I again collected data regarding their fluency rate. I then compared the results to the initial data and calculated growth over the term of the study.

Data Analysis

To track the benefits of explicit phonics instruction and use of decodable readers with struggling third grade students, data was collected through multiple methods. At the conclusion of the study, I began by analyzing the data to assess the change of each participant's WCPM scores. The weekly progress monitoring of WCPM allowed me to analyze growth from week to week as well as overall from the start of the study to the end. I also compared their ending scores to the norms table. Running records allowed me to analyze their reading progression over time. The areas that I was able to analyze were the progression of their accuracy, self-correct ratio, fluency, and comprehension scores. Qualitative data was analyzed to look for positive or negative attitudes toward reading and compare motivation both within our sessions and how they viewed reading at home. I also analyzed the data to look for patterns of engagement within our small-group and whole group reading activities.

All of the data has been compiled to show how the decodable texts paired with explicit phonics instruction aided in the fluency development of these struggling third grade students as seen below. The analysis of the data provided valuable insight into the student's progression during the study.

Findings and Results

After data collection, I analyzed the data and organized my findings into quantitative and qualitative results. The quantitative data is a collection of the CBMreading passages providing their WCPM and running records. The qualitative data came from my observational notes, verbal surveys and conversations I had with the participants and their parents.

Quantitative Results

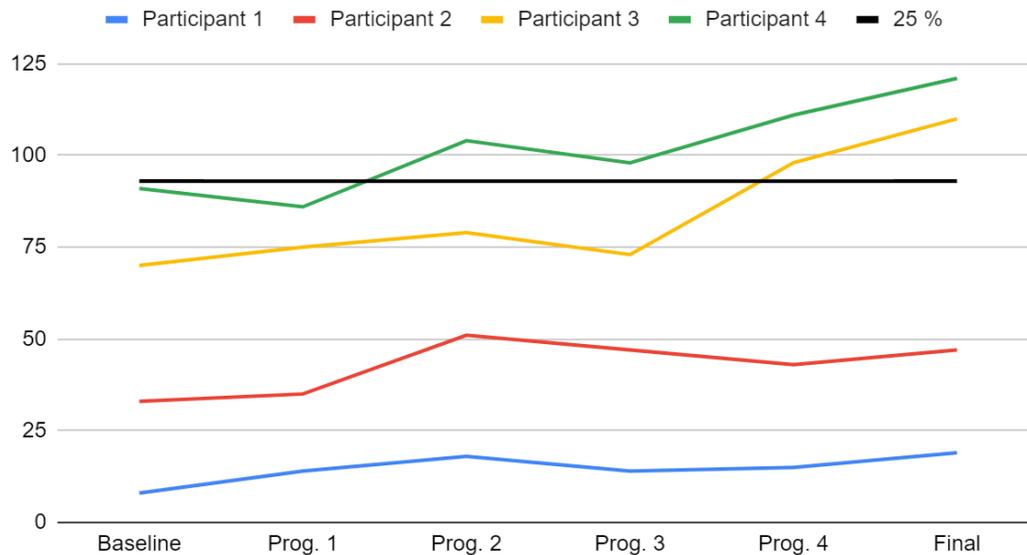
The data collected (Table 2) shows that all participants have a beginning and ending words correct per minute score as well as a calculated growth.

Table 2

FastBridge WCPM

Participants	Beginning WCPM Score	Ending WCPM Score	Growth
1	8	19	11 WCPM
2	31	47	16 WCPM
3	64	110	46 WCPM
4	88	121	33 WCPM

Both the beginning and ending scores were also compared to the norms (Table A1) to calculate students' placement within the norms table according to the winter assessment scores, as this study took place within that time frame. Each participant's weekly data was plotted to show progression, and the 25th percentile for the winter benchmark, which is 93 WCPM, was included for reference (Figure 1) .

Figure 1**Words Correct Per Minute Data**

Participant 1 had a beginning score below the 5th percentile at the beginning of the study achieving 8 WCPM and also scored below the 5% with a final score of 19 WCPM for a total growth of 11 WCPM. Participant 2 had an initial score of 31 WCPM which also falls just below the 5%, but was able to achieve a final score of 47 WCPM which falls between the 5-10% and a total growth of 16 WCPM. Participant 3 started with an initial score of 64 WCPM placing them between 10-15% and ended with 110 CWPM which is at the 40% and a total growth of 46 WCPM. Participant 4 had an initial score of 88 WCPM placing them between 20-25% and a final score of 121 WCPM which is just above the 50% showing a total growth of 33 WCPM.

Additional quantitative data was collected through running records that includes accuracy, self-correct ratios, fluency and comprehension scores (Table 3). I collected these running records during weeks two through 5 of our small-group time. I had the appropriate text for each participant ready, and I asked them to read the text aloud and discuss comprehension questions after reading.

Table 3*Running Records*

	Running Record 1	Running Record 2	Running Record 3	Running Record 4
Participants				
1	Accuracy 80% Self-Correct 0:10 Fluency 1 Comprehension 0/6	Accuracy 87% Self-Correct 0:6 Fluency 1 Comprehension 1/6	Accuracy 90% Self-Correct 1:4 Fluency 1-2 Comprehension 4/6	Accuracy 92% Self-Correct 1:2 Fluency 1-2 Comprehension 3/6
2	Accuracy 85% Self-Correct 0:10 Fluency 1-2 Comprehension 3/6	Accuracy 82% Self-Correct 0:10 Fluency 2 Comprehension 2/6	Accuracy 87% Self-Correct 1:5 Fluency 2 Comprehension 3/6	Accuracy 90% Self-Correct 1:4 Fluency 2 Comprehension 3/6
3	Accuracy 92% Self-Correct 0:4 Fluency 1-2 Comprehension 4/6	Accuracy 94% Self-Correct 1:2 Fluency 1-2 Comprehension 4/6	Accuracy 92% Self-Correct 1:3 Fluency 2 Comprehension 5/6	Accuracy 96% Self-Correct 1:2 Fluency 2 Comprehension 4/6
4	Accuracy 94% Self-Correct 0:6 Fluency 2 Comprehension 3/6	Accuracy 96% Self-Correct 1:4 Fluency 2 Comprehension 3/6	Accuracy 96% Self-Correct 1:2 Fluency 2-3 Comprehension 5/6	Accuracy 98% Self-Correct 1:2 Fluency 3 Comprehension 5/6

In this table (Table 3), accuracy represents the percentage of total words read correctly for the short read. Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System outlines that an accuracy rate of anything below 90% is a hard text, 90-94% shows instructional level text and 95-100% shows an independent level with the given text. Self-correct represents the ratio of how many errors were corrected by the student without prompting compared to the total number of errors. The fluency score is ranked on a 1-2-3 scale with 1 being the lowest where the participant has very choppy and fragmented sentences and 3 shows smooth reading with phrasing and intonation. The final piece of the running record data shows the comprehension questions and the amount of questions that were correctly answered about, within and beyond the text.

Participant 1 started with a moderately low accuracy of 80% showing that this text was in the hard range, zero self-corrections out of 10 errors, had a fluency score of one out of three possible points, and was unable to answer any of the comprehension questions correctly. As the study progressed, Participant 1 made steady increases until the final running record at the end of the study where they grew to 92% accuracy, self-corrected one out of every two errors, increased fluency score to approach a two, as well as correctly answered three out of six comprehension questions correctly.

Participant 2 began with an accuracy score of 85% which falls within the hard range, also zero self-corrected errors out of ten, had a fluency score of one to two out of three possible points, and was able to successfully answer three out of six comprehension questions correctly. At the end of the study, this participant increased to 90% accuracy with a self correct ratio of one out of every four errors corrected, had a fluency score of a solid two, and was still able to answer three out of six comprehension questions correctly.

Participant 3 began with an accuracy score of 92%, which falls within the instructional level, zero self-corrected errors out of four, a fluency score of one to two out of three possible points, and was able to correctly answer four out of six comprehension questions. Their growth fluctuated throughout this study and a final running record shows an accuracy score of 96% which is in the independent range, self-corrected one out of every two, meaning that every other mistake was corrected by the participant, had a fluency score of two, and was able to answer four out of six comprehension questions correctly.

Participant 4 began with an accuracy score of 94% showing an instructional level of text, zero self-corrected errors out of six, had a fluency score of two out of three possible points, and was able to answer three out of six comprehension questions correctly. This participant made very

steady positive progress throughout the study, achieving a final accuracy score of 98% showing an independent level of text, was able to self-correct one out of every two errors, had a fluency score of three, and was able to answer five out of six comprehension questions correctly.

Qualitative Findings

Observational notes and discussions throughout the sessions brought to my attention an increase in motivation and engagement with all participants. The verbal conversations and surveys collected from the participants at the beginning of the study revealed a very negative outlook from all participants in terms of their self-reflection of their abilities in reading. One of the participants commented *“I don’t like to read. I’m so bad at reading, and I think other kids look at me weird when I try to read out loud in front of them because I’m not a good reader like them.”* When speaking to parents, I asked them how their child felt about reading in the home environment. They also confirmed that the participants did not have a positive attitude when it came to reading, nor did they have the willingness to practice skills at home. The participants were very reserved and minimally engaged during our small groups at the beginning of the study as well.

I also verbally surveyed the focus group participants in regards to their self-confidence level and their willingness to read aloud at the beginning of the study. I asked the participants how they felt about their reading abilities and how they felt when they were asked to read aloud in small group and whole group activities. All of the participants seemed to have the same negative outlook towards reading. Unfortunately, this is often a common mindset of a struggling reader, especially as they enter the upper elementary years. Many of the participants commented that they were not good at reading, they did not like to read especially out loud, and did not choose reading as a free choice activity at school or at home. Participant 3 said, *“I am so bad at reading, I don’t*

like read-to-self time, I only like it when you read aloud to us and I really don't like to read at home either." Many of the other comments received from the participants reflected a similar negative outlook towards reading and degrading self-talk.

As the weeks progressed, I began to notice a change in their attitude when it came to participation in our small groups. I also noticed a change in their behaviors during our sessions. Slowly they began to become more involved and willing to read aloud during the small group sessions, almost arguing over who would read first at times. They were actively participating in all activities and volunteering to read aloud or answer questions as we discussed texts. Parents also commented that some of the participants were more excited to do reading at home and even beyond, asking to go to the library to get books. *"I just love seeing a change in her attitude at home when it comes to reading. Now, she always has books ready before bed and can't wait to show off her new reading skills."* There was also more participation in whole group reading activities throughout the day as they began to volunteer to read more frequently and were reading with much more confidence in all aspects of their day.

At the end of the study, all of the students had a very positive outlook in regards to reading. They all were excited about the skills they had worked on and openly expressed their new found love for reading. Participant 3 commented that *"I am now so excited to read every day and I'm no longer scared to read in front of my classmates. Being able to work with you and our small group is my favorite part of the day!"* I spoke with a couple parents as well regarding their student's attitude towards reading near the end of the study, and it was remarkable to hear how their attitude at home had also changed. One participant had asked to go to the library and check out books which had previously been unheard of requests coming from that student, according to their parents. *"I was shocked when he asked me to not only go to the library to look for books, but*

came home with a stack and began to read them as soon as we got home. He's never done that before!" Another commented that their student had begun to take multiple books to read before bedtime when in the past it had been a struggle to read one book before bed for practice. *"We always used to struggle with her when trying to get in reading minutes before bed and now we have a hard time getting her to put the books away and go to sleep."*

Overall, participants showed a much different outlook when it came to motivation and attitude towards reading by the end of the study, changing from mostly negative to very positive attitude.

Discussion

A wide range of notable findings began to emerge as I began to analyze the progression of this study from beginning to end. There was overall improvement in the participant's WCPM scores ranging from an increase of 11-46 correct words that were improved upon from their initial scores to the final data collection. This increase is seen as meeting an ambitious rate of improvement that is needed to close reading gaps. A weekly gain in reading rate of two to three words correct per minute is "ambitious," or the type of gains needed by struggling readers to accelerate their reading progress toward grade-level achievement (Fuchs et al., 1993). Along with the improvement of their words correct per minute, participants also made gains connected to their accuracy and fluency as noted in their running record data. Beyond these quantitative data findings, there were also many positives found in regards to their motivation and engagement while reading both within the focus sessions and beyond.

Increase in WCPM

The main focus for this study was to see what effect the explicit phonics instruction along with the use of decodable texts could have with struggling readers. Overall, all participants

increased at an “ambitious” rate. Participant 4 completed the study reading at grade level expectations; above the 25th percentile for spring benchmark data and 50th percentile for winter. Participant 3 finished at the 40th percentile for the winter benchmark, and above the 25th percentile for spring already. Participant 2 finished between the fifth and tenth percentile winter and approaching the fifth percentile for spring, making gains although not enough to close the entire gap. Likewise, Participant 1 is still below the 5% on both winter and spring but approaching 5% as they continue to make small gains. Overall, all participants increased between 11-46 WCPM, meeting or exceeding expectations, again showing support for their ambitious rate of improvement. As stated above, a weekly gain in reading rate of two to three words correct per minute is “ambitious,” or the type of gains needed by struggling readers to accelerate their reading progress toward grade-level achievement (Fuchs et al., 1993). With the continuation of the study group, I would expect scores to continue to increase prior to their official spring benchmark scores, moving the two that are below the 25% to continue to make gains towards the 25%. If the study group were to continue in six week increments, the potentially expected outcome would be that the two lowest students could make enough gains to be reading at a rate of 41 WCPM for Participant 1, and 79 WCPM for Participant 2 if not higher at the end of the school year. This would leave them still below grade level but also gaining at an accelerated rate compared to expectations, while reading grade level texts.

Time Reading

I believe one of the biggest factors that has played into the success for the participants, in addition to the phonics and fluency focus of our group, was the additional amount of structured time reading that the participants had. There is much to be said about the positive relationship of reading success and time spent reading and this study provided students an additional 20 minutes

per day focused on reading skills. There was always a positive atmosphere when meeting with the participants and they began to see the connections between the phonics skills addressed within the mini lessons and the texts we read. This awareness also helped them focus more on beginning to master the skills that were previously a deficit in their skills set. When a student achieves the level of awareness, as well as the ability to identify the known rules and generalizations when they come upon unknown words, is when the true knowledge building takes place. Because we had such structured lessons and my continual support and guidance throughout all of our sessions, students were able to spend more time reading and less time trying to figure out the unknown words. Scaffolding, or supportive activities provided by the educator, or more competent peer, to support the student as they are led through the ZPD (Mcleod, 2019). One could even hypothesize that if these same students spent the same amount of time reading a book of choice that may or may not be appropriate for their current reading level, that they would have spent much less time reading and more time struggling to decode difficult text, in turn, reading many fewer words in the same amount of time. This was not examined in this study so cannot be proven, but the data that shows an increase in WCPM would help support that hypothesis.

Vowel Focus

A majority of our phonics skills practice focused on the various vowel patterns that are typically seen in third grade texts. We worked on long vowel patterns, diphthongs and uncommon spelling patterns that are regular for reading. This focus helped the students be able to decode long vowel and multisyllabic words much quicker and with more accuracy as they built upon the skills each day. As readers decode words faster and with less effort, the attention required to recognize words diminishes. As such, the reader will have more resources available to employ higher-level thinking processes that are often critical for comprehending text (Zimmerman et al.,

2019). The continual practice while reading the decodable books helped them see the patterns frequently and practice to help them get closer to mastery in regards to the spelling generalizations. When students read decodable texts they can more readily apply their knowledge of letters and sounds, making it more likely that they will process all of the letters within words and develop fully specified orthographic representations of words (Cheatham & Allor, 2012).

Motivation and Engagement

A somewhat unexpected outcome from this study is connected to the participants' motivation, confidence and engagement while reading in our small group setting as well as in the whole group and at home. Their mindsets changed from a very negative outlook towards reading and their own abilities in the beginning of the study, to very positive attitudes in the end. Self-efficacy, or the belief in oneself and their ability to succeed played a role with all of the participants in this study as they were beginning to believe in themselves in a controlled environment through the scaffolding and practice. As the weeks progressed, they began to build more confidence in themselves, which then gave them confidence to go beyond the controlled setting and show carryover to other reading situations. The more confident they became, the more they changed their mindset from a fear or dislike for reading to a love for reading. They were also more willing to try harder tasks and continue to build confidence. I know that motivation and engagement does not always show up when high stakes tests or when standardized tests are given, but the fact that my participants were not only engaging in the reading but excited to do the extra work and make the gains is one of the best outcomes I could have asked for as a teacher, in addition to the measurable growth that was achieved. As educators, this shows the importance of also seeing our students as the whole person, not just their test scores or standards they can or cannot meet.

Limitations

Several factors limited the effectiveness of this study, with the greatest being the short length of time for implementation. We met for one six week cycle, which is not enough time to show consistent progress that would be possible over a longer 12-18 week cycle. Participants did show growth, although their results were staggered each week. With that in consideration, a trendline would still show a positive increase to support the growth results seen from the beginning data compared to the end of this study data collection. Further research would need to be done in order to fully determine the long-term impact of explicit phonics instruction and use of decodable texts.

Another limitation of this study is the small group size that was utilized. This study included only four of my current students, all of which were considered struggling readers and were reading below grade level expectations. A larger scale study could include groups from multiple classrooms to collect data from more students fitting the same reading profile as the participants in this study. More participants combined with a longer length of study could further support the results seen in this action research project as well as provide more insight into what specific skills and strategies are the most effective.

Instructional time each day is a final factor that impacted the results of this study. We met for short 15-20 minute sessions which was enough to provide a mini-lesson on the phonics skill at hand as well as read the decodable text. A longer session time would have allowed for a more in depth fluency conversation as well as additional modeling and practice reading beyond the decoding phase. Additional time would have also allowed for rereading a previously read text to help support fluency in a different context as well as build comprehension through questioning

and conversations as we read the text together. Overall, these limitations affected the generalizability of the study but were not enough to disprove the results in this study.

Implications and Conclusion

In closing, I learned a lot about the use of explicit phonics instruction and the impact it can have with struggling readers that have gaps in their knowledge. This study was designed to determine how the use of explicit phonics instruction when used in combination with decodable text can impact fluency with struggling third grade students. Third grade is often seen as a “make it or break it” year when it comes to reading abilities. If a student leaves third grade without adequate decoding and fluency skills, they may continue to struggle and the gaps may only widen. This study shows support for the use of explicit phonics instruction and decodable text even with upper elementary students as they are oftentimes missing pieces of early literacy instruction which can be worked on through various means. The evolution of decodable text in recent years has allowed older students to utilize them beyond the early elementary years while still being relevant to their age and comprehension levels.

The explicit instruction was only one of the factors that aided in the success of this study. Time reading texts that not only aided in practicing the skills but was also developmentally appropriate and engaging played a major role in their success. The participants received an extra 20 minutes of explicit instruction with guided practice each day, allowing them to not only continually practice but demonstrate their skills to their peers and myself. The use of decodable texts fit in with the skills at hand as well as the ones previously taught to aid in continual practice of learned phonics skills. The texts used were also appropriate for students as they were at an instructional level as seen by the running records as well as the interest level that increased as the study progressed. Participants became more motivated each week as they felt more confident in

their reading abilities and began to look at reading in a different light. Overall, the participants were able to show ambitious growth in relation to their words correct per minute as well as a change in mindset to reflect a positive attitude in regards to their reading abilities and motivation.

Going forward, this action research study has given me the opportunity to take on something that has been an area I was looking to improve in my own teaching. Students who have gaps in their reading knowledge and struggle to read cannot close those gaps on their own. If we as a profession understand how to help the older students close the gaps in regards to phonics instruction, we can help students make the gains necessary to achieve grade level reading performance. I hope to inspire others to utilize the results in this study in order to create learning environments and lessons that are effective for their own struggling readers. I fully intend to continue doing research and training related to phonics instruction in order to learn even more about the development of young readers. I will also continue working with this group of students for the remainder of the year as well as find target groups to work with in the years to come with the knowledge I have gained through this study and the research connected to it.

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APPENDIX

Table A1

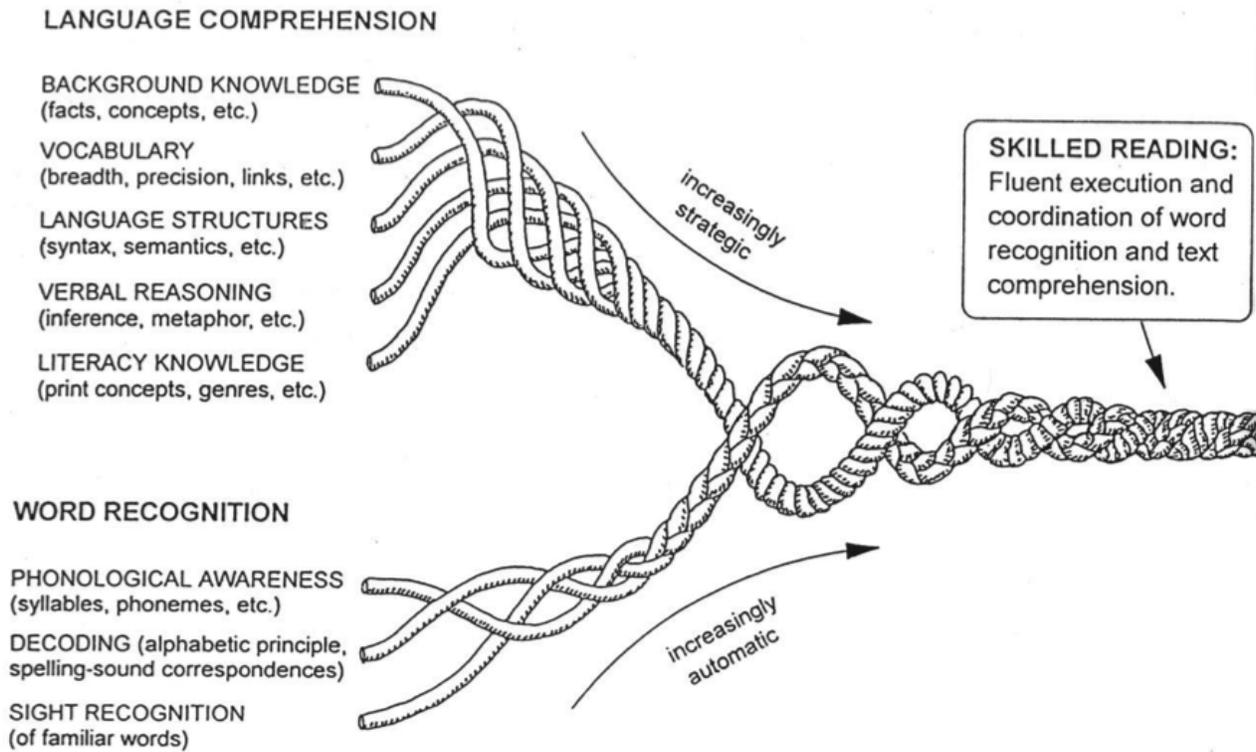
Norms - CBMR-English : THREE

%	Screening Scores Rate		
	Fall	Winter	Spring
95th	161	180	195
90th	147	166	180
85th	137	156	170
80th	130	149	164
75th	124	143	157
70th	117	138	151
65th	112	133	147
60th	107	129	142
55th	101	124	138
50th	97	120	134
45th	92	115	131
40th	87	110	125
35th	81	104	119
30th	76	99	113
25th	68	93	106
20th	60	85	99
15th	51	75	90
10th	37	59	75
5th	22	35	49
M	95.45	116.33	130.45
SD	41.10	41.61	42.30
N	6896	7042	7166

Retrieved from Christ, T. J., & Borbora, Z. H. (2021). *Curriculum based measurement for reading*. FastBridge Learning. <http://www.fastbridge.org>

Figure A1

Strands of Literacy Development



Retrieved from Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. Guilford Press. 97-110.

Figure A2**Student copy of progress monitoring passage**

Student Copy	Level 3 Progress Monitoring Form 1
Ann	
<p>Ann watched some birds build a nest outside her house. They were making it in a tree by her window. She watched them fly back and forth to the tree. They had sticks and straw in their beaks when they arrived. They worked on building the nest for a long time. After a lot of work, it was done. Ann was glad she could watch them.</p>	
<p>One day, she saw some eggs in the nest. They were bright blue and had tiny white dots. Her dad was nearby and asked what she found. Both of them looked into the nest. Her dad said the eggs would hatch in a few weeks. Ann wanted to see how the baby birds would look.</p>	
<p>Weeks passed and the three eggs hatched. Ann watched the birds who built the nest bring food. They flew to the tree with worms in their beaks. When she went outside and looked in, she saw three birds. The birds did not have many feathers yet. Their bodies were small but their eyes looked very big.</p>	
<p>Ann was glad she could see the birds grow. Day by day they got bigger and louder. They needed more food and attention. Soon they would learn to fly. It would be fun to watch them try. Maybe one day when they were grown up they would return. Maybe they would even build a nest in the same tree.</p>	
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