

Phonological Awareness Interventions for Students At-Risk  
Of Reading Failure  
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An Action Research Proposal/Report Presented to  
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## Abstract

The purpose of the Action Research was to investigate if implementing phonological awareness instruction to struggling first grade readers would improve their reading success as measured by letter sounds and phoneme segmentation fluency. The program *Early Reading Intervention* was implemented during the research in addition to the core reading program *Houghton Mifflin*. The research was conducted in the researcher's first grade classroom. Results of the case study showed that explicit phonemic awareness instruction increased phoneme segmentation fluency in the most at-risk students, but indicated that more phonics instruction would be needed post action research. Suggestions for future research are discussed.



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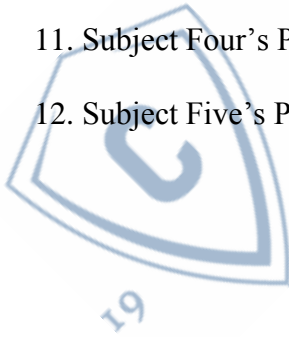
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## Action Research Proposal

## Chapter One – Introduction

Imagine sitting among a group of people looking at a bunch of strange symbols and being asked to make sense of their arrangement, sounds and meaning. While this task is nearly impossible, even with the patient guidance of a professional, the others around you are having no trouble at all making sense of these symbols, and fluently reading and conversing using this form of unfamiliar communication. You give it your all and try to remember which sounds go with which symbols. You form your mouth to try to will the words out, but you just don't succeed. Every day you are confronted with this task. While you are still trying to read, remember and sound out words and letters from two weeks ago, new and more challenging words and letter/sound combinations appear each day. After a while you start to get frustrated, angry, depressed, defeated and stop trying.

This is the description of struggling emerging readers, who live in small towns and big cities all across the country. The researcher is going to focus on a group of children from a town nestled between the Cascades and the coast of Oregon. Here sits a progressive yet conservative city just east of I-5 and between the McKenzie and Willamette rivers. This location provides access to major arteries and easy access to the coast, rivers, and mountains. Once considered a single economy city, its 58,000 citizens enjoy a diverse business climate that includes strong business in several sectors: wood products, high tech, medical, tourism, software, industrial manufacturing and many more. Although the job market looks promising, the economy has hit many of its citizens hard, and families are struggling to make ends meet. According to the Springfield Chamber of

Commerce and US Census Bureau, the medium income for a household is \$33,000. The racial makeup of this city is 89.6% white, 0.71% African American, 1.4% Native American/Alaska Native persons, 1.1% Asian, 6.9% Hispanic and 4% others and/or persons reporting two or more races.

The city of approximately 58,000 residents is served by a school district that has two high schools (grades 9-12), five middle schools (grades 6-8), 15 elementary schools (grades K-5) and two alternative high schools for its population of 11,000 students ages five to 18. The racial make-up of its students follows closely to the city's being: 78.9% white, 2.4% African American, 2.0 Native American, 2.1% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 14.7% Hispanic. In the school district, 10% of the population is served for English Language Learners (ELL). The district employs 1407 employees with 46% of those being teachers. Fifty-two percent of the student population is on free and reduced lunch, while 16% are served in Special Education. This district has a strong reputation for its teaching excellence and recorded 14 exceptional/strong schools and nine satisfactory on the 2008 state report card.

The researcher's school is among the exceptional schools, which has posted the highest scores in reading and math with regard to Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) over the past three years. The school was built in 1963 as a single story, wood framed building that has four hexagonal shaped pods housing the office and library in one, and classrooms in the others. It is one of the older buildings in the district with little technology or modern amenities as compared to the many newly constructed schools in the district. Its 358 students are dispersed between three half-day kindergarten, three first grade, two second grade, two third grade, three fourth grade and two fifth grade classrooms within

the school. Classes range in size from 18-33 students. The ethnicities of the students within this site are: 81% white, 2% American Indian, 1% Black, 2% Asian, 10% Hispanic and 5% unspecified.

The site is a Title I school which affords it the benefit of additional assistance in reading and math. The site became a Title I school in 2009 when its free and reduced lunch count hit 41%. Seven percent of its students are in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program, 8% are on Individual Education Plans (IEP), 27% are receiving Title I services and 10% are identified Talented and Gifted (TAG). The site has a steady enrollment as it is considered a “neighborhood” school meaning most of its students reside in the solid middle class neighborhood that surrounds it. The soccer, baseball and football fields are used by the community as well as the gym, as the school is the nucleus of the community.

The mission statement that the researcher and staff adhere to is, “At our school, staff, parents and community work together to learn, build and teach a broad based curriculum resulting in an innovative and meaningful education.” It has been the commitment of the staff to live up to this statement, with its greatest focus being on reading. “Walk to Read” was implemented last year to ensure that students were receiving the best possible instruction from the district adopted reading curriculum, Houghton Mifflin (HM). With the staff’s commitment to teaching it to fidelity, 120 minute reading blocks have been built into every classroom’s schedule, grades 1-5; 60 minutes for kindergarten. Staff is teaching 90 minutes of whole group instruction following the HM lesson maps with 30 minutes of reading intervention provided by staff, specialists and Educational Assistants. “Walk to Read” is where students are grouped

into intensive, strategic, and benchmark groups within grade levels. The intensive group gets additional help and students are rigorously and intentionally taught key skills and strategies in small groups. Strategic students are re-taught key skills and strategies and their learning is then reinforced with new skills. Benchmark students are challenged to extend their learning. Students can and do move throughout the groups as they master skills or need more reinforcement of a skill. The researcher teaches the intensive students in first grade, who were identified using an assessment called EasyCBM. According to its website,

EasyCBM was designed by researchers at the University of Oregon as an integral part of an RTI (Response to Intervention) model. From the start, developers have emphasized the goal of the system to help facilitate good instructional decision-making. This project began with a grant from the federal Office of Special Education Programs in 2006. The assessments on the system are what is known as CBMs, standardized measures that sample from a year's worth of curriculum to assess the degree to which students have mastered the skills and knowledge deemed critical at each grade level (EasyCBM website, 2009, para. 1).

The researcher has taught at the elementary school for 19 years and has her BS degree in Elementary Education from the University of Oregon. She is currently completing her M.ED in Curriculum and Instruction with a minor in Leadership. The researcher has also been a member of Site Counsel, Reading Team, Math Team, and Data

Team, coached the Battle of the Books teams at her school, and been a member of the District Math Steering Committee and Math Textbook Adoption Cadre.

The researcher teaches first grade. Prior to that, she taught half-day kindergarten and half-day Reading Support, which gives her ample experience in early childhood development and reading intervention experience. In addition to her homeroom class, the researcher teaches the 18 most intensive reading students from the first grade classes during “Walk to Read.” It has been through this experience that the researcher sees the need for explicit and systematic instruction of phonemic awareness through a variety of activities and supplemental reading programs. Research has shown that phonemic awareness element of reading “may be the single most powerful predictor of reading success at the end of first and second grade” (Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 1994 as cited in Troia 2004, p. 1).

A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in our language. A child learns to use phonemes to speak, long before he learns the alphabet. Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear the sounds of the language, manipulate them in one’s mind, and reproduce them appropriately with one’s mouth. For example, a child might be asked to tell the teacher the first sound he hears in the word cat. Not the letter, but the sound. The child might also be asked to tell the last sound he hears, or the middle sound. Again, this has nothing to do with knowing the alphabet or being able to tell the letter that is used to represent the sound. There are approximately 30 discrete phonemic awareness skills that a child should master by the end of second grade. The researcher sees and understands the need and urgency for struggling students to be taught phonemic awareness strategies. To become literate, the child must grasp the alphabetic principle—which means that the sounds that

are heard in words in English can be represented by written symbols. Decoding, which is required for reading, involves looking at a print symbol and associating it with a sound. Encoding, which is required for writing, involves hearing a sound and knowing what symbol, or letter(s), to write to represent that sound. Phonemic awareness is critical to both decoding and encoding. “This ability to analyze words into sounds is exactly the skill that promotes successful reading in first grade” (Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1994 as cited in Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler, 1998, p. 2).

Through this action research, the researcher is seeking to determine if rigorous and intentional teaching of phonological awareness instruction will have an impact on first grade, at-risk reading students’ early literacy skills as measured by EasyCBM’s letter sounds and phoneme segmentation fluency.



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## Action Research Proposal

## Chapter Two – The Problem or Issue

The question to be researched at the school site is: “What effect will specific phonological awareness instruction have on at-risk, first grade reading students’ early literacy skills as measured by letter sounds and phoneme segmentation fluency?”

For the past two years the school site has been focused on raising reading scores through teaching the Houghton Mifflin (HM) reading program with fidelity. The site has implemented a strategy called “Walk to Read” to ensure that every student is being taught at his or her appropriate level with maximum effectiveness using the HM core program. However, emerging readers who are struggling and considered intensive as a result of the EasyCBM (Curriculum Based Measures) assessment and the HM Emerging Literacy Screener, need additional reading intervention through a program that puts more emphasis on phonemic awareness strategies and practices. Phonemic awareness has been singled out because of the research that shows students who are deficient or low in phonemic awareness, (the ability to hear the different sounds in the English language), are in serious jeopardy of future reading failure. Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler state that “Without direct instructional support, phonemic awareness eludes roughly 25% of middle-class first graders and substantially more of those who come from less literacy-rich backgrounds” (1998, p. 1) and it logically follows that those children may not succeed in reading.

It is the consensus of the research site’s Reading Team, which is comprised of the school psychologist, Title I teacher, Resource Room Specialist, building principal and

classroom teachers, that these very intensive students need a minimum of 30 minutes a day reading intervention in addition to the 90 minutes of HM whole group reading instruction. While the HM program is successful for students of average and above reading skills, it lacks the intensive instruction in early literacy and phonemic awareness skills that these struggling readers need. It is imperative that emerging readers find success early as research has shown that children who struggle early on in reading will most likely struggle in the years to come.

A large body of research has linked deficient phonological awareness, specifically phonemic awareness, in kindergarten and the early grades with poor reading achievement (Blachman, 1997). Although not all children with poor phonological awareness have difficulties learning to read, most do. Torgesen, Wagner, and Rashotte (1994) reported that children who began first grade with phonological awareness skills below the 20th percentile lagged behind their peers in word identification and word decoding throughout elementary school. In fifth grade, their average grade-level attainment for word decoding skills was 2.3 (i.e., second grade, third month), as compared to 5.9 for children who scored above the 20th percentile in phonological awareness at the beginning of first grade (Schuele & Boudreau, 2008, p. 3).

It is the researcher's assertion that if these struggling readers are not identified and supported in kindergarten and first grade, they are at risk of future reading failure. "Children who are aware of phonemes move easily and productively though inventive

spelling and reading. Children who are not aware of phonemes are at serious risk of failing to learn to read” (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler, 1998, p. xi).

The research site possesses several high-quality, research-based phonemic awareness programs that the researcher will have access to in serving the intensive students in her classroom. They are: *Early Reading Intervention (ERI)*, *Road to the Code*, *ReadWell K and Phonemic Awareness In Young Children*. Through this research study, the researcher hopes to discover that by adding additional rigorous and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, students will gain the skills necessary to achieve reading success in the primary grades to avoid future hardships and setbacks throughout elementary school and beyond.

#### *Literature Search*

Because reading is such a vital skill in today’s society, the researcher wants to discover if and how explicit instruction of phonological awareness in the early grades, specifically first grade, at-risk students, will improve students’ reading fluency, word attack skills and spelling. There is a wealth of information on the topic of phonological and phonemic awareness. The researcher will use the literature search information to define and describe phonological and phonemic awareness and further expand the reader’s knowledge as to why it is important. Then, the researcher will discuss instructional strategies.

#### *What is Phonological Awareness?*

Phonological awareness involves knowing that words are composed of sound units and that sound units can be combined to form words. Phonological awareness has been hailed as a vital component in emerging readers’ ability to learning how to read and

as a strong indicator of future reading success and/or failure. Hoover (2002) states in his article, *The Importance of Phonemic Awareness in Learning to Read* that,

For the child having difficulty acquiring phonemic awareness, the prognosis is not good. Such a child is not able to take advantage of the alphabetic principle. She might even know that the letters are somehow connected to the spoken word, but without phonemic awareness, she is baffled by what that relationship might be (p. 5).

English uses an alphabetic writing system in which the letters, singly and in combination, represent single speech sounds. People who can take apart words into sounds, recognize their identity, and put them together again have the foundation skill for using the alphabetic principle (Liberman, Shankweiler, & Liberman, 1989; Troia, 2004 as cited in Moats & Tolman, 2008). Without phonemic awareness, students may be mystified by the print system and how it represents the spoken word.

Phonological awareness is the umbrella term under which phonemic awareness falls. Phonological awareness refers to sensitivity to any size unit of sound. It is the ability to generate and recognize rhyming words, to count syllables, to separate the beginning of a word from its ending (i.e., as in the *st* and *op* in the word *stop*), and to identify each of the phonemes in a word.

*What is Phonemic Awareness?*

Phonemic awareness deals with the smallest unit of sounds—specifically phonemes. It is a phoneme that determines the difference between look and lick, dog and hog. These differences influence meaning. Take for example, the following sentences:

“You Dog!” vs. “You Hog!” and “Take a look.” vs. “Take a lick,” the power of the phoneme becomes obvious (Yopp, 2000).

Phonemic awareness is a cognitive skill that consists of three pieces. The first piece concerns a linguistic unit, the phoneme; the second concerns the explicit, conscience awareness of that unit; and the third involves the ability to explicitly manipulate such units. Phonemic awareness is thus the ability to consciously manipulate language at the level of phonemes (Hoover, 2002). “Phonological awareness tasks, of which phonemic awareness is included, do not involve print and are provided to children for one purpose: to facilitate the acquisition of reading, writing, decoding and spelling words” (Schuele & Boudreau, 2008, p. 7).

Some confusion exists about the connection between phonemic awareness and phonics. The first relates to spoken language, the second to written language. “Before phonics can be successfully taught, phonological awareness must be established. Children must be able to hear and manipulate oral sound patterns before they can relate them to print” (The Research Basis of Earobics, 1999). Phonemic awareness is not phonics although they develop reciprocally as children learn to read, and improvement in one area generally results in a corresponding improvement in the other (Donoghue, 2009). For the purpose of this paper, the researcher will address only the area of phonological and phonemic awareness, and may use the two terms interchangeably with the understanding that the researcher is talking about the auditory process; that the speech stream is made up of a sequence of small units of sound and the ability to manipulate those small units.

*Why is Phonemic Awareness so Important?*

Learning to read early and well is a critical element in a child's success in school and in life. In fact, eventual social and economic achievements are closely linked to reading achievement (Bayder, Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg, 1993; Blaunstein & Lyon, 2006 as cited in Lane et al., 2009).

Stanovich (1986) described a phenomenon that he called the Matthew effect in reading. He explained that children who experience early success in reading are likely to read more and, subsequently, become even better readers. Children who experience difficulty during early reading, however, spend less time reading and, therefore, achieve less progress. The gap between the reading achievement of those who experience early success and those who experience early failure widens as these children progress through school. Because reading achievement during initial instruction is highly predictive of later reading success or failure (Juel, 1998; Stanovich, 1986; Torgesen, 2004), the importance of early intervention is quite clear (Lane et al., 2009, p. 278).

In order for a beginning reader to capture the logic of the written system, it appears that he or she must notice that running speech is made up of a sequence of small sounds. Without this insight—without phonemic awareness—the symbol system is arbitrary. That task of dealing with the symbol system, then, can quickly become overwhelming (Yopp, 2000).

To conclude, the research supports that phonemic awareness instruction helps children learn to read and spell. It is an important indicator of reading success, and it has been proven to increase alphabetic principle. As cited in Ed.gov, 2006, the following quotes cement the case:

- "Children who fall behind in first grade reading have a one in eight chance of ever catching up to grade level" (Juel, 1994).
- "Phonemic awareness is the single best predictor of reading success between kindergarten and second grade" (Adams, Stanovich, 1995).
- "Phonemic awareness is more highly related to learning to read than are tests of general intelligence, reading readiness, and listening comprehension" (Stanovich, 1993).
- "Phonemic Awareness measured at the beginning of kindergarten is one of the two best predictors of how well children will learn to read" (NRP, 2000).

It is this researcher's opinion, based on an extensive literature search, that phonological awareness is an important component in children's literacy development overall, especially in spelling and reading performance, and should be a part of early reading instruction. As cited in Adams, Foorman, Lundberg and Beeler (1998),

By the time children enter kindergarten, their linguistic abilities are generally quite well developed. Their pronunciation is, for the most part, correct; their grammar is remarkably sophisticated; and they usually have little problem communicating with those around them.

Yet language also has another side to it: namely, its form and

structure. Shifting attention from the meaning of language to its form is often very difficult for children at this age or stage of development. Children in kindergarten and first grade are at the ideal age for learning to read and write. Yet, making sense of the mapping between written and spoken language depends on explicit knowledge of sentences, words, and phonemes because written language is explicitly organized into these units (p. 9).

The researcher will now address instructional strategies for implementing phonemic awareness.

*What does Phonemic Awareness Instruction Look Like in the Classroom?*

Phonemic awareness activities should be child appropriate. Adams and Bruck (1995) as cited in Yopp (2000) submitted that songs, chants, and word-sound games are ideally suited toward developing young children's sensitivity to the sound structure of language. Phonemic awareness should be explicitly taught to kindergarten and first grade children, and is best delivered in small group settings. The research varies some, but most generally, is it agreed upon that instruction should be five to 18 hours (NRP, 2000 as cited in Schuele & Boudreau, 2008), three to five sessions per week, 15 to 30 minutes in length (Schuele & Boudreau).

The skills taught typically follow a developmentally appropriate hierarchy starting with rhyming and sentence segmentation which reflects an awareness of the sounds of speech. Once children develop sensitivity to sounds, they learn that words are comprised of smaller units, such as syllables, and that these segments can be blended together or broken apart. As phonological awareness is further developed, children learn that words

and syllables are made up of even smaller parts—individual sounds called phonemes. The ability to manipulate these phonemes is the most challenging and latest developing phonological skill (The Research Basis of Earobics, 1999). Table 1 (adapted from Torgesen, 1999 as cited in The Research Basis of Earobics) lists expectations for the development of phonological awareness skills:

Table 1.

*Expectations for the Development of Phonological Awareness Skills*

At age:	The average child can:
Beginning Kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Tell whether two words rhyme (cow, now).</li> <li>*Generate a rhyme for a simple word like cat or dog.</li> <li>* Or be easily taught to do these tasks.</li> </ul>
End of kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Isolate and pronounce the beginning sound in a word like nose or fudge.</li> <li>*Blend the sounds in two-phoneme words like boy or me.</li> </ul>
Midway through first grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Isolate and pronounce all the sounds in two-and three-phoneme words.</li> <li>*Blend the sounds in four-phoneme words containing initial consonant blends.</li> </ul>
End of first grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Isolate and pronounce the sounds in four-phoneme words containing initial blends.</li> <li>*Blend the sounds in four-and five-phoneme words containing initial and final blends.</li> </ul>

To determine appropriate instructional content for students as well as monitor their progress, a system of ongoing assessment is critical. Once students have been identified as needing phonemic awareness instruction and/or intervention, through a screening measure such as DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills), or in the case of the researcher’s site, EasyCBM, then phonemic awareness activities

should be implemented. This can be accomplished through a trained individual with knowledge of phonemic awareness activities, or by follow the guidance of a published program. The following is a list of each phonemic awareness skills with an example of what each might look like being taught in the classroom. These skills typically emerge following a developmentally appropriate hierarchy from rhyming, which is less complex to manipulation, which is most complex:

**Skill 1: Rhyming.** As rhyme play directs children's attention to the sound-structure of words, it seeds their awareness that language has not only meaning and message, but also form. Rhyming and sentence segmentation reflects a gross awareness of the sounds of speech

- Recite favorite poems and rhymes in a playful manner like in whispers, and then say the rhyming words aloud.
- Read favorite rhyming books with predictable text to reinforce auditory processing skills.
- Emphasize rhyme through movement--slap-clap, stand-bend, and cheers are all games children enjoy.

**Skill 2: Phoneme identification (words and sentences).** Once children develop sensitivity to sound, then they learn that words are comprised of smaller units. Children should also understand that language consists of sentences of different lengths.

- Give students 10 counters and a cup. Help them to drop a counter into the cup each time the teacher says a word in the sentence.
- Ask children to develop sentences about a picture shown.

Skill 3: Blending-- Children should be aware that some words can be divided into smaller bits, namely phonemes.

- Holding onto a chain of connecting cubes, three or four in length, the teacher taps each cube and says the sounds in a word i.e., /k/ /a/ /t/, then she makes one continuous motion across the top of the cubes while the children say the word “cat.”
- Stretch and shrink—each student has a slinky and they stretch a word as they open the slinky ( mmmmaaaaannn) then say the word (man)as they close up the slinky.

Skill 4: Segmentation--onset and rime and dividing words into single sounds.

- Onset and rime is simply saying the first sound of a word and then finishing with the remaining word i.e., /b/ /oy/, /h/ /ouse/.
- Segmenting is breaking a word apart. Given a word, children will break it down into individual sounds, as the teacher holds up a finger for each sound as a cue.  
Example: “Say the sounds in cat.” /k/ /a/ /t/ “Say the sounds in beds.” /b/ /e/ /d//z/.

Skill 5: Manipulation. The ability to manipulate these phonemes is the most challenging and latest developing phonological awareness skill.

- Substitution game. Students are asked to change the beginning sound in house to /m/ (mouse), or the middle sound in road to /e/ (red).

These are examples of activities that come from published programs like *Houghton Mifflin, Read Well, Road to the Code, and Phonemic Awareness in Young Children*. In all activities, students are given ample opportunities for individual turns, with immediate

response to errors by the teacher. All activities should be performed in small groups to increase number of opportunities to respond, number of positive reinforcements and corrective feedback.

### *Summary*

If anything is to be learned from the emergent literacy research, it is that literacy acquisition is a complex phenomenon. The attainment of literacy is ongoing, gradual and in some ways, uniquely specified for individual children. In conclusion, phonemic awareness is one of the five components that the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000 as cited in Donoghue, 2009) lists as a major aspect of a complete and comprehensive reading program; the other four being: phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Phonemic awareness is a necessary prerequisite to learning to read and spell. If students are to be successful in life, it starts at the earliest years of schooling and learning to read. It starts with phonological awareness.



## Action Research Proposal

## Chapter Three – The Goal of the Action Research Project

The question to be investigated at the school site is, “What effect will specific phonological awareness instruction have on at-risk, first grade reading students’ early literacy skills as measured by letter sounds and phoneme segmentation fluency?”

Students who are strong in phonological awareness have an easier time learning to read in alphabetic languages (Hoover, 2002). Most children, estimated at more than 80% (International Reading Association, 1998) develop phonemic awareness by the middle of first grade, especially if classrooms are rich in opportunities to engage with print, stories, poems, songs and rhymes. However it is the other 20% for which the researcher is concerned. Research on the statistic of the other 20% is as clear as it is alarming. The likelihood of these students becoming successful readers is slim (International Reading Association) if systematic instruction and engagement with language, specifically phonemic awareness is not taught.

The researcher will begin by meeting with the school site’s principal to ask for permission to conduct the action research project. Since the school site uses the “Walk to Read” model for its reading instruction, the researcher and other first grade teachers will then identify and group the students into three categories by using the EasyCBM assessment probe in the areas of letter names, letter sounds, phoneme segmentation, words reading fluency and passage reading fluency. The site testing team will also use the Houghton Mifflin Baseline Group Test for making placement and planning decisions based on students' instructional strengths, needs, and reading levels, and the HM

Emerging Literacy Survey which measures phonemic awareness and concepts of print. From these three measures, students will then be grouped into three categories: intensive readers, defined as students requiring intensive small group instruction and additional intervention strategies; strategic readers, defined as students who are approaching grade level reading, but still need some small group instruction; and benchmark readers—students who are at or above grade level reading, whose instruction is mainly whole group and supplemented by enrichment reading activities. The participants in the researcher's action research will be the students from the intensive reading group.

In this study only EasyCBM letter sounds and phoneme segmentation scores will be analyzed because those measures are the most critical indicators of first grader's reading skills. The baseline data from letter sounds and phoneme segmentation is important because first, there is evidence from concurrent correlations (data derived from research design that measure two skills in a sample of students and then determines how those skill vary) that shows a positive correlation between students who have better performance in phonemic awareness also have better performance in reading and vice versa (Hoover, 2002). Second, predictive correlations, derived from research designs where phonemic awareness is measured at one point in time and reading skill is measured at some subsequent point in time, are even more suggestive of casual relationships (Hoover).

Observations, by the researcher, and feedback from Educational Assistants will be an informal way to gather information about emerging reader's skills. The researcher will observe students during independent reading time to see if they engage in books, pretend to read, and have an understanding of concepts of print. Concepts of print is the

understanding that print moves from left to right, top to bottom and that each word is associated with sounds (one-to-one correspondence). Good concepts of print are an indication of phonological awareness (Lane, Pullen, Hudson, & Konold, 2009).

After collecting baseline data (pre-test), and determining the reading groups, the researcher will implement a phonemic awareness program depending on the achievement level of her students. For students with little to no phonemic awareness, the options will be *Early Reading Intervention*, a scientifically research-based program by Pearson Scott Foresman, *Road to the Code: A phonological Awareness Program for Young Children* by Blachman, Ball, Black, & Tangel, or *Phonemic Awareness in Young Children* by Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler. Depending on the program chosen, the intervention will last approximately 20 to 30 minutes a day in intensity and have a duration of a minimum of 11 weeks. The program will be administered to a small group of students, ideally four, but no larger than six, by the researcher and trained Educational Assistants. Throughout this intervention, students will be progress monitored weekly using the EasyCBM progress monitoring probe for phoneme segmentation and teacher observation on skill attainment and participation.

Upon completion of the intervention, the researcher will assess the students with letter sounds and phoneme segmentation and observe the students for a second time (post-test). The researcher will again observe students during independent reading time to see if any changes occur in attitudes toward reading and look for changes in concepts of print.

Finally, the researcher will compile all testing data, teacher observations and Educational Assistants' feedback to gauge if progress has been made. The researcher

hopes to be able to observe measurable improvement in students’ phonemic awareness skills. A move up in instructional level, for instance, intensive to strategic or strategic to benchmark, would indicate to the researcher that adequate progress has been made.

Many experts in the field of early literacy propose one way of measuring if a student has made adequate reading progress is by looking at whether a student increased an instructional level from one benchmark period to another. For example, moving from Intensive to Strategic or Strategic to Benchmark. Table 2, from Oregon Reading First Center’s website, shows four ways students can achieve adequate progress by looking at their instructional level.

Table 2.

*Four Ways to Achieve Adequate Progress*

<u>Fall 2005</u>	<u>Winter 2006</u>
<b>Of the <i>intensive</i> students in the fall, some may be...</b>	<i>Still At risk</i> (these students may have made progress but not enough to decrease their risk)
	<i>Now at Some risk</i>
	<i>Now at Low risk</i>
<b>Of the <i>strategic</i> students in the fall, some may be...</b>	<i>Now At risk</i>
	<i>Still Some risk</i> (these students may have made progress but not enough to decrease their risk)
	<i>Now at Low risk</i>
<b>Of the <i>benchmark</i> students in the fall, some may be...</b>	<i>Now At risk</i>
	<i>Now Some risk</i>
	<i>Still Low risk</i> (note that these students still had to make progress to maintain their low risk status)

In this action research if a student moves up an instructional level or remains at the benchmark level, on the EasyCBM Letter Sounds and Phoneme Segmentation Fluency measures, it would indicate to the researcher that adequate progress has been made (Oregon Reading First Center).

## Action Research Proposal

## Chapter Four – Action Plan

The central goal of the researcher's action research is to find out "What effect will specific phonological awareness instruction have on at-risk, first grade reading students' early literacy skills as measured by letter sounds and phoneme segmentation fluency.

Current research on the importance of phonological awareness states that phonemic awareness is one of the five essential instructional components of reading. Along with phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, it makes up an important part of beginning reading instruction. Early on, researchers did not often address phonemic awareness. It was not until the early 1990s that some research emphasis was put on how to help emergent readers become successful readers with early literacy instruction. It was then that a focus on the importance of phonemic awareness came about (International Reading Association, 1998). "Being able to complete phoneme awareness tasks such as segmenting, blending, substituting, categorizing, isolating, and identifying phonemes is not always the easiest for our young learners" (Yopp, 1992, p. 696). Yet, research has shown that the "acquisition of phonemic awareness is highly predictive of success in learning to read, in particular in predicting success in learning to decode" (International Reading Association, p. 2). The researcher will keep these ideas in mind as she looks for possible solutions.

*Possible Solutions*

One solution to developing phonemic awareness in young readers is by using a supplemental early reading curriculum designed to promote awareness of words' sound structure by helping students learn how spoken language is represented by letters. One such program is the *Phonological Awareness Training for Reading* (Torgesen & Bryant, 1994). According to its website, Pro-Ed Publishing,

The *Phonological Awareness Training for Reading* program is designed to increase the level of phonological awareness in young children. It was developed because children who are sensitive to the phonological structure of words in oral language have a much easier time learning to read than children who are not (para. 1).

The program is divided into four sets of activities: warm-up, sound blending, sound segmenting, and reading and spelling. The warm-up phase includes rhyming activities to help children focus their attention on the sounds in words. Following the warm-up, children begin the formal training program with activities that teach them to blend individual sounds to make words. They then begin the more difficult segmenting activities. In the final phase of instruction, children are taught how to use their phonological awareness skills in reading and spelling.

The program can be taught either individually or in small groups. The *Phonological Awareness Training for Reading* program takes about 12 to 14 weeks to complete if children are taught in short sessions three or four times a week. The program should be used with at-risk children in kindergarten to help prepare them for reading in

first grade or with first or second grade children who are having difficulties learning to read. This program is appealing for its reasonable price of \$171 a kit and because it requires minimal teacher training to use (Pro-Ed Publishing). The researcher likes this program and will consider it strongly based on its affordability and design of use.

A second solution to teaching phonological awareness is *Road to the Code: A Program of Early Literacy Activities to Develop Phonological Awareness* (Blachman, Ball, Black, & Tangel, 2000).

*Road to the Code* is a program designed to incorporate phonological awareness activities into the kindergarten and first grade classroom before students have had a chance to fail. Originally conceived for students in kindergarten, research has verified that *Road to the Code* is also effective for first grade students struggling with beginning reading and spelling skills (Blachman, Ball, Black, & Tangel, 2000). Taught by classroom teachers, resource and reading teachers and language specialists, *Road to the Code* is meant to supplement instruction in critical early reading skills in classrooms that are already rich in oral and written language activities and where reading to children is a common occurrence. The research literature is filled with studies underscoring the importance of phoneme awareness and understanding the alphabetic code for beginning readers. Research has also verified that early intervention can indeed facilitate the acquisition of early reading and spelling skills. The overriding goal of *Road to the Code* is to develop in students an awareness that spoken words can be segmented into phonemes and that these segmented units can be represented by the letters of the alphabet. *Road to the Code* consists of 44 lessons that are taught in groups of 4-5 students 4 times a week over an 11-week period. Each of the 15-20 minute lessons are divided

into 3 parts and follow the same daily format: *Say-it and Move-it*, a phoneme segmentation activity; letter name and sound instruction; and to conclude, an activity to reinforce phonological awareness. The *Say-it and Move-it* activities teach students to segment words into phonemes. Students repeat a target word, move a small disk or tile for each sound. This program is designed for use with kindergarten and first grade, but could be adapted for use with older children. It is also intended for small group instruction for children with weak phonological awareness skills. *Road to the Code* is designed for use by classroom teachers, resource teachers, and language specialists (Florida Center for Reading Research website).

A third solution is using a research-based phonemic awareness and phonics program entitled, *Early Reading Intervention*. *Early Reading Intervention* is a scientifically research-based program by Pearson Scott Foresman.

Scott Foresman Early Reading Intervention is based on Project Optimize, a five-year longitudinal research study by Dr. Edward J. Kame'enui and Dr. Deborah C. Simmons. It identifies at-risk children in kindergarten and grade one and provides intervention to improve reading achievement. Research shows 97% of kindergarten children who were taught with our program experienced faster achievement rates and were able to sustain that level of achievement into second grade (Pearson Scott Foresman web site p 2).

*Early Reading Intervention* is a carefully sequenced series of activities that will stimulate phonological awareness in 30 minutes of teacher-led activities each day. It is an excellent program with careful instructions for teachers to follow. The first 15 minutes of each lesson focuses on phonological awareness and alphabetic understanding. Here,

activities related to letter-names, letter-sounds, and phonological awareness are implemented in a game-like fashion. Writing and spelling are the focus of the last 15 minutes of each lesson. These activities begin with students learning how to write the letters that correspond to the letter sounds they have learned and progress to using these letter-sounds to spell words. Fluency regarding letter-sounds and reading words is a consistent part of this intervention. Vocabulary is addressed throughout the intervention and focuses on word-learning strategies. After approximately 100 lessons, students are reading controlled text comprising approximately 3-5 word sentences.

A fourth solution would be to simply immerse the classroom with literature rich activities and print such as using big books, read alouds and predictable books, developing language experience charts, and using other language-oriented practices to give children valuable reading experiences. “In order to ‘leave no children behind,’ it is imperative to help close this gap in the early primary grades, and one of the most efficient ways to do so is through reading aloud and sharing stories orally with students” (Trinkle, 2008, p. 43).

It is this researcher’s view that first-grade teachers, who are effective in teaching reading, design a classroom environment that supports learning. They should create a print-rich environment where children have access to a variety of reading and writing materials. They should offer many opportunities for reading and writing instruction that are embedded in ongoing reading and writing activities. This idea is backed by the International Reading Association, 1998 when it suggests, “provide opportunities for students to practice reading and writing for real reasons in a variety of contexts to promote fluency and independence” (p. 6). Teachers should provide many and varied

opportunities to read alone, with a partner, and in a small group. They should use a variety of carefully chosen reading materials including literature, poetry, big books, and instructional level texts. “Nursery rhymes, riddles, songs, poems and read-aloud books that manipulate sounds may be used purposefully to draw young readers’ attention to the sounds of spoken language” (International Reading Association, p. 5). They should offer multiple opportunities to write and link writing to reading. “Reading instruction and experiences with print such as being read to, playing letter games, language play, and having early writing experiences, facilitate phonemic awareness development” (International Reading Association, p. 4). They should offer opportunities for children to develop rapid recognition of sight words and display sight or high frequency words on a word wall. And they should provide interesting and creative contexts in which to foster reading fluency.

While the researcher agrees with these practices, and herself strives to create a classroom atmosphere as described above, it is also her belief that this strategy, in and of itself, is not enough phonemic awareness instruction for the struggling reader in need of systematic and deliberate instruction of phonemic awareness skills. Yopp, (2000) describes developmentally appropriate activities such as storytelling, word games, rhymes and riddles as ways to facilitate phonemic awareness, yet she argues that phonemic awareness instruction should be deliberate and purposeful, intentional not incidental. And Trehearne, (2003) states, “Some seem to develop these skills fairly easily within a stimulating classroom environment, while other need more instruction that consciously and deliberately focuses on phonological awareness” (p.117). The researcher

rejects this strategy based on lack of explicit instruction needed for students struggling to acquire phonemic awareness.

### *Summary*

The solutions thus far have included three supplementary early reading programs, and a less structured, yet philosophically sound practice of classroom design. The researcher liked all three programs presented, yet has chosen to use *Early Reading Intervention* based on availability (the school site possesses the program), and proven scientific research of success.

### *Action Plan Details:*

In this action research project the researcher seeks to find out “What effect will specific phonological awareness instruction have on at-risk, first grade reading students’ early literacy skills as measured by letter sounds and phoneme segmentation fluency?” The researcher has designed a carefully thought out action plan that is comprised of 15 weeks where participants will be chosen, data will be collected, the program, *Early Reading Intervention* will be implemented, and results will be organized and evaluated to assess if adequate progress has been made.

### *The Action Plan Timeline:*

- Pre-organization steps: Leading up to the implementation of the action plan, the researcher has been working with a group of five students who are not making adequate progress in reading instruction and phonemic awareness based on EasyCBM benchmarking data and teacher observation. With the consultation of the site’s school psychologist and resource room specialist, it was decided that an

intervention of explicit phonological awareness instruction would be the best solution to help these students improve their reading skills.

- Week One: Receive permission from the school site principal to use the data received from the intervention in the researcher's action research plan and prepare materials.
- Week Two: Assess selected students in the areas of letter sounds and phoneme segmentation to acquire baseline data. Evaluate and graph data.
- Week Three – Thirteen: Administer *Early Reading Intervention* in 30 minute blocks daily in addition to regular reading instruction from district adopted reading series Houghton Mifflin.
- Week Fourteen – Fifteen: Assess students during the EasyCBM spring testing window, May 3<sup>rd</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup>, collect data and analyze results regarding the effectiveness of *Early Reading Intervention* and compare it to the baseline data.

### *Conclusion*

If students are to be successful readers, they must have a foundational understanding of phonemic awareness. "Research has revealed that poorly developed phonemic awareness is the core difficulty for a large population of children who are having difficulty learning to read" (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler, 1998, p. 5) as is the case with the researcher's focus group. If through this action research project, the researcher can improve her students' reading success and help them avoid the eventual hardships that may ensue with poor reading skills, then she will feel that she is fulfilling her responsibilities as a teacher and a member of society.

## Action Research Proposal

## Chapter 5- Results and Next Step

Through this action research it was the researcher's objective to answer "What effect will specific phonological awareness instruction have on at-risk, first grade reading students' early literacy skills as measured by letter sounds and phoneme segmentation fluency?"

At the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year, eighteen students from the first grade were identified as intensive readers as a result of the EasyCBM benchmarking probes. Twelve of the lowest scoring students received an intervention of phonological awareness for the first three months of the year. After that, the five lowest students were targeted as needing an additional phonemic awareness intervention. It is from that point that the researcher's action research begins. The students began their intervention immediately following the winter benchmarking in January which would run for 15 weeks.

After 10 weeks into the intervention, two of the subjects, who were progressing steadily, were pulled from the group to allow them to receive instruction at a pace more geared to their level. Thus, the remaining three subjects continued to receive the intervention for the entire 15 weeks.

The five students who were identified at risk of reading failure each had unique characteristics and needs that distinguished them from one another. It should be noted that all students were male. To follow is a description of each student who will be identified as subject one through five.

- Subject One is a first grade student who has been identified with a learning disability and placed on an IEP. This student is significantly behind his peers academically. His phonemic awareness skills, as measured by EasyCBM, were extremely low at the beginning of the school year. He has been on several intervention plans this year both for academics and behavior. It is the researcher's opinion that his behavior affects his learning significantly, but it could be argued that his learning disability and inability to learn at a rate equal to his peers drives his poor behavior. Because he is avoiding the work associated with the reading lessons, his behavior disrupts the learning of the others. He is also on a speech IEP. This child is extremely difficult to assess and evaluate his progress based on his many learning difficulties.
- Subject Two is a student who is repeating the first grade. His skills are improving, but he still performs below his peers and his rate of growth in early literacy skills is very slow. This student also has behavioral issues and has been on several behavior plans throughout the school year. He has an Occupational Therapy (OT) IEP and works with a therapist one to two times a month at the school site. Subject two engages with subject one in an off task manner during reading instruction and they disrupt the learning of the whole group. The researcher spends a great deal of time and energy on classroom management issues that take away from valuable learning time.
- Subject Three is on medication for Attention Deficit Hyper-activity Disorder (ADHD). He is still very difficult to manage in the classroom and his frequent disruptions make it very difficult to conduct lessons. He has been on several

behavior modification plans this year, with little success. He avoids doing any tasks that require academic work and requires an exorbitant amount of teacher time. The researcher feels he is capable of learning more, but he sabotages his learning by refusing to do any work and he uses avoidance tactics such as getting out of his seat wandering around, unnecessary interactions with the teacher, disrupting others, talking out and drawing attention to himself frequently and inappropriately.

- Subject Four is a student who is extremely active and has great difficulty sitting still. He must always be moving. When the researcher is able to obtain his attention, he is able to complete short tasks with moderate accuracy. His emerging literacy skills are very poor. This student is on speech and OT IEPs. His speech and language skills make it difficult to understand him at times. His fine and gross motor skills are extremely poor. Writing is very difficult and usually illegible. He falls and stumbles a lot around the classroom. He frequently falls out of his chair, which causes a disruption in his learning and those around him.
- Subject Five is a student who repeated kindergarten. His skills are slightly higher than that of the group, yet far below typical peers. His speech and language disability make it just about impossible to understand him in conversation or multi-word responses. Single word responses are fairly discernable, which is a lot of what is required in small group phonemic awareness instruction. His behavior is very manageable, but the behavior of the rest of the group tends to draw him in and he emulates their negative behavior.

To summarize, this group is very challenging academically and behaviorally. They require an excessive amount of teacher time just to keep them on task and motivated to learn. Learning results are slow and arduous. They are however, very sweet, likable and eager to please. Praise and rewards are very effective in motivating them to perform and behave acceptably for short periods of time. The researcher has discovered that their greatest reward for accomplishing a required task is to have a story read to them and an even greater reward is to be the one who chooses the book. This motivation goes a long way toward obtaining their attention and performance on a task or skill.

#### *EasyCBM Research Results*

Subjects two and five were given 10 weeks of *Early Reading Intervention (ERI)*, and subjects one, three and four (the most at risk students) received the 15 weeks. At the onset of the intervention, each subject was given the EasyCBM benchmark probe for letter names, letter sounds, phoneme segmentation fluency, word reading and passage reading fluency. For the purpose of this study, only letter sounds (LS) and phoneme segmentation fluency (PSF) were used as baseline data since LS and PSF are the measures that most closely match the skills the students are learning in the ERI program. Table 3 shows the instructional levels of each EasyCBM measure used to determine placement and success. Table 4 depicts the LS and PSF results of each subject from the winter benchmarking assessment just prior to implementing ERI and the spring benchmarking at the conclusion of ERI.

Table 3.

*Easy CBM Guidelines for Indicators of Risk First Grade*

Measure	Fall		Winter		Spring	
	Score	Status	Score	Status	Score	Status
Letter Sounds	25	Benchmark	30	Benchmark	43	Benchmark
	16-24	Strategic	22-29	Strategic	31-42	Strategic
	<16	Intensive	<22	Intensive	<31	Intensive
PSF	35	Benchmark	39	Benchmark	43	Benchmark
	19-34	Strategic	25-38	Strategic	33-42	Strategic
	<10	Intensive	<25	Intensive	<33	Intensive

Table 4.

*Student Scores on Letter Names and Phoneme Segmentation Fluency*

Student	Winter		Spring		Winter		Spring	
	LS	Level	LS	Level	PSF	Level	PSF	Level
Subject 1	4	I	10	I	9	I	40	S
Subject 2	18	I	15	I	64	B	42	B
Subject 3	11	I	30	I	58	B	56	B
Subject 4	26	S	27	I	37	S	33	S
Subject 5	34	S	53	S	62	B	57	B

*Note:* I = Intensive; S = Strategic; B = Benchmark

In the area letter sounds Figure 1 shows each subject improved their scores from the winter to spring benchmark. However, none of the subject increased an instructional level as the researcher indicated earlier in the paper would be desirable to show adequate progress. These results may be due to the heavy emphasis on phonemic awareness and not phonics, which the letter sound probe measures.

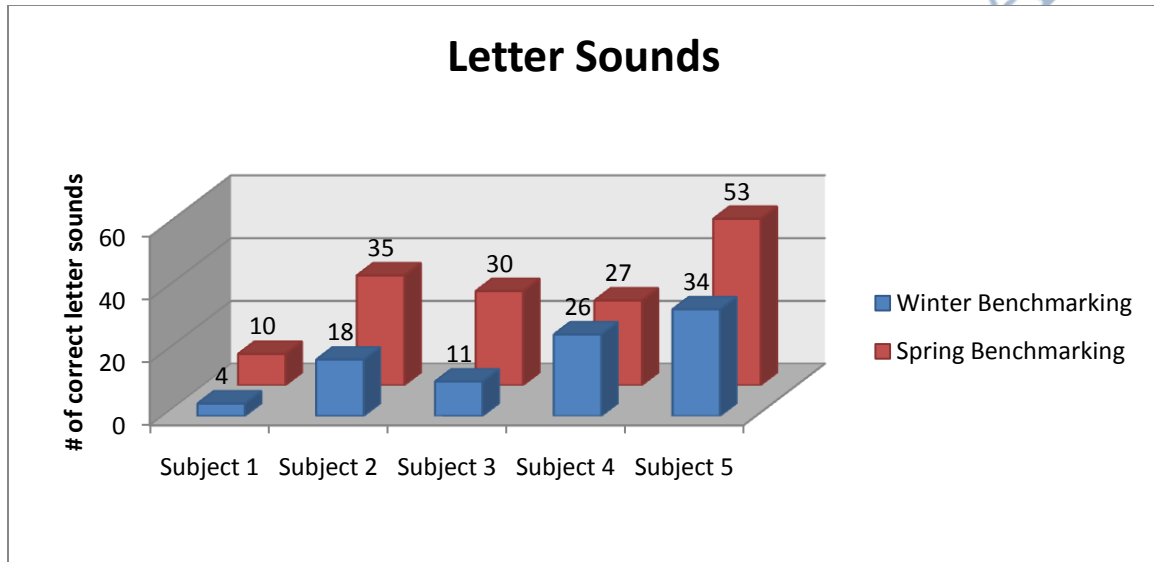


Figure 1. Pre and Post-Test Performance on Letter Sounds

Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 show results of each subject's letter sound performance compared to typical peers. The goal is set at 30 correct letter sounds for the winter benchmarking period and 43 for spring. Subjects one, two and three began and ended in the intensive range. In addition, subjects one, two and three performed well below their peers as indicated by the big gap between the subject's and peer comparison's performances. Subject four was strategic in the winter, but went down an instructional level in the spring. Even though his score increased by one letter sound from winter to spring, the criteria for benchmark level was raised for the end of the year assessment (See Table 1). One can also see the gap between subject 4 and the peer's performance

increased in the spring indicating subject 4 is now farther behind his peers than he was in the winter. Subject five began and ended at benchmark and is actually performing above his peers.

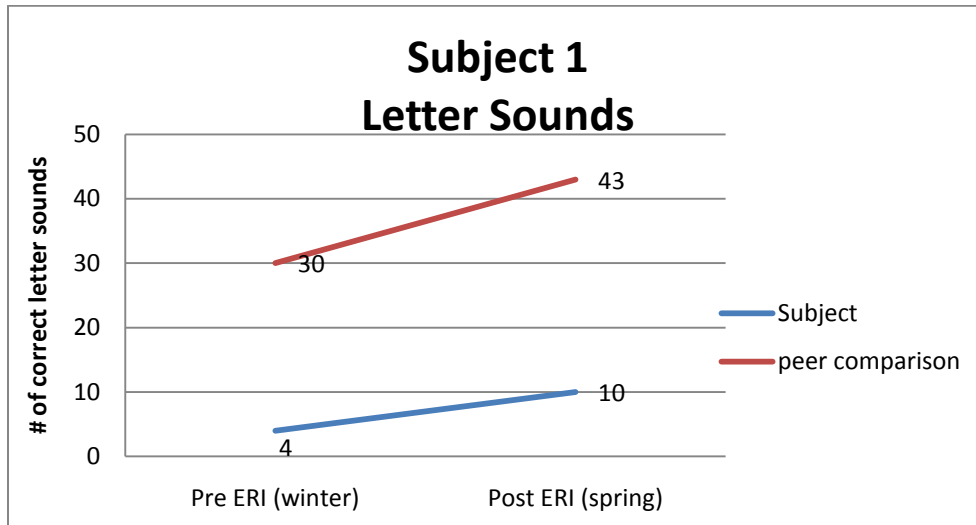


Figure 2. Subject One's Performance on Letter Sounds

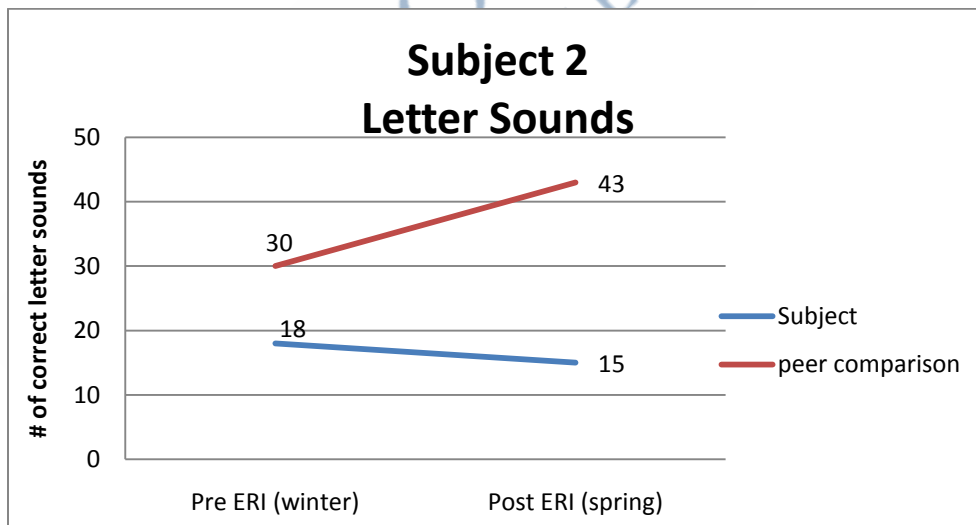


Figure 3. Subject Two's Performance on Letter Sounds

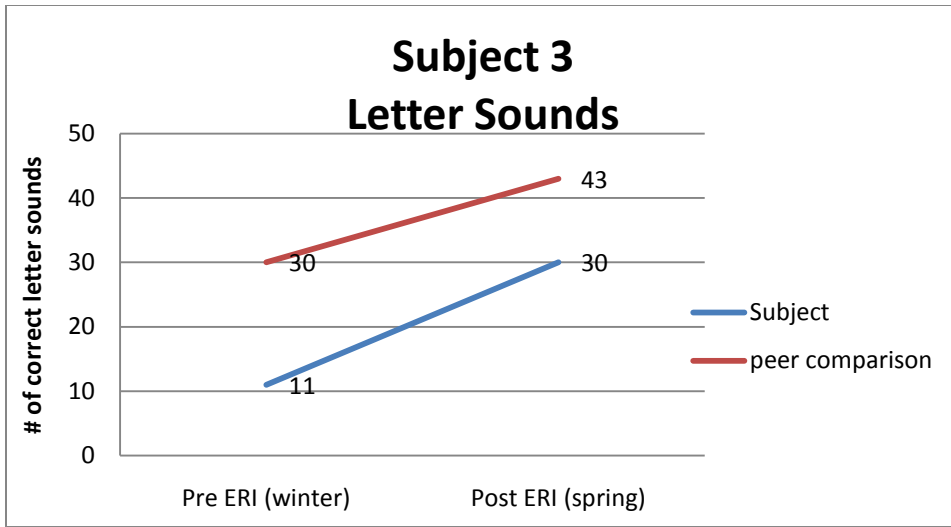


Figure 4. Subject Three's Performance on Letter Sounds

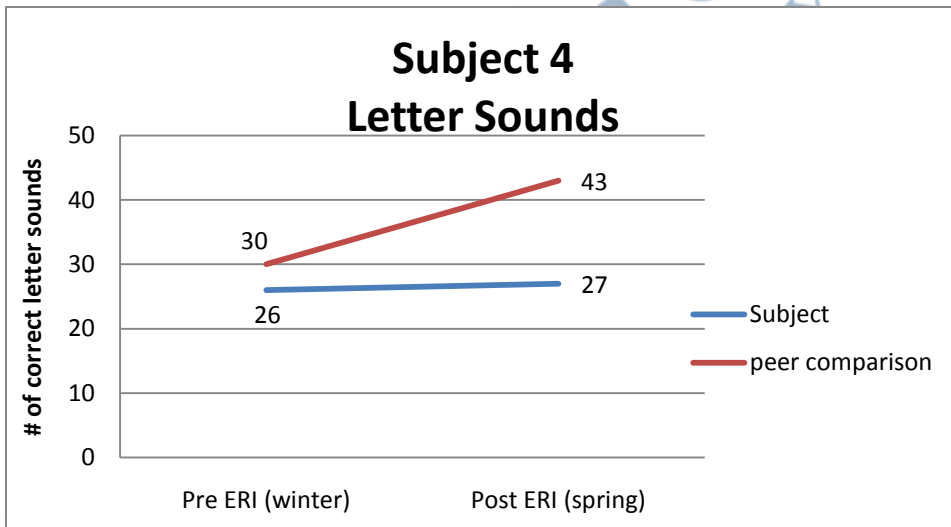


Figure 5. Subject Four's Performance on Letter Sounds

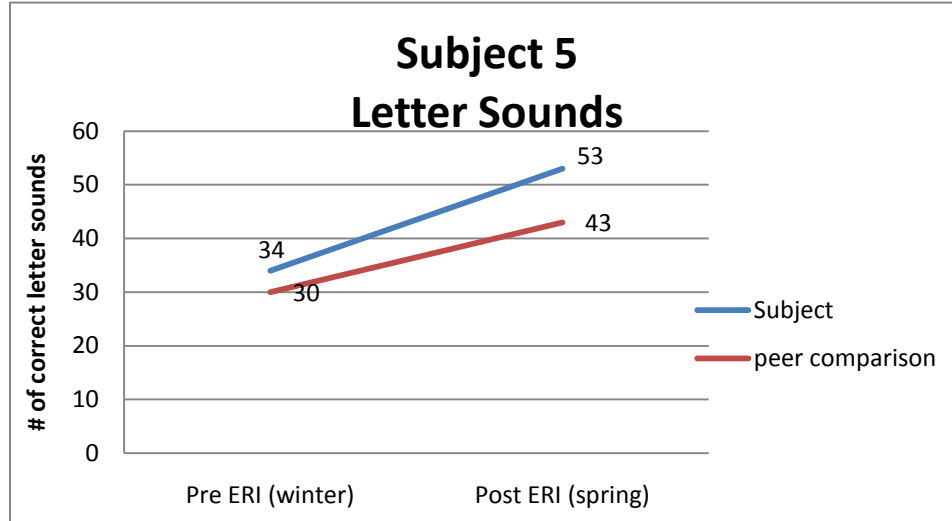
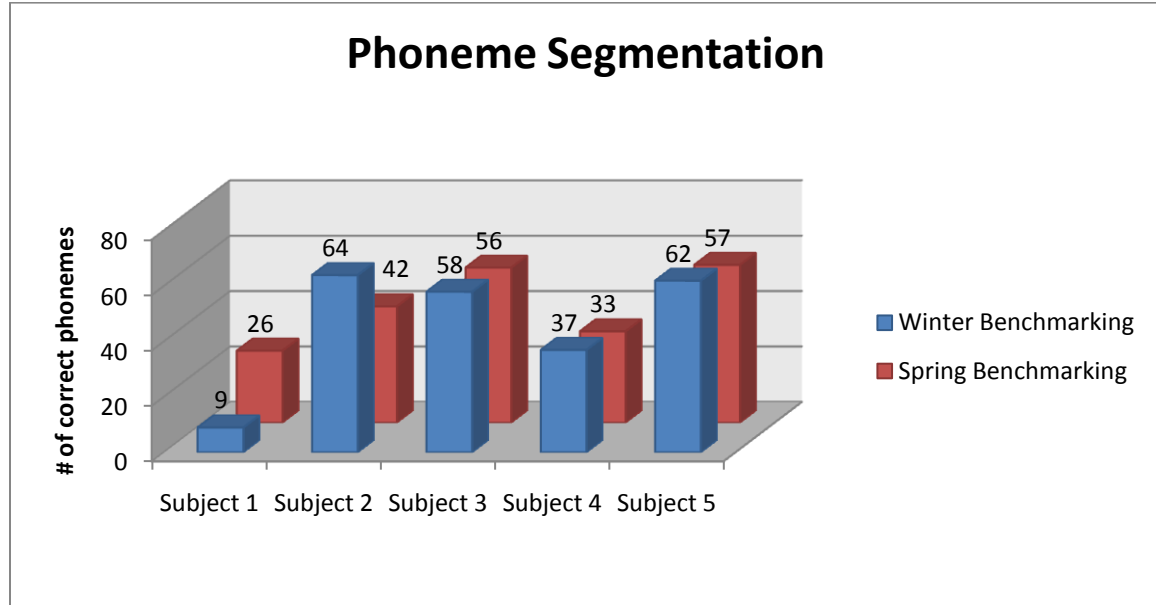


Figure 6. Subject Five's Performance on Letter Sounds

Overall, four out of the five subjects did not increase an instructional level on the letter sounds measure. However, this did not surprise the researcher and the school psychologist because letter sounds is a phonics related skill. Although phonics skills were taught through the ERI program, it was not the main focus. Results suggest the next intervention for these students should fade out instruction on phonemic awareness and add in more intense instruction on phonics skills.

Results of pre and post-test performance on PSF for each subject are shown in Figure 7. The figure indicates phoneme segmentation fluency was already within benchmark range at the winter benchmark for all but one subject—subject one. This is most likely a result of the previous phonemic awareness intervention. However, their overall instructional level based on all five EasyCBM measures was intensive, indicating the need for more targeted, intense instruction in phonics skills and higher levels of phonemic awareness. As a result, another intervention of phonemic awareness was deemed appropriate.



*Figure 7.* Pre and Post-Test Performance on Phoneme Segmentation

Looking more closely at the PSF scores in relation to typical peers, the researcher notices that the data becomes very interesting (See Figures 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12). Typical peers core around 39 correct phonemes per one minute timing for the winter benchmarking and 43 for spring. Three of the five participants, subjects two, three and five, started out in the benchmark range and stayed there, although their scores dropped. Subject one had vertical movement up one instructional level and subject four stayed in the strategic range the entire time. In summary, 4 out of the 5 subjects demonstrated making adequate progress by either moving up an instructional level or remaining at the benchmark level.

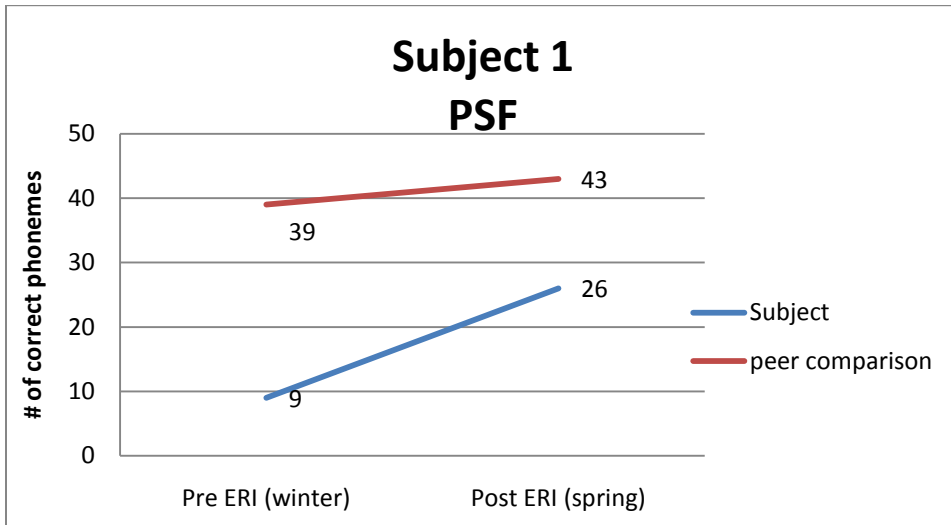


Figure 8. Subject One’s Performance on Phoneme Segmentation Fluency

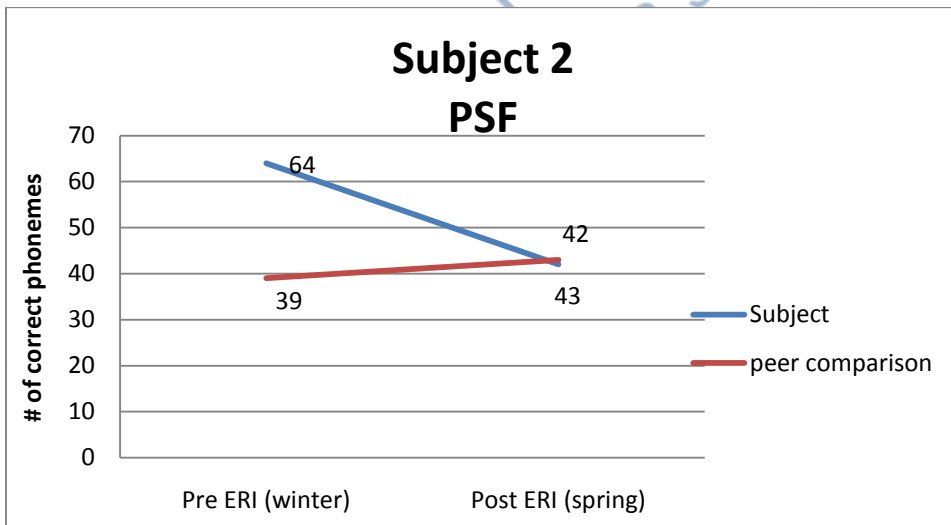


Figure 9. Subject Two’s Performance on Phoneme Segmentation Fluency

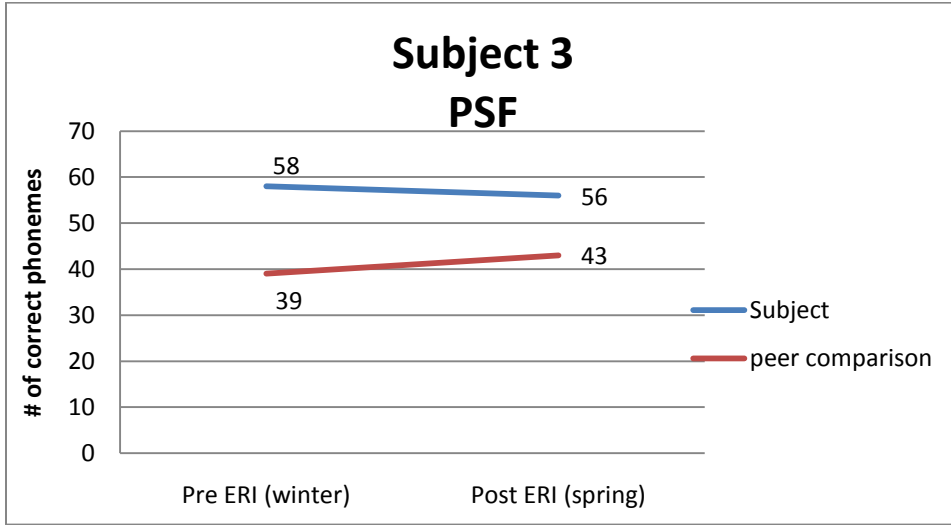


Figure 10. Subject Three's Performance on Phoneme Segmentation Fluency

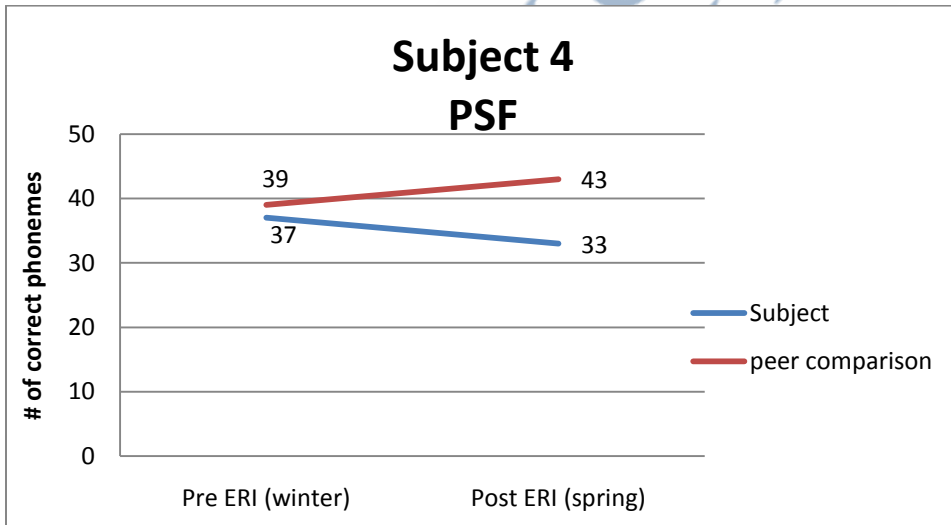


Figure 11. Subject Four's Performance on Phoneme Segmentation Fluency

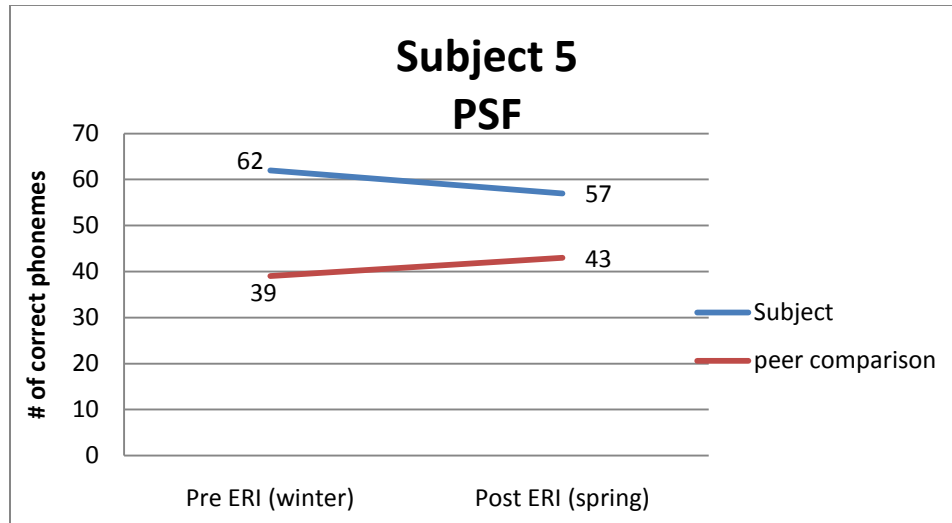


Figure 12. Subject Five's Performance on Phoneme Segmentation Fluency

#### Data Results

While the data piece of this action research doesn't look overwhelmingly positive, it was one of several components the researcher looked at to determine success. The others, mentioned at the conclusion of Chapter 3, were teacher observation and Educational Assistants' feedback. Part of the teacher observation was to see if subjects engaged more with books during independent reading time and to note if any changes in attitude occurred toward reading and in the development of concepts of print. It is from this standpoint that the researcher saw significant growth. All subjects were excited about books and would choose to look at books during free time and independent reading time. They were choosing books at their reading level so they could feel success. One of their rewards was to be able to choose the book the researchers would read aloud to the group at the end of reading time. They all had very positive attitudes about reading. Based on the observations, positive feedback from the Educational Assistants, such as a noticeable difference in group participation of phonemic awareness activities, and the fact that most

participants stayed at the benchmark level on PSF or at least moved up an instructional level, I would deem this research a success.

### *Significance*

This action research study has indicated that students, who are instructed in specific phonological awareness skills, improve their understanding of the individual sound components that make up words and phoneme segmentation. This intervention has also improved students' attitudes toward reading. Therefore, this action research shows that when explicitly taught, students can improve phonological awareness through explicit research-based reading lessons as used in *Early Reading Intervention*.

It is the opinion of the researcher that a phonological awareness program should be taught to all struggling, at-risk of reading failure first grade students at the school site. Doing so will provide a solid foundation in the individual sounds that make up the English language and will eventually increase fluency in connected text. Decoding and fluency are two of the components that make up a successful reader. When reading becomes easier and more natural, more time and energy can be spent on reading comprehension, which is the ultimate goal of reading.

### *Suggestions for further study*

This research provided useful information in relation to the implementation of phonological awareness to struggling at-risk readers to their success and development in understanding the sounds that make up the English language. The researcher would like to see the next course of action be a phonics program implemented to build upon the success of the phonological awareness intervention. Future research should examine the

effects of a research-based phonics program on at-risk reader's performance on letter sounds and oral reading fluency.

These readers will most likely continue to struggle throughout their schooling, so it is imperative that every course of action and intervention be afforded to them. As stated earlier, reading is the gateway to success in our culture. The educational system must do everything it can to help these young readers achieve success, one small step or sound at a time.



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