

**Fluency Instruction that Makes a Difference**

**By**

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**B.A., University of Wyoming, 2009**

**Plan B Research 5090**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Masters in Arts in Curriculum and Instruction  
with a focus on Literacy  
University of Wyoming, 2017

**University of Wyoming**

**Summer 2017**

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## Fluency Instruction that Makes a Difference

### Abstract

Successful readers must be able to fluently decode words they are reading independently and with automaticity. Once they can decode words fluently, they are able to comprehend what they are reading more easily. This action research study describes how reformatting traditional fluency instruction paired with additional student practice time increases the reading ability of first grade students.

The highlighted research was conducted in a first grade classroom with six and seven year old students. Each student was given explicit fluency instruction within a small group setting in addition to whole group fluency instruction, at their specific reading level, with independent fluency practice. Fluency strategies were taught during whole group times, and reinforced in small groups. In addition, each student was given fluency passages or Readers' Theater scripts at their individual reading level to practice at home nightly. This action research project shares the benefits of specific, focused fluency instruction within a small group setting and how fluency instruction in first grade can help to close the reading achievement gap.

Five reading assessments were used to determine the growth of each student before and after the instructional changes in fluency were put in place. The results show how the small group that participated in the reformatted fluency instruction, increased in words per minute, number of mastered sight words, increased comprehension, and overall reading level at twice the rate as that of students not in the group in the same class.

*Keywords:* fluency, small group instruction

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## Chapter 1

### Fluency at the Forefront: Instructional Changes That Make a Difference

#### Introduction

An often-discussed quandary in education is the 4th grade slump, a noticeable shift in students' reading achievement scores that occur beginning in 4th grade and results in an ever-widening gap between students who are high performing and those who are not. It is analogous to the concept of the rich become richer and the poor become poorer; the gap widens for students as they progress into higher grade levels as the higher performing students continue achieving at a high level, while the under-achieving students rarely reach the level of proficiency they need to be successful. One suggestion to help solve this problem has been to focus resources and interventions during Kindergarten through third grade, in order to close the reading achievement gap as much as possible in the first three years of schooling (Musti-Rao & Cartledge, 2007). Many educators have suggested "flooding," in other words, pouring as many resources, certified professionals, and interventions as possible to support primary grades. This is in an effort to close the gap before fourth grade, so the gap does not grow as the students' progress through school. Although this action research project does not look at what is most effective in closing the achievement gap in later years, these ideas helped to formulate the reasons behind this action research project, and sparked the desire to look at ways of closing the reading achievement gap as much as possible within my first grade classroom. The guiding question for this research project was: Will reformatting fluency instruction be a plausible intervention for closing the widening reading achievement gap in these early years?

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Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin (1990) noted that 4th grade is a critical transition period, when students move from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." The slump, they suggested, might be related to students struggling to shift from reading relatively easy, familiar words and passages to using their reading skills to acquire new knowledge from increasingly difficult words and texts. For some students, encountering these more difficult texts may unearth a previously undetected lack of fluency and automaticity from earlier years in their education (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990).

This educational phenomenon of the "4th grade slump" and research surrounding the benefits of fluency provoked my inquiry in this research project. This report presents an eight-week action research project during which I examined the use of targeted reading fluency instruction within a small group, with additional independent practice, and leveled fluency passages for practice at home, and documents the results of the students' progress toward closing the reading achievement gap.

### **Question and Purpose**

The focus of this study was based on the question: To what extent does targeted fluency instruction within small groups of similar reading skills and abilities, additional opportunities for independent practice in class, and leveled fluency passages for practice at home impact reading achievement scores? Will this reformatted fluency instruction bring low performing students to grade-level and close the achievement gap within my first grade classroom?

Currently, many studies demonstrate the successes of individuals taught in a whole group setting within the school day, but I found a lack of research indicating the effects of small group fluency instruction and practice outside the class. This action

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research project addresses the limitations of previous cases that appeal to whole group instruction directed by the teacher and a lack of texts at home at the child's level to practice outside of school. The goal of my research is to help close the reading achievement gap in my classroom by using a lower teacher-to-student ratio (small group instruction) in combination with fluency practice at the student's reading level at home.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

Instructional fluency strategies play an integral part in children's reading development in elementary school. The National Reading Panel identified fluency as a key ingredient in successful reading instruction (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Readers must use both decoding and comprehension skills when reading. The National Reading Panel suggested fluency is crucial in allowing readers to comprehend text instead of being caught up in the effort to decode the text effectively. In order to comprehend what is being read, one must be an effective decoder so that less time is spent trying to determine the word, than on the meaning behind the word so that the text makes sense.

Fluency is often mistaken as a synonymous term with "reading fast." This is a misconception. Fluency is much more than "who's the first one done." Framing fluency as "fast reading" has led to compartmentalization of the skill. For instance, students often believe if they cannot read fast, they cannot read as well as their peers. In contrast to this perspective, Timothy Rasinski's research has shown that fluency has multiple components and elements. For example, in the book *Moving Beyond Accuracy, Automaticity, and Prosody*, Rasinski outlined three key elements of fluency. The three elements are accuracy of word decoding, automaticity in recognizing words, and appropriate use of prosody (Rasinski, 2006). Word decoding is the ability to apply your knowledge of letter-sound relationships, including knowledge of letter patterns, to correctly pronounce written words (Rasinski, 2006). Automaticity refers to the ability to do things without occupying the mind with the low-level details that are required; this is



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usually the result of learning, repetition, and practice; such as high frequency words or sight words (Rasinski, 2006). These are words that children memorize over time with practice so they are not spending time decoding them and losing meaning as they read. The third piece Rasinski identified was appropriate use of prosody, which is a pattern of rhythm and sound. You might think of this as expression and appropriate phrasing for the text that is being read. A child who does not have prosody will sound like a robot or choppy when reading a text aloud. Targeted fluency instruction includes a focus on these key components that Rasinski highlighted, rather than how quickly you can read.

Research from the National Reading Panel (2000) determined that fluency instruction should occur daily for 15 to 30 minutes. Reutzel (2006) further suggests that fluency instruction can be implemented a number of ways and also aligns with the ‘gradual release model’ of reading instruction (Reutzel, 2006, p. 72). Other research has found that 12 to 15 minutes of integrating fluency instruction is effective for reading intervention within a classroom (Begeny & Ross, 2014). Fluency instruction is found most effective when done consistently and in shorter time periods, ranging from 12-30 minutes. Fluency instruction should not be long or cumbersome for the student.

Research has been clear on the amount of time in class that needs to be spent on fluency instruction, and also supports independent reading time outside of the classroom. Many public schools require 20 minutes a night for independent reading. This time usually lacks focus and is meant to foster a love for reading. Research is not definitive about the amount of time at home that should be focused on fluency in addition to this reading time. The question raised then is how much time should be spent out of class

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with a fluency focus during homework? This additional time should be dedicated to using fluency strategies with appropriately leveled passages. Valle's research about homework in primary grades revealed that the effectiveness of homework depended on the level of intrinsic motivation and positive attitude towards homework (Valle, 2015). Research shows that there are four major themes related to teachers' homework practice: the quantity, the type, the source of it, and differentiation of homework (Bedford, 2014). These must be considered when assigning homework of any kind, including fluency work, to maximize student success at home. The amount of time spent at home on any homework including fluency is unclear, but the factors for educators to consider are the same. This suggests that the amount of homework should be age appropriate, includes tasks that can be done independently, and be differentiated at an appropriate reading level for the student (Valle, 2015).

Other research focuses less on the time spent practicing both at home and in the classroom, and more on the instructional strategies. The effectiveness of fluency instruction when implemented correctly can have long lasting impact. A study by Mohr, Rasinski, & Young (2014), showed that struggling readers who received fluency instruction showed an increase in their reading expression, reading rate, and reading score overall. Mohr et al (2014) also found that these struggling readers made significant gains in expression and volume, smoothness, phrasing, and pace while reading aloud after twenty days of fluency instruction. Fluency instructional strategies over time produce reading growth for struggling readers.

A study conducted by Griffith and Rasinski (2004) revealed that teachers could decrease the learning gap with a 'focus on fluency' rather than a program approach to

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fluency (p. 2). Effective methods of fluency instruction and results of these methods were shared through Lorraine Griffith's experience in her classroom using a case study methodology. After implementing the strategies or teaching tools of Readers' Theater, partner reading, and timed reads, struggling readers in her classroom had increased their reading levels beyond grade level (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004). These results indicate growth of at-risk students who were at fourth grade or above a fifth-grade reading level, which was 71% higher than that of a traditional reading program (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004). These data show that you do not have to buy the current reading program to effectively support students in reading growth. You can achieve reading progress by implementing solid fluency instruction. Data from another case study of remedial and special education students indicated that repeated reading alone improved the reading fluency and comprehension of nondisabled students and learning disabled students alike (Therrien, 2004). Thus, the notion that fluency increases reading achievement can be traced from the primary grades all the way to secondary students (O'Shea, McQuiston & McCollin, 2009).

The research from both Rasinski and Therrien suggests that fluency practice combined with instruction is effective in raising overall reading ability in both reading rate and comprehension when it is implemented for short durations of time, consistently. Whole group fluency instruction was effective as well as focused strategies in improving reading achievement. Fluency work improved other areas of reading like comprehension and decoding. Initially there was not much research on the benefits of utilizing small teacher-led groups for fluency instruction or if additional fluency practice outside of the classroom (i.e. homework) made a difference in student reading success.

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In digging further, there was support for both, but the school the study took place in did not use these practices. This challenged me to reformat the fluency instructional practices within my classroom and school. The previous research piqued my interest in determining to what extent my students' reading achievement would improve through adjustments to my instructional practice to include small group, individualized fluency instruction, and independent practice.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Methods**

Action research in education is designed to diagnose problems or weaknesses through a variety of evaluative, investigative, and analytical research methods (O'Brien, 2001). Action research is “learning by doing” and helps educators develop practical solutions to address the weakness quickly and efficiently (O'Brien, 2001). Action research projects begin with an emergent design and through the process may have pieces of the design that need to be altered or refined to best support students.

#### **Setting**

The school in which the study took place is a 4-3 school, meaning there are four classrooms for each grade K-3, and three classrooms each of fourth and fifth grades. It is not a Title 1 school and the majority of students come from middle- to highly-affluent families. The district uses a school of choice policy and therefore, this school is comprised of a variety of neighborhood students as well as a mix of students from around town. There are approximately 430 students that attend the school. The percentage of English language learners is very low; approximately 8 to 10 students total. There are 82 students that get free lunch and 38 with reduced lunch. Of the 430 students, 33 are identified as special education in some facet and are receiving services for such (7.7% of the population). Thirteen of those 33 are K-2 students. There are 20 academic tier three students, 9 of which are students in K-2. There are 9 students receiving Occupational Therapy. Of the nine in occupational services, 7 are in grades K-2.

The school uses a Literacy First Framework, which is supported by the district and utilizes teacher-created assessments. This is a data-driven, instructional framework

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based on the five essential components for reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

The school uses a Response To Intervention model (RTI), which includes tiered instruction to best meet student needs. In this approach, there are four tiers of instruction to support students in their learning. Tier 1 is within the regular classroom with a highly qualified teacher, using research-based instruction, and screeners given periodically to identify students that may be struggling. Tier 2 is put in place for a student that is not meeting adequate progress in core curriculum instruction and needs additional support that is documented by the classroom teacher. Tier three involves more intense instruction that is individualized to target the student need for remediation and possible prevention of more severe problems. This tier usually involves the school tutor in the intervention to check progress and support the student's learning. The last is Tier 4, which is a Special Education referral for testing after many documented interventions are not able to support or help the student's progress. At Tier 4, the Special Educator will assist the student within the classroom instead of taking them out into another room, the school calls this inclusion.

The study took place in a first grade classroom at the school with 18 students. The first grade had 72 students collectively and four teachers, one in each classroom. There was 100% inclusion of special education students. During service times, the special education teacher or an aide assisted in the classroom and on occasion team-taught with the primary teacher. The featured classroom for this study only had one certified teacher for the fluency instruction.

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The classrooms are in close proximity and students in first grade are often shared between the four certified teachers to differentiate instruction in math and reading. All students in my first grade classroom participated in normal Tier 1 classroom activities. One of those activities is breaking into small groups each day for reading or skill group instruction. All first grade classrooms utilize a similar structure, which allows teachers to see each child every day in a small group and practice the skill independently in a literacy center. Each teacher runs two 25-minute guided reading groups at this time.

### **Participants**

The participants included my first grade classroom and myself, the classroom teacher. I assessed the progress of students' reading achievement after reformatting traditional fluency instruction. The groups consist of four to six students working on the same reading skill and who were at the same independent reading level according to the Rigby reading assessment implemented approximately every two weeks.

All students were ability grouped. I kept a special focus on a group of students that were below grade level in reading due to my interest in closing the reading achievement gap, and bringing these students up to grade level reading expectations. There was no exclusion from the participant pool.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

I began by gathering pre-assessment data on the students' reading achievement scores in the areas of comprehension, fluency growth as measured by AIMSweb words correct per minute, mastered sight words, and Rigby reading levels. I used this assessment information to organize homogenous student groups of four to five students, based on reading level and skill needs. I assessed sight words mastered and fluency

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passages weekly, although I used the whole battery of tests to gather post-assessment data at the end of each instructional cycle. The data reflect two instructional cycles: the first was after six weeks of small group instruction, and the second added the independent fluency passages (See Appendix 1), that were practiced at home and school for eight weeks in addition to whole group and small group instruction.

My reformatted reading practices included explicit whole group fluency instruction each day, targeted small group fluency instruction four to five times a week for both instructional cycles, and leveled independent passages that were practiced both in school and at home over the course of the week throughout the second cycle.

Since whole group fluency instruction was already a part of my classroom routine, the first instructional practice I changed in the first cycle incorporated fluency instruction in each small group for twenty-five minutes a day, four to five times each week. I would introduce the fluency strategy and skill during whole group instruction, and then reinforce and practice the strategy or skill within small group instruction. Some of the strategies I incorporated in whole groups were to discuss vocabulary, decode tricky words, and practice reading together chorally on a grade level text. The students would move into small groups to practice fluency strategies using passages that were at the instructional level of the students in each group.

The second instructional cycle was devoted to the continuation of small group fluency instruction with the addition of leveled passages that included the use of books, fluency passages, and Readers' Theater scripts at the individual reading level of the students. The books provided were from the school's guided reading library that has been leveled using Rigby Reading levels. Leveled fluency passages were obtained from



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the online reading resource, Reading A-Z (See Appendix 1), which included fiction and non-fiction text. Readers' Theater scripts came from various resources, mainly Linda Hoyt's *Interactive Read Aloud* text. I found using a variety of texts such as these, exposed students to a wide collection of text and topics, which sparked new interests as well as appreciation and engagement in unlikely text formats. Students were assigned their individual passage on Monday and were expected to practice in class and at home throughout the week. Parents were informed of this action research project and agreed to support their child in practicing the passage nightly for 10 to 15 minutes, and returning it on Friday of each week (See Appendix 2).

In the second instructional cycle included the use of classroom I-Pads for recording purposes. Students were able to use I-Pads to record them read a passage, listen to it, and re-record after making corrections to their expression, volume, speed, etc. This was used in small groups and with partners during centers. Students could use a peer coach to help them identify what fluent reading sounded like and where they could improve.

Every other Friday was used for assessment purposes, which is normal to the first grade reading groups routine schedule. The time was also used to celebrate the group bringing back fluency passages they had worked on throughout the week at home. Within the literacy curriculum, students were also able to practice repeated readings during appropriate independent reading times throughout the week in class.

### **Assessments**

Student Rigby reading level, sight word mastery, comprehension questions, and words correct per minute on AIMSweb Oral Reading Fluency passages were used to

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determine if students were making growth with the newly implemented fluency instruction. The assessment data gathered from the aforementioned assessments, were used to determine if my students were reaching grade level expectations due to the changes in fluency instructional practices. First grade students were assessed every two weeks on Rigby reading level. Fluency passages and Literacy First High Frequency Sight Words were assessed weekly and used as a formative assessment.

**Oral reading fluency (ORF).** The AIMSweb ORF is a norm referenced assessment tool that measures words read correct per minute. AIMS Web fluency was recorder by conducting Oral Reading Fluency passage assessments weekly. This is done for all students and not in addition to our current assessment time. I assessed one student at a time as they read a grade level appropriate passage for one minute. I recorded how many words the student read in that minute. The Oral Reading Fluency shares the number of words per minute the student can read fluently as well as a rubric using a 1-4 scale in the areas of expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pace. Students receive a passing score if they have a 3 or 4 on each area of fluency in addition to their total number of correct words read per minute. Fluency passages and Readers' Theater scripts were assigned to the child each Monday after assessing their current level and returned on the Friday of that week. Upon return, they would read the fluency passage aloud for peers in celebration of their hard work and assessed on the same 1-4 scale and number of words correct read per minute.

Oral Reading Fluency grade level text in the fall, should have students score between 3-4 on the rubric for expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pace as norm referenced by Literacy First. The number of words read per minute accurately read

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aloud must be in the 50-74th percentile range to be considered on grade level. Higher than 74% is above grade level and 49 percent or below is below grade level. Our school goal is for students to read seven words per minute in the first quarter, fourteen in the second quarter, twenty-three by third quarter, and fifty by fourth quarter. I looked at growth from the start of my research in each instructional cycle and at the end. I also looked at the data of students in my groups compared to other students not receiving the reformatted fluency instruction.

**Rigby benchmark assessment.** Rigby is used to identify a child's reading level, measured through leveled fiction and nonfiction texts that support students with independent authentic reading. While reading the text, students have to maintain fluency by reading the words in the text accurately. After reading the leveled text, students are required to answer comprehension questions pertaining to the story.

The data from the Rigby assessment helped determine the child's reading ability as it includes a scale for both fluent reading and comprehension of the text that is read. I assessed Rigby reading levels every two weeks. The expected reading level for the school (based on district reading goals to be considered on grade level) is to read in the range between levels 6 and 10 in the first quarter, between levels 10 to 15 in the second quarter, levels 15 to 20 in third quarter, and to be at a level 20 or higher by fourth quarter.

**Literacy first comprehension assessment.** The third data point was a comprehension assessment from the Literacy First Framework the school uses. This assessment had the teacher read a story aloud and after, ask the student a series of comprehension questions on a 0-3 scale. If prompting is needed, the student receives a

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lower score. Students must be able to answer 90% of the generic comprehension questions correctly to pass this assessment.

The Literacy First comprehension assessment was also done twice as it was regularly scheduled, not in addition to routine assessments. This assessment is where the teacher reads a story to the child and ask the student different questions about the story. There are story element questions with a five detail, retell component for fiction stories and a text feature assessment for nonfiction text. I used the fiction text considering the time of year and instruction. To analyze the comprehension assessment students must earn a score based on the sufficiency and accuracy of their oral answer. The scale is from 0-3. Students must earn a certain amount as a total score in each section of the assessment in order to pass. The total needed depends on the particular section.

**Literacy First high-frequency words.** High-frequency words are the most commonly used words in printed text (i.e. and, the, what, a, etc.). Many of these words are phonetically irregular or abstract so students must memorize them to read quickly and fluently.

Sight word checks, where the students reads a list of ten high frequency words with automaticity and must have at least 9 of 10 mastered, occurred every week. Sight words or high-frequency words, are determined by Literacy First for this assessment. Each week, a list of ten words goes home for the student to practice. Sight words are explicitly taught during the course of the year and are reviewed when needed. As they are introduced, sight words go on the classroom wall as a reference. Students are to have mastered fifty sight words by quarter one of first grade,

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100 by semester, 150 by third quarter, and 200 by the end of the year. There are 500 total sight words that must be mastered by second grade. These tests were used as a pre-assessment and at the end of each instructional cycle.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected in this action research were referenced to first grade school expectations in the current quarter. All four assessments described below were used to compare a pre- and post- score in the study to see how students responded to newly formatted fluency instruction.

I kept track of the class' progress on a digital spreadsheet for myself, on Literacy First data tracker for district and school harvested data, and on Mastery Connect, which allows parents and teachers access to individual student progress toward grade level standards. The four first grade teachers looked at pre-assessment data and we divided students into like skill and ability groups. I took the students that were on the “bubble”, in other words the mid-to-low group of students. These students stayed in my group throughout the entire study. I focused on five students in one of my groups because I was their homeroom teacher and had access to their academic scores, had developed good relationships with them and their parents, and could keep them in my group throughout the duration of the research.

Table 1 shows a class roster of those students not meeting the different benchmark expectations throughout the year according to the quarter in percentages. It includes a district-wide growth assessment score at the bottom of the table called the Northwest Evaluation Association or NWEA. A school goal is for students to score at 60% or higher in the reading portion of the test. The school year started with roughly

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half of my class below grade level according to reading achievement benchmarks. By quarter two, the number of students that were below grade level in reading had significantly decreased. This was at the end of the first instructional cycle. By the end of the year, my class data shows that approximately 11% (two students) were not meeting or exceeding reading expectations. All of the students in my focus, sample group were below grade-level in the first quarter. By the end of the year, the sample group was on or beyond grade level expectations in all reading achievement assessments.

**Table 1: Class Data- Not Meeting Quarterly Reading Benchmarks**

Assessment	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4
ORF	44%	17%	17%	11% (2/18 students)
Rigby	33%	16%	11%	11% (2/18 students)
Comprehension	56%	44%	28%	17% (3/18 students)
Sight Words	50%	28%	28%	.06% (1/18 students)
NWEA	50%	NA	33%	11% (2 students)

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

The following tables reflect the findings of data collected from five students that were below grade-level at the beginning of the year in phonics skills. Although these students were below expectations in phonics skills, each was on or near grade-level expectations on the assessments by the end of the first quarter. These students were targeted as students that needed continual and consistent support in order to maintain grade level expectations. The tables show their pre-assessment data and their progress throughout the instruction cycles.

#### **Student Achievement Data**

**First instructional cycle pre-assessment data.** Table 2 shows a sample of student pre-assessment performance, before the first instructional cycle. Scores deemed ‘on grade level’ for each of their assessments at the time they were given by the researcher are as follows: the number of words read in one minute, the timed fluency assessment must be within the 50-75% range to be on grade level. This is from a first grade norm-referenced passage in the first quarter and to be considered on grade level, students must score 7-19 words per minute (WPM). Sight words expected to be on grade level was 50 sight words. Comprehension should have been at least 4 out of 5 questions answered correctly to be on grade level. Rigby reading level is an independent reading level and students are considered on grade level if they fall between levels **6-10**. Again, Table 2 shows the assessment results of the students before the small group instruction took place.

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**Table 2: Cycle 1 Pre-Assessment Data**

Student	Literacy First Fluency WPM	Literacy First Sight Words	Literacy First Comprehension	Rigby Reading Level
Student 1	49 WPM-91%	52 sight words	4/5	Level 9
Student 2	35 WPM -86%	33 sight words	3/5	Level 9
Student 3	7 WPM -50%	32 sight words	2/5	Level 9
Student 4	25 WPM -82%	55 sight words	3/5	Level 9
Student 5	40 WPM- 89%	54 sight words	4/5	Level 10

Through pre-assessment data, I can conclude that all five students were below or just meeting expectations in these four assessments. All students were on or above grade level in words read per minute. Students 1, 4, and 5 were at grade level according to the results of sight words. Only students 1 and 5 were on grade level for correctly answered comprehension questions on the Literacy First assessment. All students were meeting Rigby reading level expectations. I could conclude that students needed most work in the area of comprehension. As these data were harvested, the question came up, ‘Can explicit fluency instruction increase comprehension?’ Also, ‘what is the relationship between fluency and comprehension? Does one come before the other? How do they work together? How can I help close the gap by a simple lesson structure change and including additional fluency instruction?’

**First instructional cycle post assessment data.** Table 3 shares post-assessment data results from the first instructional cycle. The passages were taught along with a



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guided reading lesson with a book at the group's instructional reading level. Books were sent home every few days so they could be read and returned. Students were allowed to use the passages during independent reading time for additional practice. The following results are after this teaching and practice was implemented on a daily basis.

**Table 3: Cycle 1 Post-Assessment Data**

Student	Literacy First Fluency WPM	Literacy First Sight Words	Literacy First Comprehension	Rigby Reading Level
Student 1	59 WPM-94%	87 sight words	5/5	Level 12
Student 2	46 WPM -91%	60 sight words	5/5	Level 11
Student 3	34 WPM -87%	43 sight words	4/5	Level 11
Student 4	51 WPM -92%	70 sight words	5/5	Level 11
Student 5	57 WPM- 94%	81 sight words	5/5	Level 13

The researcher concluded several findings from the post-assessment data. One finding was that every student grew according to the assessments used in the areas of reading fluency, sight words, comprehension, and independent reading level. All students are now above grade level except student 3 in the area of sight words only. The next step after analyzing the data was to implement the second cycle of instruction. The instruction in small groups remained the same, however, there was an added component of independent practice through Readers' Theater and fluency passages. Students could move up in level of fluency or script, or down depending on the amount of work they did at home. The next two tables display this across the later part of the year.

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**Second instructional cycle pre-assessment data.** Table 4 shows pre-assessment data on the four assessments before the second instructional cycle. Scores to be ‘on grade level’ for each of their assessments at the time they were given by the researcher are as follows: The number of words read in a one minute timed fluency assessment must be within the 75-50% range to be on grade level. This is from a first grade passage in the fourth quarter of at least 50 WPM. Sight words expected to have mastered to be on grade level was 200 sight words. Comprehension should have been 4 out of 5 to be on grade level. Rigby reading level is an independent reading level and students are considered on grade level if they reached a level 20 or higher. Again, Table 4 shows the results of the students before the small group instruction in addition to at home practice and giving plenty of appropriate level texts to use took place with the same student sample.

**Table 4: Cycle 2 Pre-Assessment Data**

Student	Literacy First Fluency WPM	Literacy First Sight Words	Literacy First Comprehension	Rigby Reading Level
Student 1	56 WPM	200 sight words	4/5	Level 20
Student 2	72 WPM	210 sight words	4/5	Level 20
Student 3	58 WPM	200 sight words	4/5	Level 18
Student 4	97 WPM	200 sight words	4/5	Level 20
Student 5	91 WPM on a 2 <sup>nd</sup> grade passage	200 sight words	5/5	Level 23

All five students were at or above expectations in four assessments. All students were above grade level in having 50 words read per minute. Students 1, 3, 4, and 5 were

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at grade level according to the results of sight words and student 2 was beyond by a list of ten words. All students were on grade level for correctly answered comprehension questions on the Literacy First assessment, but student 5 was the only one that managed to get all five correct. All students but one were meeting Rigby reading level expectations. I concluded that students needed most work in the area of comprehension again in this later data. In contrast to the Table 1 data, none of these same students were recognized as “bubble students” or at-risk because they are all on grade level in these areas at the time of this assessment.

As I harvested the data this time, I wondered if additional practice paired with small group instruction would make the boost for them to grow beyond “at grade-level expectations”. I wondered this, because as they move onto second grade, I feared that they may not be able to maintain their reading gains and might struggle to start second grade as they did at the beginning of first grade. As I saw the achievement gap close for these students, my next quest was to see if what I was implementing would help each student reach scores measuring beyond grade level so that they could be better prepared moving to the next grade.

**Second instructional cycle post-assessment data.** Table 5 shares post-assessment data results at the end of the eight-week instructional cycle. Explicit fluency instruction was given to students using passages ranging from Readers’ Theater scripts to Reading A-Z (See Appendix 2), taught with a guided reading lesson and a book at the group’s instructional level. After each passage was taught, students practiced the passage at home nightly. This was explained to families through a parent letter and in conferences (See Appendix 1). Books were sent home every few days so they could be

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read and returned. The fluency passages came back at the end of the week on Friday where the children enjoyed “performing” for their classmates, reading their passages out loud. Students were also allowed to use the passages during independent reading time for additional practice in class. The following results are after this teaching and home practice was implemented on a daily basis.

**Table 5: Post Assessment Data Quarter 4**

Student	Literacy First Fluency WPM	Literacy First Sight Words	Literacy First Comprehension	Rigby Reading Level
Student 1	90 WPM	500 sight words	5/5	Level 26
Student 2	88 WPM	300 sight words	5/5	Level 26
Student 3	69 WPM	210 sight words	4/5	Level 20
Student 4	98 WPM	300 sight words	5/5	Level 26
Student 5	114 WPM on a 2 <sup>nd</sup> grade passage	390 sight words	5/5	Level 27

The researcher concluded several findings from the post-assessment data. One finding was that every student grew in each of the areas of reading fluency, sight words, comprehension, and independent reading level with the use of targeted fluency instruction. I created an additional table, Table 6, to chart each student’s increase or progress over the course of the two cycles of fluency instructions.

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**Table 6: Progress From Beginning to End of Year**

Student	Literacy First Fluency WPM	Literacy First Sight Words	Literacy First Comprehension	Rigby Reading Level
Student 1	Increase of 41 WPM	Increase of 475 sight words	Increased 1 section to have perfect score	Increased 17 reading levels to move beyond grade level
Student 2	Increase of 53 WPM	Increase of 267 sight words	Increased 2 sections to have perfect score	Increased 17 reading levels to move beyond grade level
Student 3	Increase of 62 WPM	Increase of 178 sight words	Increased 2 section to have 4/5 score to be on grade level	Increased 11 reading levels to be on grade level
Student 4	Increase of 73 WPM	Increase of 245 sight words	Increased 2 sections to have perfect score	Increased 17 reading levels to move beyond grade level
Student 5	Increase of 74 WPM	Increase of 336 sight words	Increased 1 section to have perfect score	Increased 17 reading levels to move beyond grade level

As an educator, I can conclude that the student participants benefited from the lesson structure reformation to small group and explicit fluency teaching along with additional practice time with fluency at their reading level at home.

To further support this conclusion, Table 7 shares results from a standardized M.A.P. Test called N.W.E.A. The scores shared are Rasch Units or RIT's that estimate the student's instructional level and the progress of growth in school. RIT scores in reading typically show that first grade students are surpassing goals with approximately a

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twenty-point growth for the year from Spring to Spring. This is very difficult for students to make this stretched goal of going beyond average growth.

**Table 7: Spring-To-Spring Reading NWEA Class Results**

Student	Spring of Kindergarten RIT Score	Spring of First Grade RIT Score	RIT Point Growth Spring to Spring
Student 1	166	185	19 point growth
Student 2	169	192	23 point growth
Student 3	151	174	23 point growth
Student 4	160	181	21 point growth
Student 5	153	186	33 point growth
Student 6	158	177	19 point growth
Student 7	179	200	21 point growth
Student 8	161	185	24 point growth
Student 9	169	209	40 point growth
Student 10	172	206	34 point growth
Student 11	144	160	16 point growth
Student 12	163	188	25 point growth
Student 13	166	196	30 point growth
Student 14	154	179	25 point growth
Student 15	164	186	22 point growth
Student 16	174	199	25 point growth
Student 17	184	198	14 point growth
Student 18	156	185	29 point growth

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Table 7 shows an average growth of twenty-seven RIT points in the year as a class. The stretch goal for first graders is around twenty points in one year. This indicates that as a class, they performed better on standardized reading tests than expected.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

In this study, I set out to examine how reformatting my fluency instruction to include whole-group and small-group instructional formats as well as fluency take-home practice would impact the reading achievement of my first grade students. The first instructional cycle (See Table 2) included the additional fluency practice and resulted in increased speed of growth when compared to the students that did not have explicit fluency instruction in a small group. All five students grew in words read per minute by 10 to 27 words as compared to peers who did not receive the reformatted fluency instruction who averaged a 7 words increase per minute. Sight words grew with all five students similarly to that of their peers. Literacy comprehension grew for each student. All of the sample group students were on grade level in the area of comprehension. Rigby scores grew at least 2 levels while the remainder of their peers grew one level on average in the same time period.

The second instructional cycle of research within the eight-week time period, that included at home practice, also showed further growth. In Table 4 there is evidence that even after students were on grade level, additional practice seemed to foster further growth pushing student achievement above grade level expectations. All assessments showed each child grew an additional amount from the first instructional cycle and continued to thrive in reading.

Table 5 showed how much total growth each of the five students made. Each quickly reached grade level expectations to close the gap that they had before



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instruction. They surpassed first grade end of year expectations in nearly all assessment areas.

I found, as a teacher researcher, that when I used explicit fluency instruction, embedded in a small group lesson, along with time for practice in class and at home, that it was effective in raising reading proficiencies. Each child began below or near grade level and ended above grade level expectations according to the five assessments used in this research. In addition to the changes in my own instructional practices I found that students that demonstrated the greatest growth in Table 5 were also the students who were diligent about doing the reading at home and were consistent in bringing fluency passages back to school. This showed that support from home and consistency factored into the student's success.

Much like studies in previous articles, I found through action research that a focus on fluency is a key element in successful reading instruction. All of the students who received the additional fluency instruction grew in the areas of comprehension, sight words, words read per minute, and overall independent reading level. The growth of these students was acquired more quickly and progressed further than students who did not receive the extra instruction. In looking at the data with my colleagues, we all decided to implement the new practices to benefit all first graders in the subsequent years.

National Reading Panel (2000) research determined fluency instruction should occur daily, as part of a regular schedule for 15 to 30 minutes. Through consistently implementing this dedicated fluency time, I realized several additional gains were made. One was that each student was seeing rapid growth and felt successful. I felt the

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success occurred because fluency tends to come before comprehension. As my students became more fluent readers, they were able to understand what they read. Thus, helping them increase their comprehension scores and level of text complexity because of their fluency. They weren't losing meaning by taking time to decode words. As the text became more fluent, meaning became a complimentary benefit. This was a result that was not anticipated, as I thought comprehension would have to be explicitly taught separate from fluency.

This success also fostered positive feelings toward reading for all of the student participants. The student's entire attitude about reading became more positive and I began to notice an increase in excitement each time we met. Each week they were more confident. This also transpired into their willingness to take risks while reading and try reading strategies before asking for assistance. At the beginning of this process, the students in this group were not 'risk takers' in reading. They would come to a difficult word and immediately look to me for help. When coached, they would freeze and were reluctant to try a strategy. After this intervention, I saw one of the most powerful progressions in the process. Students began to take risks, and apply strategies to unknown words and difficult texts without teacher assistance or prompting. This does happen eventually for many young readers, but not as quickly as it seemed to happen for the students in this study. What I learned about my students was that the more confidence they felt in their reading ability, the more likely they were to take risks in reading. That alone was a success.

As I implemented passages each week for home, I saw an even greater enthusiasm from the group. Valle (2015) suggests in his research that motivation plays a large part in

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the success students have with homework. Students were eager to share and loved playing parts in the Readers' Theater scripts provided. It was easy to see that students were motivated and engaged in their fluency homework. It didn't take much time and was practiced each night for repetition. Students enjoyed seeing progress from start to finish within the week. They were able to actually hear and record their progress over the course of one week. This also gave families a chance to engage in an appropriate reading level text with their child throughout the week and I gave them specific strategies to help support their child. Parents commented on how much of an improvement they saw from Monday to Friday with the same passage. This, in turn, provided a tool for parents to use in the future to be able to gauge the level of difficulty their child could handle when purchasing books for them or going to the public library. This practice gave focused, concrete strategies for parents to use and teach at home as they often ask for guidance to support their child in reading.

Examining the lesson structure used in the small group, I was able to draw some conclusions to improve my effectiveness in teaching reading. One of those conclusions was to highlight key vocabulary within the lesson and explicitly teach it before reading. This helped the readers get through the lesson more smoothly. Another was to model what fluent reading sounded like, paying attention to punctuation and phrasing. I used an I-Pad as a tool throughout the week for students to record themselves as they read aloud and then listen for the qualities of fluent reading. They would listen and recognize their own phrasing and expression. The immediate feedback and self-reflection was invaluable and fun for the students. Peer advocacy played a part in the recording as each student encouraged the other reader's progress and gave "coaching tips."

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Additional practice time at home and in class provided several other benefits not compiled in the assessment data. Students enjoyed this time to read to each other and it created the feeling of success, accomplishment, and pride in what they were working toward. I also realized a few weeks into my action research that I was choosing guided reading texts for small groups that were too easy for students. Interestingly by the third day on a Rigby leveled book, the students were ready to move on to something more difficult. This was a huge revelation to me. I found that during small group time, I started the week with texts at their instructional reading level, but then I had to select texts for later in the week that were slightly above their instructional reading level. Students were going through text difficulty almost twice as fast as my traditional groups. Data from 2004 confirms my research, stating that teachers are able to close the learning gap in reading at a rapid rate with a ‘focus on fluency’ in the classroom rather than a program (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004).

A previous study showed that students sustained significant gains in expression and volume, smoothness, phrasing, and pace while reading aloud in as little as twenty days with fluency instruction (Mohr et. al., 2014). An ambitious goal set in the study demonstrated an increase of 1.5 words per minute each week for the students. Students in that study calculated an increase of 5.2 words per minute gain per week (Mohr et. al., 2014). This demonstrates how fluency can be used as an intervention. In my group, the students made gains in the range of 10 to 26 words per minute on grade level text. Within the year, their gains were in the range of 41 to 74 more words read per minute than when they started. All of my students who participated are now above grade level expectations in fluency. I found that, like Rasinski, I could use this strategy as an

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intervention and also as enrichment just depending on the level of text we used as they increased.

Based on my findings and data analysis, I will continue to use the reformatted fluency instructional practices, and as a result, the other first grade teachers in my school are going to implement the practices as well in the coming years. I will make sure to have fluency at the forefront of my small group instruction and provide additional practice time. I will ensure that the homework portion is meaningful by using fluency passages and Readers' Theater scripts. I will continue to celebrate their work at the end of the week to encourage their drive and passion to become readers in the classroom. I want every child in my classroom to achieve reading success. How I teach fluency and the amount of practice I provide can drastically increase the success for students, therefore it should be available to all students. Furthermore, I feel like this method of fluency instruction should be implemented in all emergent reading classrooms to increase the pace and rigor of the reading ability for students' success and positive experience in an effort to close the reading achievement gap at an early age.

### **Limitations and Further Questions**

I found that I was left with additional questions after this action research was complete due to limitations in the study design. I was not able to find out exactly how much additional time at home each child in the group was actually spending on the texts. Some students might have been spending more time reading than others and this might have affected their performance on the assessment measures. Future research will need to document at-home reading practice more explicitly to discern possible effects on outcome measures. I also did not look as closely at the correlation between an increased

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number of sight words and overall reading ability. I did take this into consideration and included sight words in my data. However, I would like to know how sight word fluency relates to a child's ability to read fluently overall. I also used a small student sample to track from my own classroom, and I look forward to seeing what the data will show after it is implemented across all of the first grade classrooms. I also used a small student sample to track from my own classroom, and look forward to seeing what the data will show after it is implemented across all of the first grade classrooms.

### **Practical Implications**

My action research provides data that suggest the implementation of explicit fluency instruction in a small group setting and providing additional practice in class and at home can help individualize the instruction enough to maximize reading growth for first grade students. A benefit is that it does not cost the school additional money, human resources, or the implementation of a specific program. By reorganizing fluency instruction with weekly assessments, teachers are able to implement this structure in any classroom as long as they can identify the child's reading level, create small groups, and provide appropriate text for reading and fluency practice.

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Appendix 1: Homework Example Passage (Reading A-Z)



LEVEL **1**

Fluency Passage—Nonfiction

**Fossils**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Word Count: 88

**Fossils**

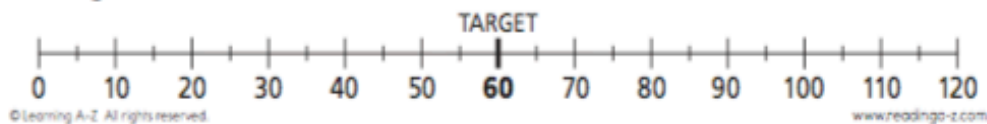
The Earth is very old.	5
Long ago, there were no humans.	11
Dinosaurs ruled the planet.	15
What did they look like?	20
How did they live?	24
Scientists try to figure this out.	30
They study the world around them.	36
They find clues in fossils.	41
Fossils are parts of living things from long ago.	50
They are found in rocks.	55
Scientists may find parts like teeth or bones.	63
A footprint can be a fossil, too.	70
Fossils give us clues as to what dinosaurs looked like.	80
They help us know more about our world.	88

Number of Errors 

1	2	3	4	5	6
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Accuracy (%):

Reading Rate (Words Per Minute):



Appendix 2: Parent Letter

**First Grade Reading Fluency Practice**

It is now time for your first grader to work on reading fluency. Fluency is the ability to **read smoothly and automatically, with expression and attention to punctuation.**

Here is an outline of the fluency homework.

- ◆ Every **Monday** a reading passage will be sent home that your child needs to **read out loud** with you at least 4 times during the week. The passage **needs to come back to school on Friday in the Fluency Folder**. Your child will be responsible for reading the passage to the teacher. Your child's teacher will record how long it takes for your child to read the passage and how accurately your child is able to read. Being able to read smoothly and automatically is our goal. You can record on the passage how many words they read per minute and see how much they grow throughout the week. The more practice with the passage at home, the better!
- ◆ The passages sent home are at your child's reading level. However, when you sit down to read, with your child, it will be the first time your child has seen the text. Your child might need some support with the first couple of readings.

Below are some ways to work on fluency with your child.

- \* *Choral Reading* - Reading aloud with your child and having your child track the words with a finger and match their voice to yours.
- \* *Echo Reading* - Have your child track the words with a finger as you read a sentence aloud. Next, have your child re-read the same sentence on his/her own.
- \* Have your child practice reading the same list of words, phrases, or short passages several times.
- \* Remind your child to pause between sentences and phrases.
- \* Please refer to the Fluency chart on the back of this letter.

If you have any questions, please contact your child's teacher at 253-1100.

Reading Is **FUN**damental!