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**READING LIKE ROBOTS:
MOVING BEYOND DECODING TO MEANING MAKING**

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ABSTRACT

This combined qualitative and quantitative action research study documents the progress and reported experience of twelve learning support students and their teachers in a part-time learning support classroom as they receive Guided Reading and Horizons scripted direct instruction phonics lessons. A series of baseline assessments, on-going progress monitoring, post study assessments, surveys and participant observations revealed that the combined instruction of these methods resulted in the demonstrable improvement of the reading skills of students with various learning difficulties. Student engagement in reading also improved as instruction was taught in small groups within their instructional level and geared toward their interests. Student progress may have occurred as a result of the combined use of these two methods or simply as a result of the increased instructional time provided in reading.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
MY STORY.....	1
INTERVENTION.....	6
LITERATURE REVIEW / READING ABOUT READING.....	7
Defining Reading.....	8
Guided Reading.....	9
<i>Choosing Materials for Guided Reading.....</i>	10
<i>Lesson Characteristics of Guided Reading.....</i>	10
<i>Assessment Tools.....</i>	12
Direct Instruction.....	12
<i>Types of Phonics.....</i>	13
<i>Effective Reading Instruction.....</i>	14
<i>Materials Needed for Direct Instruction.....</i>	15
<i>Lesson Characteristics for Direct Instruction.....</i>	15
<i>Assessment and Evaluation Tools.....</i>	17
Balanced Literacy Approach.....	18
<i>Reading Statistics.....</i>	18
<i>Pros and Cons to Guided Reading.....</i>	19
<i>Pros and Cons to Direct Instruction.....</i>	19
What To Do With The Information.....	22
<i>Which Approach is Best?.....</i>	22
<i>Balanced Literacy.....</i>	23
METHODOLOGY.....	25
Field Log.....	25
Surveys and Interviews.....	26
AIMSWeb	26

<i>DIBELS</i>	26
<i>R-CBM</i>	27
Student Work.....	28
<i>DRA</i>	28
<i>Dolch Sight Words</i>	29
<i>Letter Names and Sounds</i>	30
Running Records	30
TRUSTWORTHINESS.....	31
OUR STORY.....	35
Who Are We?.....	35
<i>School District and City</i>	35
<i>Our School</i>	35
<i>Our Class Make-Up</i>	36
Our Room.....	37
<i>Our Language Arts Block</i>	37
<i>Beginning of the Year</i>	38
<i>Reading Groups</i>	38
Case Study: Tana and Fran.....	39
<i>Baseline Information</i>	40
<i>Reading Groups Begin!</i>	41
<i>Bumps in the Road</i>	43
<i>New Start With Beginning Sounds</i>	43
<i>Sight Words: Can We Find Success?</i>	45
<i>Light at the End of the Tunnel</i>	46
Case Study: Allie and Tommy.....	48
<i>Baseline Information</i>	49
<i>Decode, Decode, Decode</i>	50
Case Study: Joey, Kate, Paul and Brad.....	56
<i>Baseline Information</i>	58
<i>Reading Begins</i>	59
<i>Progress is Starting</i>	60
<i>Fluency Work!</i>	62
<i>Post Study Results</i>	66
Case Study: Robby, Nan, Fonda and Josh.....	68
<i>Baseline Information</i>	70
<i>Are We Working on Fluency or Having Fun?</i>	71
<i>Life Gets in the Way of Learning</i>	76
<i>We Find Success</i>	81

DATA ANALYSIS.....	82
Ongoing Analysis.....	83
Codes, Bins, and Theme Statements.....	83
Outlines and Table of Contents.....	85
Narrative Forms.....	86
Analytic Memos.....	87
FINDINGS.....	87
FINAL THOUGHTS.....	98
REFERENCES.....	100
APPENDIXES.....	104
A Pre/Post Study Survey	105
B DIBELS.....	106
C AIMSweb DIBELS Benchmark Table.....	110
D AIMSweb Fluency Passage.....	111
E AIMSweb R-CBM Benchmark.....	112
F Dolch Sight Word Assessment	113
G Letter Name and Sound Assessment.....	115
H Running Record Assessment.....	116
I Calculation and Conversion Table.....	117
J Principal Consent Letter	118
K Parent Consent Letter.....	119
L Co-Teaching Consent Letter.....	120
M Weekly Reading Survey.....	121

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Language Arts Schedule.....	44
Figure 2. Bins.....	93
Figure 3. Running Record Decision Sample.....	101

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Tana and Fran Baseline Data.....	46
Table 2. Tana and Fran Post Study Data.....	53
Table 3. Tommy and Allie Baseline Data.....	56
Table 4. Tommy and Allie Post Study Data.....	62
Table 5. Joey, Kate, Paul and Brad Baseline Data.....	66
Table 6. Joey, Kate, Paul and Brad Post Study Data.....	75
Table 7. Nan, Robby, Josh, and Fonda Baseline Data.....	79
Table 8. Nan, Robby, Josh, and Fonda Post Study Data.....	90
Table 9. Fourth Grade Pre/Post Study Data.....	97
Table 10. Third Grade Pre/Post Study Data.....	98

MY STORY

I do not belong to the school of thought that suggests “one size fits all.” In fact, it has been my past experience that “one size fits few.” This monograph is not a story that tells what the end all, be all method is for teaching reading to students with special needs. It is simply a personal account of what I have found to work within my classroom, for this year, with this group of children. It is my hope that it may serve as guidance for other teachers who may find themselves in a similar situation to mine.

My story begins with a quotation by Freire (2000), who says, “Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation” (p. 89). Freire uses this statement to say when people who are oppressed find a cause that moves them to make changes in their situation, it is the passion and love for that cause that gives them the courage to stand up and fight for what is right. With a renewed sense of courage, those who are oppressed may find a feeling of freedom and a feeling of being in control of their own situation.

I care deeply for my students and want nothing more than to see them find success in reading. As a learning support teacher, my students are with me because they have not yet found success in reading using the standard methods of

teaching. It is my job as a teacher to find a way to help them achieve success in reading.

Last year, the supervisor of special education gave me a mandated scripted direct-instruction reading program. Research suggests that direct instruction is one effective model for teaching students with learning disabilities (Schieffer, 2002). Guided Reading, however, has long been my preferred method for teaching reading. Throughout my six years of teaching I have continued to search for techniques that work, regardless of research paradigms because I am always open to finding better ways to help my student find success in reading. It is my desire and love for my students to help them become successful readers that has kept me from accepting the sole use of a scripted Direct Instruction program to teach reading. I have found that my students need more than what this single program offers. I have also found that my students need to work with and read books that are of personal interest to them in order to make meaningful connections.

My students in years past have made progress in reading when I have used a Guided Reading approach. Guided Reading allows for me to take their background knowledge and interests and build on it, but unfortunately the Direct Instruction program alone doesn't provide that flexibility. I have, however, had students who didn't seem to develop effective word decoding skills. Hence, when these students came to a word they were unable to decode, the strategy they most

commonly resorted to was looking at the picture to see if that would give them a clue to what the unknown word could be. The problem with this strategy is that it has very limited use for figuring out basic sight words such as: *can, what, which, etc.* Although I have spent many lessons teaching other reading strategies for figuring out unknown words I have found that many students still resort to this very limiting method. After using the district-sanctioned reading program last year as my primary method for teaching reading, I noticed improvement in my students' word decoding skills, but I also noticed a decline in reading fluency and comprehension. Some students spent so much time decoding each word, they lost fluency and comprehension.

When I first read Connelly and Clandinin (1988), I noticed one key chapter discussed teacher-proof material and how many districts resort to purchasing canned programs as a way to “idiot-proof” teaching. Reflecting back onto conversations I had with my special education supervisor and arguing about why I had to start using the direct instruction series even though my students were making progress made me remember something she said, “Crissi, I know you are teaching effectively and doing things correctly, but this is a way for us to make sure that all the teachers are doing what they should be doing.” She then went on to say, “Not everyone is using Guided Reading correctly and covering the skills that need to be worked on in reading.” Finally she said that I could continue to use my Guided Reading but to also use the direct instruction reading program so

that I was doing the same thing as all the other learning support teachers in the district. From my vantage point, this suggests the special education department in my district has penalized those of us who are working and making progress with our students based on the inadequacies of others. Implementing a scripted direct-instruction reading program was a way for those in authority to make teachers more uniform in order to bring up the standardized test scores of the special education population in our district.

The way my schedule was set up last year and the number of students I was servicing did not allow me time to integrate both methods into my language arts block, but I think it is crucial that components from both methodologies are used to create a balanced reading program for my struggling crew. This year with the assistance of my co-teacher, we developed a schedule that has allowed us to arrange the necessary time it will take to use both methodologies, as needed, for teaching reading.

By conducting an action research project I chose not to allow my students or myself to be oppressed. I found a way for my students and me to have control over what happens within our classroom, while meeting the learning needs of my students and the requirements of my school district.

While reading Delpit (2002) I came across a statement that I found to strike a chord within my heart and shares a little more of the spirit that motivates me as a teacher. Delpit states, “We must reconnect them to their own brilliance

and gain their trust that they will learn from us” (p. 48). Here Delpit is describing what teachers should do to help their African American children learn another language or dialect. She feels that African American students should feel their own language is valued along with their culture. When students feel safe and know that a teacher understands their background they will let down their walls and let the teacher come into their world and be open to learning.

As a special education teacher I feel very strongly about this statement. Much of the time when a student is newly identified and begins coming to my room for reading and/or math, he or she is very frustrated with school. Such students have often repeatedly failed within the regular education curriculum. Depending on their age, many of these students see their own learning differences and know they are not performing at the same level as their same age peers. It is my job to help them find success in learning.

Much of my job involves not only improving their skills, but also and perhaps more importantly, helping them gain confidence in their own ability to approach a learning task. If a child feels that he or she can't be successful, then the child gives up before even trying. I spend a great deal of time talking with my students and just watching them. I think that is why I enjoy action research. I am a natural observer. I enjoy trying to figure out what makes people tick. Through my ability to observe and be attuned to my students' needs I am able to build that trust and help them see that they are capable of learning. I do have a good rapport

with most of my students. If anyone were to walk into my class he or she would see what I like to call a pleasant groove going on. Those students whom I haven't completely won over, I continue to talk to and observe to find out what makes them tick and to gain their trust.

INTERVENTION

For my action research study I combined the use of two reading programs from opposing paradigms of reading instruction. One method I used was a scripted direct-instruction program that focused on letter-sound correlations and decoding. Each lesson served as a scaffold upon the previous lesson and skills that were sequentially organized. The other method I used for teaching reading was Guided Reading, where I focused on developing a more established sight word vocabulary, reading for accuracy, comprehension and reading with fluency.

READING ABOUT READING

The war between Explicit vs. Implicit methods in teaching continue to be at the very core of teacher and administration choices in how lessons are planned and executed in schools nationwide (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005). On one end of the spectrum lies the camp of “Traditionalists.” In the traditional reading approach the teacher is the sole provider of information. The teacher is in control of what information is presented within a lesson (Dewey 1938). At the other end of the reading spectrum lies the “Constructivist” group. In the constructivist approach students bring their own background knowledge and skills to the lesson. The teacher’s role is to guide the children’s learning (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005).

Manset-Williamson and Nelson (2005) feel that one set of educators support the constructivist view on ways to teach reading and others support a more traditional method of teaching reading. Educators who support constructivist learning theory tend to support Guided Reading. Traditionalists tend to support Direct Instruction, which is an explicit method for reading instruction (Manset-Williamson & Nelson 2005). In their view, Direct Instruction “is aligned more closely with behaviorism than with cognitive and affective theories, and it takes as given the external representation of the subject mater to be impressed upon the student” (Levine, et. al. 1985 p. 1).

Defining Reading

With two oppositional views toward reading education come two definitions of reading. Meyer (2002), who is more of a constructivist, defines reading as:

What happens when written words begin to live in the mind, heart, relationships, spirit, and the world of someone engaging with text.

Reading is about having the ‘disposition to engage appropriately with texts of different types in order to empower action, thinking, and feeling in the context of purposeful social activities. (p. 26)

Flesch (1955) who wrote Why Johnny Can’t Read, bases his definition on a traditional view of learning when he defines reading as “getting the meaning of words formed by letters on a printed page, and nothing else. As long as he cannot say out loud what each letter combination stands for, he cannot read.” (p. 110).

By this, Flesch describes reading as word decoding and gathering meaning through word decoding only. A more current definition from the traditional side of the reading spectrum comes from Ehri (2001), who defines reading as, “reading real words and pseudo words, reading text orally and text comprehension.” (p. 3). Through these definitions of reading it is easy to see each author’s personal stance along the reading continuum. For the purposes of this paper I have attempted to create my own definition of reading. My definition falls somewhere in the middle of these two viewpoints. I define reading as the

ability to decode, comprehend, connect on a personal level with the printed text and see the perspective of the author who has written the text.

Guided Reading

According to Fontas and Pinnell (1996) Guided Reading is a method for teaching reading in which teachers are able to provide skill strategies for reading accuracy, comprehension, and fluency. Reutzel and Cooler (2005) state the major purposes of Guided Reading are to develop reading fluency strategies and to move children toward independent reading. Children are grouped by developmental levels that reflect a range of competencies, experiences, and interests. The strategy centers on developing the child's ability to successfully process text with limited teacher guidance and interaction. (p. 148)

Rog (2003) also adds in her definition of Guided Reading that the focus of Guided Reading is on "what students need to know rather than what a textbook says should come next" (p. 12). Rog continues to emphasize this point by stating that Guided Reading "provides instruction in response to student needs, not according to a pre-set program" (p. 12). Fontas and Pinnell (1996), Reutzel and Cooler (2005), and Rog (2003) all agree that Guided Reading should occur in small groups consisting of 4-6 students. Another key to Guided Reading is the use of texts at the instructional level of the students in the group.

Choosing Materials for Guided Reading

The materials in Guided Reading must be carefully chosen. In order to make a connection to each student's background knowledge, teachers must choose books that will build upon that knowledge base. A library of leveled texts is important to have in order to implement Guided Reading (Reutzel & Cooler 2005). Rog (2003) further emphasized the need for leveled text. She states, "the text that is chosen for a group should be within their readability level" (p. 32). According to Rog (2003) this means that students should be able to read 9 out of 10 words and have a basic understanding of what they read for it to be an appropriate selection. For teachers who do not have access to pre-leveled texts, there are ways in which they can take the books from within their own classroom and calculate the book level. Kathy Schrock (2005) provides a plethora of ways to level a book on her website based upon the original readability formulas created by Dale-Chall, Fry, and Flesch-Kincaid. Fountas & Pinnell (1996) also provide a fairly thorough list of leveled texts in their book Guided Reading: Good first teaching for all children.

Lesson Characteristics of Guided Reading

When planning a lesson, Rog (2003) states, "Good teachers begin with an end in mind" (p. 48). Teachers must have a clear understanding of their students' needs and a knowledge base of the reading skills a student must acquire in order to become a proficient reader. Fountas & Pinnell (1996), Reutzel & Cooler (2005),

Hill (1999) and Rog (2003) suggest that a Guided Reading lesson be approximately 20-30 minutes in length. Rog (2003) suggests that a Guided Reading lesson should begin with the reading practice of familiar text, namely a previously introduced book, a poem, or a reader's theatre script. Rog (2003) continues to sequence a Guided Reading lesson by suggesting that another part of the Guided Reading lesson should include a book introduction and identifies the book introduction as the most critical aspect of the Guided Reading lesson. Texts are selected to scaffold or build children's reading development. The texts are supportive and there is some challenge for the children (Hill 1999).

Fountas & Pinnell (1996), Rog (2003), Hill (1999), McEwan (2002) and Reutzel & Cooler (2005) provide a sequence for introducing a Guided Reading book. They suggest that when introducing a book, the teacher should discuss the cover and publication information. Next the teacher takes the students on a book walk through the text. During this time students make predictions based on the pictures throughout the book. Next, the teacher introduces a reading strategy that will become the focus while reading through the new book. After discussing the strategy the group reads through the book using the newly learned strategy or previously learned strategies to help them figure out unknown words. After the book is read, the teacher checks for comprehension by asking various questions based on the text. The newly introduced book is then added to the group's reading basket to become part of their familiar read selection.

Assessment Tools

Fountas & Pinnell (1996), Rog (2003), Hill (1999), McEwan (2002) and Reutzel & Cooler (2005) all describe the Running Record, first developed by Marie Clay, as the primary assessment tool used in Guided Reading. A running record is a coding system that teachers use to assess students' oral reading. Running records allow teachers to keep track of behaviors and errors a student makes as he or she reads aloud. A running record can be administered on any given text as long as the text is on that student's reading level. Ken Goodman further developed the running record by introducing a process of miscue analysis, which gives the teacher a clear picture of the cueing system a student most often uses or perhaps what cueing system he or she needs to further develop. (Fountas & Pinnell 1996; Rog 2003; Hill 1999; McEwan 2002; Reutzel & Cooler 2005).

Direct Instruction

Direct Instruction can be defined in different ways. It is most often linked or interchanged with terminology such as: explicit instruction, synthetic instruction and phonics first programming (Reutzel and Cooler 2005). Ehri (2001) defines it as:

a systematic phonics program where a planned set of phonics element is taught sequentially. The set includes not only the major correspondences between consonant letters and sounds but also short and long vowel letters and sounds, and vowel and consonant digraphs. It also may include

blends of letter-sounds that form larger subunits in words. The larger unit taught might include onsets and rimes. (p. 122)

Tobin (2003) defines it as:

a system of teacher-directed instruction that involves teacher demonstration, careful prompting and support of student skills, and systematic correction of errors. The goal of Direct Instruction is to accelerate learning by maximizing the design and delivery of instruction. All Direct Instruction programs feature scripted lessons and careful instruction sequencing. Several skills are presented in each lesson and skills are systematically reviewed. (p. 2)

My personal definition of Direct Instruction is a combination of Tobin (2003) and Ehri, et. al. (2001). I define Direct Instruction as a scripted phonics based program that teaches word decoding by breaking words into individual sounds and/or sound clusters.

Types of Phonics Instruction

Ehri, et. al. (2001) identifies five types of phonics instruction. The first type is Synthetic phonics in which phonics is taught in a part to whole approach in which individual letter sounds and letter blends are identified to decode an unknown word. The second type of phonics instruction is Analytic phonics, which is a whole-to-part approach. In this approach the readers analyze letter-sound relations once the word is identified. Embedded phonics is another approach to

phonics instruction in which the reader uses letter-sound correspondences along with context cues to identify unfamiliar words. A fourth type of phonics instruction is Analogy phonics, whereby the reader uses part of written words he or she already knows to identify new words. The final approach is phonics through spelling, where readers learn to segment and write the phonemes in words.

Effective Reading Instruction

Schieffer (2002) identifies three focal areas she feels every reading program should contain. She also feels these components need to be taught in an explicit or Direct Instruction manner. The first area is oral language. She feels that students with poorly developed language skills are more likely to have difficulty in reading. She breaks down oral language into two areas, the first being receptive language, which she defines as “words that are recognized or understood” (p. 88). Orally presenting a word and asking the student to identify the corresponding object measures receptive language. The other type of oral language is expressive language, which she defines as “words that are produced by students” (p. 88). Stating the appropriate word/label for a presented object is how expressive language is measured. The second focal area Schieffer (2002) feels all reading programs should have is a decoding component. Schieffer states that, “Research continues to demonstrate the superiority of a code-emphasis program in the acquisition of beginning reading skills” (p. 90). Schieffer also

feels that this needs to be taught explicitly through Direct Instruction. The final focal point Schieffer feels every reading program must have is a comprehension component. She states that, “gaining the meaning from text is the ultimate goal of learning to read” (p. 97).

Materials Needed for Direct Instruction

Most Direct Instruction programs come in a kit where a particular publisher provides all the necessary materials. The *Horizons Learn To Read* series, which is published by SRA/McGraw-Hill (1997) includes scripted teacher’s manuals, trade books that can be extensions to some of the lessons, student workbooks and student reading books in their kit. In addition to each classroom kit, all students need their own workbook and reading book.

Steventon (2003) identifies an oral reading fluency passage as an additionally desired component for a Direct Instruction lesson. Some programs have these passages built into their scripted lessons but others do not. Steventon identifies oral reading fluency as “the ability to read a text quickly, accurately and with proper expression” (p. 17). Steventon suggests using the Direct Instruction’s reading passage as an oral fluency passage if there is not one already built into the program.

Lesson Characteristics of Direct Instruction

Tobin (2003) identifies five basic components that make up a *Horizons* lesson. The first component is letter and sounds instruction and practice. At the

top of each reading lesson page is a section that has a list of individual letters, blends or word chunks or a combination of the three. Following the script, a teacher directs students through identifying the sounds of the letters, blends or word chunks. The second component in a *Horizons* lesson is word attack skills, instruction and practice. In this part of the lesson, the teacher again reads from the script and directs the student's identification and decoding of word lists, which consist of similar phonemic characteristics. The next component is the reading passage, where students chorally read aloud. These stories contain several of the words from the previously practiced word lists. Some passages are a complete story while other passages are parts of a story that will be read over a span of a few lessons until the story is complete. The fourth component is story-based activities. The students complete these activities independently in their workbook. Some of these activities include filling in the sentence with a detail from the story. Other activities include identifying vowel sound or letter blends. The final activity is a writing component, where students practice individual letter writing, sentence writing or spelling. This portion is similar to hand writing exercises or sentence dictations.

Ehri (2001) states, "small groups were found to produce statistically larger effect on reading than large group" (p. 125). The teacher's role in a Direct Instruction lesson is to "provide clear modeling and guided practice to students, there by demonstrating exactly what students must know" (Schieffer 2002, p. 91)

Assessments and Evaluation Tools

Slocum (2003) discusses assessment and evaluation in a Direct Instruction model. She defines assessment as checking for understanding and evaluation as what a teacher does with the assessment information. Slocum identifies three methods of assessments used within a Direct Instruction reading program. One method is checking for understanding through the questions that are in the script. Teachers read the questions and the students show understanding by answering. Another assessment tool to check for understanding is the writing tasks in daily work. Each Direct Instruction program also has some form of mastery test where students must score above an 80% to demonstrate mastery.

Slocum (2003) identifies two types of evaluations, Formative and Summative. She feels that “Direct Instruction integrates an extensive and sophisticated formative evaluation system within each program” (p. 113). The formative evaluation in a Direct Instruction program “examines short-term outcomes and suggest small-scale adjustments within the program to make it more effective” (p. 113). One example she provides of formative evaluations includes the placement tests given to each student prior to beginning the program to determine proper lesson placement. She also identifies the evaluative decisions teachers make on a daily basis while using the program. If a student is unable to answer the scripted question or independently complete the workbook page, for example, teachers must make the decision to go back and re-teach the part of the

lesson that was not mastered. Another example would be if a skill on a test is not mastered, then the areas of difficulty must be re-taught until a student is able to reach mastery on that portion of the test.

Balanced Literacy Approach

Reading Statistics

Schieffer, et al. (2002) acknowledge, “Learning to read in the elementary years is an essential steppingstone toward educational performance and advancement in our society” (p. 87). In their study they quoted the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which reported in 2001, that “37% of 4th grade student cannot even read at a basic level and only 32% read at or above a proficient level”(p. 87).

McEwen (2002) identifies students who are falling through the educational cracks in our schools. Through her research she has calculated that 5% of children or even less learn to read as if by magic; another 20-30% learn to read with ease when exposed to any kind of instruction; but for at least 60% of children learning to read is hard work. Their success depends on the effectiveness of instruction. Another 15-25% will find learning to read to be most difficult task they have undertaken, and the remaining 5% will be identified as having a learning disability. What do all these statistics tell us as educators? Clearly, we need to develop a method of teaching that meets the needs of all our students.

Pros and Cons to Guided Reading

Hill (1999) makes a valid argument in support of why Guided Reading should be used as the sole method to teach reading. She states,

Guided Reading is based on an interactive, dynamic view of literacy in which children learn to read and write through participating in activities which develop their sense of themselves, their language and literacy resources, and cognitive capacities. In this view of learning teachers and children are active constructors of evolving knowledge. (p. 14)

Unfortunately, Guided Reading may not meet the needs of every child in a classroom. Some children may benefit more from a Direct Instruction approach to reading than a Guided Reading approach. When Anderson et. al. (2002) conducted their action research project, they found there were inconsistencies in the delivery of the Guided Reading lessons and found this to be an overall concern nationally. In their analysis, they discovered not all teachers were addressing the skills that students were lacking. They also determined there was an overall lack of comprehension strategies introduced through literature to the students.

Pros and Cons to Direct Instruction

Dudley-Marling and Paugh (2004) state “All student benefit from some degree of explicit and individualized support and direction...struggling readers

are more likely to require ‘frequent, intense, explicit, and individualized support and direction,’ structure is especially important” (p. ix).

Reutzel and Cooler (2005) also support Direct Instruction, noting that Phonics rules help the reader decode unknown words based on rules that apply to similar and previously viewed words. Applying phonics rules can also help the reader make sense of an unknown word if the reader is able to make a connection to words that are in the reader’s vocabulary. Reutzel and Cooler (2005) feel that when phonics knowledge is applied first and then makes use of semantic and syntactic cues in the passage, the reader can positively identify unknown words in most elementary-level reading materials (Reutzel and Cooler 2005). They suggest that having a strong phonics base will help the reader in the future.

Ehri (2001) is another supporter of Direct Instruction, noting, “Phonics instruction is considered particularly beneficial to children with reading problems. Studies indicate that students with reading disabilities have exceptional difficulty decoding words” (p. 126). Direct Instruction programs that teach decoding are expected to bring students with learning disabilities closer to performing near their grade level. Ehri explains that a child who cannot read much of the text will not be able to comprehend what is read. If that same child is able to decode the unknown words through use of phonetic rules he or she will have a better chance of reading the passage and making sense of what was read (Ehri 2001).

Some critics of Direct Instruction give various reasons for being against using it. Meyer (2002), conducted a research project in a classroom that was given a Direct Instruction program as a mandated reading program, feels that based on his observations and conversation with the teacher, a Direct Instruction “story is broke up by saying some words by their sounds and kids figure out the word...Kids lose the meaning because they are so focused on the sounds they aren’t listening to story (p. 13). He feels Direct Instruction inhibits a child’s ability to comprehend the reading passage when he or she is stopping so frequently. Meyer (2002) also feels that Direct Instruction does not engage children in their reading. Another observation made by Meyer through his study is that students use only word decoding as a means for identifying unknown words so they are forced to look at one word at a time and are not able to see a sentence in its entirety in order to comprehend what they are reading. Meyer also suggests that students who are taught to read through phonics based Direct Instruction methods never learn to use reading cues because they have only learned to figure out an unknown word through the use of decoding.

Reutzel and Cooler (2005), who are both advocates and proponents of Direct Instruction, have this to say about Direct Instruction program, which they also refer to as a basal series:

If a child is failing to achieve success using an approach to reading instruction, in this case the basal reader, then common sense tells us that

what is needed is an alternative strategy – not just more of the same.

Finally, basal reader systems frequently do not allow students enough time for real reading. The multifarious collection of skill sheets and workbook pages tend to be so time consuming that little time is left for reading. (p. 198)

What to do With the Information?

Which Approach Is Best?

Dudley and Paugh (2004) have really driven home the need for a balanced approach to teaching reading. They state over and over again, throughout the introduction of their book entitled Struggling Readers, it is not about which programming is better but rather meeting needs of the students in the classroom. “No reading method, no matter how many studies are cited to assert its effectiveness, has ever been found to “work” with all students, in all settings, all the time” (p. viii).

There is a need for yet another reading reform. It is not to say that as educators we need to jump from one end of the reading continuum to the next but to try and seek a more balanced approach between the constructivist view and the traditional view. As Dewey (1935) stated, “There is always the danger in a new movement that in rejecting the aims and methods of that which it would supplant, it may develop its principles negatively rather than positively and constructively” (p. 20). Dewey is cautioning not to develop new approaches merely in opposition

to those they are replacing. Dudley and Paugh (2004) encourage teachers to identify what works within their own classroom to determine what methods should be used to teach their students to read. They suggest that teachers conduct routine assessments to identify individual student needs. This is a plea for more action research to be conducted in classrooms all around the world.

Schieffer (2002) indicates that school districts around the country are grasping desperately to raise their standardized test scores to avoid being placed on “the list” of schools that have not shown adequate yearly progress. Many schools are turning to teacher-proof reading programs in a last ditch effort to bring their scores up. Schieffer (2002) says, “How reading is taught in schools is connected to the number of students who experience reading difficulty and the decline in reading scores” (p. 88). The question is not about choosing the best method for teaching reading but listening, observing and identifying the needs of the students in order to create a reading program that ensures their success.

Balanced Literacy

Rog (2003) suggests there should be a balanced approach for teaching reading in which students are shown models of good reading and writing and given the time for independent practice to test their new skills. Rog suggests the use of a block format will allow teachers to create and execute a balanced approach for teaching reading and writing. In the three blocks model the language arts block is divided into three sections, each with a focus on certain

skills. One block of time is devoted to “word study” which has a focus on phonics and vocabulary. Another block is focused on “Reading Workshop.” In “Reading Workshop” there is a time for a read-aloud, shared reading, Guided Reading and independent reading. The third portion of the three blocks model is “Writing Workshop,” where students work on modeled/ shared/ interactive writing, guided writing, and independent writing (Rog 2003).

Angell (2001) implemented a Four-Block Method to organize her language arts block and as a means to improve students’ reading abilities. Angell conducted an action research study, which focused on a group of first grade students living and attending school in a suburb of a large Midwest city. The students involved in the project were identified as being “at-risk.” Angell determined her students’ at-risk status through the use of student surveys, pre and post test data, student performance assessments in reading comprehension and results from the school readiness test. Angell’s Four-Block Method includes: Guided Reading, Self-Selected Reading, Writing and Working with Words. Overall the study turned out to be successful. Using the Four-Block method, the students’ sight word recognition showed the most improvement. Students also demonstrated improvement in reading comprehension (Angell 2001).

Reutzel and Cooler (2005) feel that “approaches in which systematic code instruction was included with the reading of meaningful connected text resulted in superior reading achievement overall for both low-readiness and better-prepared

students” (p. 45). The statement by Reutzel and Cooler truly supports my own action research project.

METHODOLOGY

I used a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. The qualitative data measurements I used consisted of frequent field log entries (MacLean & Mohr, 1999; Arhar, Holly & Kasten, 2001; Cole & Knowles 2000; Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1993), student surveys and interviews (MacLean & Mohr, 1999; Arhar, Holly & Kasten, 2001). I also felt the need to triangulate my findings by conducting a number of quantitative data collection methods. I used a weekly progress monitoring fluency probe that is generated by Edformation (2006) called AIMSweb. I also examined student work, including Dolch Sight Words, Developmental Reading Assessment (Pearson Education, 2004), and Running Records (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996)

Field Log

According to many leading teacher action researchers (MacLean and Mohr 1999; Arhar, Holly and Kasten 2001; Cole and Knowles 2000; Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993) the most effective method for collecting qualitative data is through the use of a field log and/or journal. They suggest that within the field log, teachers should keep a record of their thoughts, observations and feelings about the events which unfold daily in a their own classroom. Within my own field log, I wrote about classroom events on a daily basis and also a group-by-

group basis. This field log data provides the core of my research narrative. By regularly re-reading the log, I was able to reflect upon the course of my action research project. Within my field log I have daily observations and observer comments which are my own personal reactions to the observations, that will be woven together to create the story of my classroom and my adventure with my students.

Survey/Interviews

MacLean and Mohr (1999) and Arhar, Holly and Kasten (2001) both discuss the use of surveys or interviews as a tool for gathering information about the participants' views and feelings toward an identified subject or topic. They suggest that surveys can be both formal and informal. I conducted two surveys. The first helped to determine individual students' feelings towards reading and how they perceive themselves as a reader. I administered this survey both at the beginning and end of the action research study. The other survey I administered on a weekly basis elicited responses from students about how they felt about their reading ability and what reading activities or projects they enjoyed during that week (Appendix A).

AIMSweb

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)

The DIBELS assessment measures early literacy skills. It is divided into the areas of Letter Naming Fluency (phonics), Letter Sound Fluency (phonics),

Phonemic Segmentation Fluency (phonological awareness), and Nonsense Word Fluency (phonics). Each of these tests is administered for one minute on an individual basis. Initially students are given 3 consecutive probes within each domain to establish a baseline. Once a baseline has been established students are assessed bi-weekly until mastery has been obtained. Mastery for Letter Naming Fluency is considered 60 or more letters named in one minute. Mastery for Letter Sound Fluency is considered 25 sounds or more per minute. Mastery for Phonemic Segmentation is considered 35 sounds or more per minute. Mastery for Nonsense Word Fluency is considered 20 sounds or more per minute. When mastery of all four areas has been obtained students are transferred into reading passages. I used this assessment as a baseline measurement and as an ongoing fluency assessment for students who were not yet ready for the reading passages (Appendix B).

Reading Curriculum Based Measurement (R-CBM)

The R-CBM is given to those students who have mastered the concepts in DIBELS. In the R-CBM, controlled reading passages of increasing difficulty measure a student's reading fluency and accuracy. I am able to determine a student's mastery of a reading passage by using my district's predetermined benchmarks (Appendix C). My students who were working on the R-CBM passages were assessed every Friday. This tool helped me to keep weekly fluency progress on each student (Appendix D &E).

Student Work

Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA):

The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) is a district wide assessment comprised of leveled books ranging from A-42. Each grade is given several designated levels. Level A and 1-3 is considered Kindergarten mastery range. First grade levels are from level 3-18. Second grade goes from level 20-28. Third grade levels range from 30-34. Fourth grade has a range from level 38-42. The DRA is a measurement tool that assesses a student's reading in three areas and is conducted one on one with the teacher. The first area the DRA assesses is a student's reading accuracy using a running record for all or part of the selected level of text. Then, there is a portion of the text for the teacher to conduct a one-minute probe to assess a student's fluency rate. Finally students are asked to orally retell the story from beginning to end. The teacher highlights the facts that a student gives and uses the DRA rubric to assess a student's comprehension on that leveled text. For a student to move up a level, he or she must have an accuracy reading of 96% and a comprehension score of 16, which is considered adequate. When students score at or above this benchmark, they are then given the next leveled text. This assessment continues until a child no longer meets the benchmark. The last level successfully completed is considered the child's independent reading level. From here Guided Reading groups can be formed based on student reading levels.

I used the DRA for baseline information and again at the conclusion of my action research project. I felt that through the use of this tool I could determine individual student reading levels and examine progress when I administered the assessment at the end of the intervention period. I also used the DRA to help in my decision for creating Guided Reading groups.

Dolch Sight Word:

I created the Dolch Sight Word assessment for assessing percentages of known and unknown sight words. I obtained a list of the Dolch Sight Words from a web sight provided by the Gemini Elementary School <http://gemini.es.brevard.k12.fl.us/sheppard/reading/dolch.html>. Then I took these words and typed them into a table format (Appendix F). I wrote each set of words onto colored index cards. To assess the children I showed them each card and asked them to read the word. If they were able to identify the word quickly I checked it off as being a part of their sight word knowledge base. If they took time to sound it out or read it incorrectly I checked it off as not yet being a part of their sight word knowledge base. To calculate their percentage of known sight words I added up the number of identified sight words and divided it by the total number possible for that level. I used this assessment tool as a baseline measurement and as a post study assessment to measure the growth in sight word vocabulary.

Letter Names and Sounds:

I created this assessment tool for my students who had limited sight word knowledge. Similar to the Dolch Sight Word assessment tool, I put the letters of the alphabet onto index cards and created a form for keeping track of known and unknown letters and sounds (Appendix G). I used this assessment tool both as a baseline measurement and a post study assessment to specifically identify what letters and letter sounds an individual student knows or doesn't know.

Running Records

The most important tool of assessment under the Guided Reading format is the running record, which was first developed by Marie Clay. A running record is an assessment tool teachers can use to track students' oral reading and to guide instruction. A running record helps teachers make decisions about a student's ability to read a particular leveled text and can also guide grouping of children based on reading level or error types. Running records provide consistent progress monitoring and allow teachers to observe particular reading difficulties in individual students (Fountas & Pinnell 1996; Rog 2003; Hill 1999; McEwan 2002; Reutzel & Cooler 2005; Clay 1993).

I used running records on a weekly basis to monitor my students' reading progress. Each week I introduced a new book during Guided Reading that was specific to each group's reading level. At the end of the week each individual student read his or her new book and I assessed using the running record

techniques. After a student successfully read three consecutive books with an accuracy score of 95% or higher, I moved the student up to the next level of text (Appendix H & I).

TRUSTWORTHINESS

MacLean and Mohr (1999) remind teacher researchers to be “honest and tell the truth as they understand it” (p. 125). By this, they mean that teachers must conduct their action research in an ethical manner, as does any researcher. In their chapter on researcher ethics, MacLean and Mohr (1999) created a series of guideline to help teachers “evaluate the individual ethical situations that will arise as part of their research” (p. 125). The first thing they say teachers should do as ethical researchers is to “treat students and colleagues with respect and care” (p. 125). I feel that I was able to carry out this expectation. My students mean a great deal to me and I am very open with them about their thoughts and feelings throughout the day. For example, when a student’s behavior has changed from his or her normal behavior, I take time to talk with them about the behavior and why the behavior is occurring. MacLean and Mohr also state that teachers must “give credit” (p. 126) where credit is due. I have given credit throughout my writing. This was not solely my project. It was a group effort between my co-teaching partner, our students and me. Another way MacLean and Mohr feel teachers can maintain an ethical research project is by “disclosing their plans, methods and results” (p. 126) of their study. I shared my students’ progress in

reading throughout the course of the study. Each time we did a running record, I went over the assessment with them and told them what they did well and areas they need to work on to improve their reading abilities. Kelly did the same thing within her reading group. Giving the students a goal to work towards helps to give them a focus and a purpose for doing their best work. Before the winter break when I officially finished collecting data for my study, I called each student up to my desk to discuss her or her reading growth. I showed students where they were at the beginning of the year and where they were in the middle of December. Finally, MacLean and Mohr also feel that ethical researchers “acknowledge their own personal beliefs and assumptions” (p. 129). By writing this statement of trustworthiness and my researcher stance, I have validated that I do have personal beliefs and assumptions that will be apparent throughout the writing of my story.

As a teacher researcher it is not only my job to find ways to improve upon my teaching through my action research, it is also my job to conduct my research in a highly ethical and trustworthy manner. I began the process by obtaining permission from my building principal to conduct the action research study (Appendix J). As a way to show my co-teaching partner, students and their parents that I am a trustworthy researcher I drafted a consent letter (Appendix K) which I sent home at the beginning of the school year, to ask my students, their parents, and my co-teaching partner for their permission to participate in my action research project. These letters detail the students’ participation and my co-

teachers' participation in the research study. In addition, the letter summarizes how the students will benefit from the study as well as potential risks. I obtained consent to participate in my study from 13 of my students and consent from my co-worker (Appendix L).

Prior to sending the consent form home with my students I held a class discussion to explain my project in terms that my students would understand. I explained what their role would be throughout the study. I also explained to them that they could withdraw from the project at any time but, they would same curriculum work as the students who continued were research participants. I also explained to them that I would be giving them different names in my final write up to make sure that anyone reading the paper would not be able to tell whom I was writing about. Their reactions to this were rather funny. One student said, "Well, that is stupid. I like it when you use our names in math questions. Why can't you keep our real names in it?" I explained that it is the law to maintain people's privacy. I then went on to explain how sometimes in movies when the show is based on a true story, the writer changes the names of the real people as a way to protect them. The student then said, "Oh Ms. Corbin, you would never hurt us." I then responded by saying that while I would never do anything that I felt would be harmful, this was just another requirement for my class and a way for me to maintain student privacy.

After our privacy discussion, I explained what our language arts time would look like. We walked through a schedule of the morning. I gave examples of activities we would be doing in Guided Reading. I explained that we would also be using the direct-instruction *Horizons* reading books and workbooks. At the end of my discussion I asked if there were any question and I read to them the letter I was sending home for their parents.

Throughout the study, my students and I discussed my project. When I made some exciting observations about one of them or a group, I would tell them that I would be writing about their progress to share in my book. They asked from time to time if they could read the story of our classroom when I was finished. I told them that I wouldn't be writing the story until the spring but that I would bring my book in and share parts of it with them when I was finished.

Maintaining privacy is another important part of being a trustworthy research. I did a number of things to maintain student anonymity. Each student was given a pseudonym that I have used throughout my story to report my findings. I kept a key of the pseudonyms in a locked filing cabinet in the privacy of my home. Any documentation of the study, including observation notes, field logs, graphs, charts, student work and other data, were also kept in a secure location at my home.

Since I am the case manager of my students with special needs I made sure that my lesson plans did not jeopardize the individual needs of my students.

The lessons were designed to work on language arts goals that are identified in each student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). It is my belief that this study helped me design lessons that enabled me to meet their individual learning needs and move my students closer to meeting their IEP goals and objectives.

OUR STORY

Who Are We?

School District and City

Our school is located in a small city that is only approximately 4 square miles in size with a population of approximately 26,000. The city has a rather high crime rate due to its location between two of the largest cities on the East Coast. Gang memberships have grown and new gangs move into the area on an ongoing basis. The school district encompasses the surrounding fast growing rural communities north, south and west of the city, which creates a very diverse population throughout the district.

Our School

The school we call home for 6 ½ hours a day is an elementary school with a Kindergarten through fourth grade student body. It is located on the south side of the city. Our school has approximately 550 students. There are five to six classes of children at each grade level, K-4. The students who attend the school are primarily from low-income households. Over 50% of our school population receives free or reduced lunch. The school is comprised of a mixture of ethnic

backgrounds. Our school enrollment summary shows that 45% of our students are White, 33% are African American, 21% are Hispanic and 1% are Asian/Pacific Islander.

Our Class Make-Up

We are fortunate to have four adults in our classroom. There are two teachers and two paraprofessionals. My co-teacher is Kelly Berk. Last year, when our caseloads became overwhelming we decided to blend our classes together and co-teach in hopes of squeaking out enough quality time to meet our students' needs. Like our school, our class is a good example of the ethnic mixture of our community. When my study began, our classroom was predominantly made up of Caucasian students. Out of the 13 students we had 10 Caucasian students, two African American students and one Hispanic child. Since then, our class size has doubled to 26 and has become more ethnically mixed. We currently have 13 Caucasian students, six Hispanic students, and six African-American students. We are an ever growing and changing community. Unfortunately, I will not be telling the stories of my recent arrivals, for they were not here when our story began. I will tell the stories of 12 of the students who were returning students from last year or even as far back as the year before.

The students are between the ages of 8 and 10 and are all in either third or fourth grade. Most of the students have been identified as students with a Learning Disability. Some have been identified as having mild mental

retardation, which is an IQ in the low 60's to low 70's, or students with other health impairments such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or Seizure Disorder. The students spend between 30-45% of their day in my room for support in reading and/or math.

Our Room

Our Language Arts Block

This year our language arts time is divided into four blocks. Each reading group goes to each block on a daily basis. Guided Reading is one block. In Guided Reading, students are reading books on their reading level and working on skills such as building comprehension, increasing fluency and building a larger sight word vocabulary. The next instructional group is *Horizons* direct instruction where students are primarily working on developing decoding skills by focusing on letter sounds, letter blends, and word chunks to decode unknown words. During their *Horizons* sessions, students are also working on applying their decoding skills to short stories or reading passages and answering some factual recall questions based on the reading passage. The third instructional group is Spelling/Writing. For the first half of this group time, students develop spelling skills using SRA direct instruction spelling program. During the second half of this group, students work through the stages of the writing process on stories that are self selected or on given topics. The final block is called "independent center." During this time students are more self-directed. They can select to go

to the computers and play a reading game or write a story. They can listen to a book on tape. They can select an activity from the writing center or an activity from the reading center. Each student is responsible for keeping track of his or her independent work in a “Centers” folder, which is checked every Friday.

Beginning of the Year!

The first week of school the students I work with stayed in their homerooms to get acquainted with their new classmates and homeroom teacher. I feel this time is important so that the students begin to build that sense of belonging to their regular classroom. Much of their day is spent in my room, so it is important to start a foundation in their homeroom. Throughout the week I pulled individual students and administered baseline assessments so that we could begin to work on our schedule.

Reading Groups

Based on our findings, we realized in order to best meet the needs of our students we needed to create a schedule that would allow students to have instruction at their ability level. We also wanted to ensure to place them within a small enough group that instruction would be the most effective and provide a schedule that would allow students to rotate through the 4 areas of our language arts block. We ended up creating six reading groups, each with 2-3 students (see Figure 1). As our story unfolds I will introduce each group and give a more detailed picture of the individual students whom form each reading group.

Figure 1. Language Arts Schedule

Time	Guided Reading	Horizonss	Spelling/ Writing	Centers
9:00	Tana Fran	Joey Kate	Paul Brad	X
9:30	Joey Kate	Paul Brad	Tana Fran	X
10:00	Allie Tommy	Fonda Josh	Nan Robby	X
10:30	X	X	X	4 th Grade
11:00	Paul Brad	Tana Fran	Joey Kate	X
11:30	X	X	X	3 rd Grade
12:00	LUNCH			
12:30	Fonda Josh	Nan Robby	Allie Tommy	X
1:00	Nan Robby	Allie Tommy	Fonda Josh	X

Beginning of the year language arts schedule.

Tana and Fran

Tana is an eight-year old child who is in the third grade. Tana comes from a single parent home. While her twin sister is an average student, Tana with an IQ in the low 60's is classified as having Mental Retardation. Last year Tana struggled to learn her letters and numbers and struggled with any reading task in general. Tana struggled to identify the letters in her name or to recognize her name in print. Although Tana is academically low, she is high functioning socially and appears to be a happy and well-adjusted child.

Fran is new to my classroom this year and recently moved into the school district. Fran is a ten-year old child in the third grade. She has come to our school

with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that was transferred in from a neighboring school district. Fran is a ten-year old child in the third grade. The Evaluation Report on Fran's background information is limited. While it did not contain any intelligence scores or any medical background, I gathered limited information about Fran's academic standing from reading her IEP, which provided goals for reading and math and identified Fran as a student with a learning disability.

Baseline Information

Throughout the first week of school I pulled Tana and Fran individually to determine a starting point. Tana and Fran were both able to read a DRA level 2 book. This is comparable to a kindergarten reading level. When given the DIBELS letter naming fluency assessment Tana was able to name 16 letters per minute and Fran was able to identify 25 letters per minute. When given the Horizons placement tests both girls placed at lesson 21 in the level-A book, which also corresponds to a kindergarten reading level. When given the Dolch Sight Word Assessment, Tana was able to identify 8 sight words on the pre-primer list and Fran was able to read 18 words on that same list. Both girls performed similarly on all baseline assessments, so I paired them to form my first reading group (see Table 1).

Table 1

Tana and Fran Baseline Data

Name	DRA	AIMSweb		Dolch Sight Words		Observe
		<i>Type</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>List</i>	<i>%</i>	
Tana	2	DIBELS LNF	16	Letters Sounds Pre	92% 60% 40%	Little or no reading skills. She is not able to read with 1-1 correspondence
Fran	2	DIBELS LNF	25	Letters Sounds Pre	94% 73% 35%	Little or no reading skills. She is not able to read with 1-1 correspondence

Reading Groups Begin!

When Tana arrived for our first group session, she immediately put her head down, announcing, “I can’t read.”

I said to her, “but I haven’t asked you to read anything yet. How do you know you can’t read?”

She just looked at me with a very serious face and repeated, “I just can’t. That’s all.”

So many questions immediately ran through my mind...Did I ruin this kid last year with all those direct instruction activities? How can I change this child’s view of her own abilities? What can I do as a teacher to reach her and find a reading method that helps her feel more confident in reading? Will using the Guided Reading activities be something that she will enjoy? She sat through much of this initial lesson with her head down, arms folded on the table, participating only when I called upon her directly.

We spent much of our reading time during the first week working on one-to-one correspondence and identifying simple sight words. I also introduced my first reading survey (Appendix A) to Tana and Fran. I discussed with them that I would be administering this survey at the beginning and at the end of the study. The survey is a tool I used to find out what the kids each felt about their reading abilities and what types of reading they like or dislike. I told them that I was giving them the survey to find out their individual thoughts and feelings toward reading. I told them they needed to answer what they were thinking and feeling and that there wasn't a wrong answer. Tana and Fran said they feel positive about reading; their reading skills are great; reading makes them feel good; they love listening to stories; and they feel that their reading skills are above their classmates. I must admit I was surprised to see how positive their self-perceptions appeared to be. I was not sure at this time if they were answering how they thought I would want them to answer or if they had been fortunate enough not to be made aware by teachers, parents and classmates of how low their current reading levels actually were. I know I try to help my students focus on their abilities rather than their disabilities. It is my job as a teacher to be the one who knows their weaknesses and create lessons that turn those weaknesses into strengths. It creates a much more pleasant and positive learning environment when the students focus on their positive attributes and strive to maintain a positive view on learning.

Bumps in the Road

As I struggled to determine Tana and Fran's academic strengths and weaknesses, I introduced an easy reader's theatre play that I thought they would be able to handle after a few readings. Upon starting the first read through, Tana just put her head down and Fran continued to chew her fingernails. I switched gears and skipped the rest of the reader's theatre script and introduced their new Guided Reading book. I also made the decision to introduce the ABC chart for our daily familiar reading so that we could focus on beginning letter sounds since Fran and Tana both have difficulty identifying the initial sounds when they come to an unknown word. To figure out an unknown word, both girls automatically look at the picture to help them in decoding.

New Start With Beginning Sounds

To strengthen Fran and Tana's initial sound recognition, I decided to introduce the alphabet chart as a familiar read. With the alphabet chart, the girls had to identify the letter name, the letter sound and the word that matches the picture to go with that letter sound. As part of my planning for what I could do with the girls to help them learn to identify initial letter sounds in words, I talked with my co-worker to find out what words they were working on decoding in the *Horizons* program, which turned out to be words with *-am* and *-an* endings. Hence, I asked students to create new words by changing the initial consonant. After doing this with them, I composed the following poem.

How many words can you make with __an?

I can make tan,

I can make fan!

We can make can,

We can make ran.

How many words can you make with __am?

I can make jam,

I can make ham!

We can make ram,

We can make Sam!

This is easy as you can see!

Give us another task that isn't auditory.

You are right! I must say!

I guess I will go back to the drawing board AGAIN today!

How can I teach them to look at the beginning sound?

Without driving the process into the ground?

I was happy with the success of this activity but this also meant that I needed to come up with another method for getting the girls to focus on reading the initial consonant.

Sight Words: Can We Find Success?

Having learned that the girls are able to identify beginning sounds using their auditory skills, I decided to pull out some sight words that have been in several of their Guided Reading books, as follows:

Teacher: Here are four words that we will read throughout your next Guided Reading book. We have seen these words in many of our other books.

(Teacher shows the words asleep, come, wake, here)

Tana: *(sighing)* Those are big words!

Teacher: Let's look at the beginning sounds.

Teacher covers the word with a paper and shows the first letter only.

Fran: That is a W.

Teacher: What sound does a W make?

Tana and Fran: /W/

Teacher: *(uncovers the word)* The word is wake. What word do I have?

Tana: Wake!

Teacher: *(Teacher continues this word introduction pattern for all four words.)*

Okay, lets take turns and read all four words.

Tana: *(shown the word WAKE, student reads)* make!

Teacher: What is the beginning letter?

Tana: *(shrugs)* I don't know.

Fran: I know Ms. Corbin. It is a W. That word is WAKE!

(Tana slips down into her chair to pout.)

Teacher: Here is another word. Tana, help me with this.

Teacher: *(shows COME)* What is the beginning letter?

Tana: C

Teacher: What sound does C make?

Tana: /C/ *(smiles and glances over at Fran as if to say...see I can do this too!)*

Teacher: Excellent! Can you tell me the word?

Tana: Come! The word is Come!

Teacher: Yes, now let's read these words again!

Tana and Fran: *(Girls read the words successfully)*

(Play repeats at the beginning of the next day's lesson, but unfortunately the same success was not repeated.)

Light at the End of the Tunnel

As weeks went by Kelly and I continued to teach the girls using a half hour of Guided Reading and a half hour of the *Horizons* direct instruction program. I gathered very little evidence that any reading instruction we were giving the girls was making a difference in their reading abilities. Just as my co-teacher and I wondered what intervention we might try next, the girls began to sound out and blend two and three letter words. They also began to retain sight word vocabulary. To be witness to a child, who finally after much hard work and frustration, begins to understand the process of reading and for the first time truly

begins to read fills my heart with joy and is the very reason I became a special education teacher. With each new story we continued to examine four to five high frequency words prior to reading. We also moved from the ABC chart to a letter blend chart. Over the next eight weeks, Tana and Fran both moved up to an independent DRA level three, while working at an instructional level four and preparing to move up to a level six. As readers at a beginning first grade reading level, Tana and Fran were both reading consistently with one-to-one correspondence and neared mastery in letter naming fluency. They both identified approximately 80% of their individual letter sounds and moved on to identify common beginning letter blends. With each new story that was introduced Tana and Fran began to show more confidence in their own reading abilities. Rather than looking to me for help when they came to an unknown word, they looked at the beginning sounds and the other sounds that followed in an attempt to decode an unknown word. I can now say Tana and Fran are reading. They are still far behind their regular age peers, but, for the first time, I can say they are building that foundation to becoming a better reader. I feel that much of their reading success this year comes from the fact they are practicing the basic reading skills they need through the drill and repetition of the *Horizons* reading program. They are then given the opportunity to take those skills and are shown how to generalize them during Guided Reading group with books at their instructional and independent reading level. As the girls' reading levels and skills

improved, their interest in reading also improved. Instead of whining when I asked them to read out of their reading baskets, they became excited and regularly asked to read out of their baskets. They also asked to read to me so that they could share with me their ability to read the stories that were once a struggle for them to read independently (see Table 2).

Table 2

Tana and Fran Post Study Data

Name	DRA	AIMSweb		Dolch Sight Words		Observe
		Type	Score	List	%	
Tana	3	DIBELS	55	Letters	92%	Tana has shown much improvement in her skills. She is developing her sound blending skills to decode an unknown word.
		LNF		Sounds	79%	
				Pre	33%	
Fran	3	DIBELS	58	Letters	94%	Fran is able to read with one to one correspondence.
		LNF		Sounds	83%	
				Pre	44%	

Tommy and Allie

Tommy is a middle child with two older siblings and three younger brothers. Tommy is identified as a student with a specific learning disability. Most days Tommy comes to school in dirty clothes. We spent much of the end of last year trying to teach him some self-care skills. Tommy still comes to school most days with a dirty face and ears and extremely dirty hands and arms. It is evident there is little support from home in self-care.

Allie, too, is a middle child with an older sister and a much younger brother. Like Tommy, Allie comes in with uncombed hair, dirty clothes and dirty

hands and face. I have been working with Allie since she was in second grade. Allie was identified in first grade as a student with a specific learning disability. Allie needs much love and encouragement and asks frequently to come live with me. Allie has come a long way since joining my class. When she first started coming to me she would usually end up under the table crying for no visible reason.

Allie and Tommy are my two lowest-scoring fourth grade students and have the most needs both academically and socially. Both students thrive with instruction that contains a great deal of positive praise and feedback. They are both very quick to shut down if they begin to feel overly challenged.

Baseline Information

Like Tana and Fran we pulled Tommy and Allie on an individual basis to give them the baseline assessments to see where they would be placed within our language arts block. With the knowledge of last school year's ending DRA scores of Tommy and Allie both at a level 10, I administered the alternate test at the same level to verify they had maintained their reading level over the summer months. Tommy had maintained his reading level, but Allie had slipped back one level, a common regression for students who are identified as having a learning disability and for students who come from families who offer limited support of their basic living needs. When given the AIMSweb first grade R-CBM passage, Allie was able to read 12 words per minute and Tommy was able to read 14 words

per minute. On the Dolch Sight Word Assessment Allie read 75% of the pre-primer words and 41% of the primer word list. Tommy faired much better with his sight words. He read 87% of the pre-primer lists, 83% of the primer list, 76% of the first grade list, 80% of the second grade list and 64% of the third grade list. Tommy’s assessment scores this high for sight words indicate to me that his comprehension of the text and reading fluency are keeping him from reading at a higher DRA level. Since both students are returning students we started them off in the Horizonss program ten lessons back from where they had ended the previous school year (see Table 3).

Table 3

Allie and Tommy Baseline Data

Name	DRA	AIMSweb		Dolch Sight Words		Observe
		Type	Score	List	%	
Allie	8	R-CBM 1 st grade	12	Pre Primer	75% 41%	Fluency is going to be difficult. When she feels under pressure she shuts down.
Tommy	10	R-CBM 1 st grade	14	Pre Primer 1 st 2 nd 3 rd	87% 83% 76% 80% 64%	Tommy also struggles with fluency. He tends to shut down if called upon directly.

Decode, Decode, Decode!

During the first month of school Allie and Tommy worked on the same activities as Joey, Kate, Paul and Brad, but I adapted their projects as needed to meet their needs on their reading level. They performed their own puppet show

about two friends playing a guessing game about what was in a mysterious red box. Much of the script they created was repetitious. The first character asked a question, and the second character rephrased the question and gave a clue to the mystery in the box. As Allie and Tommy worked together on their play, I noticed they almost had it memorized simply as a result of composing it but they had difficulty putting expression into their voices. Even though they were reciting their own words, they still sounded like robots. I began to wonder what I could do to increase their fluency, which had not increased with repeated readings. On a whole when Allie reads, she struggles to formulate cohesive sentences. Even when reading a book that is below her level, Allie sometimes freezes on the simplest word— similar to a child who stutters.

To help formulate a solution to Tommy and Allie’s fluency issues, I sat and observed them during a *Horizons* lesson to see if they were experiencing the same difficulty in Kelly’s group. They were reading “Bitter Butter Batter,” which they had already read for the first time at the end of last school year. “Bitter Butter Batter” is a difficult story because it forces the students to focus on paying attention to the whole word. In many of the sentences the words “bitter, butter, batter and better” are used within the same sentence. The group was reading a continuation of the story from the previous day’s lesson. Having watched Allie earlier read over her Guided Reading book and stumble over simple sight words, I was surprised and excited to see her read this story with a little more confidence

and fluency at the beginning. She started out reading very strongly but then when she got to the second paragraph she started struggling again. I used my field log notes to compose the following “I” story vignette to capture what I imagine Allie is thinking as she reads.

BLAHHHHHHH! I feel Ms. Corbin watching me. I want to do a good job for her. I want to show her how well I am doing in Ms. Berk’s reading group. Will she still love me if I don’t do a good job on my reading? I hate reading. I’m not good at reading. It scares me to death. Every time I sit down to read I start out fine then it is almost like the page goes blank. I don’t see the words. The letters don’t make sense to me. Ms. Corbin and Ms. Berk tell me to look at the sounds, and I just can’t remember what sounds the letters make. The more they try to help me the more embarrassed I get and the harder it is for me to concentrate on my reading. I am freaking out. I just want to get this reading over with and not have them listening to me. Maybe if I just try to read it fast they won’t notice my mistakes and I can just be done. Nope! Ms. Berk keeps making me go back and look at the sounds. Maybe if I just stare at the book, Ms. Berk will just give me the word. Phew! She gave me the word. Okay, I’m reading again and I know these words. Oh, no! Here come those words that all look the same. Is it bitter or butter or batter? Why is Ms. Corbin watching today? I just want to show her how well I can do and make her proud of me. Forget it! I can’t read this. I am just going to put my head down and hide in my arms.

Time and time again, I see Allie become upset when she makes a mistake. She shuts herself down so quickly I often don't even realize when it is going to happen. Some days she is more willing to push through the tougher phrases as she is making progress. At these times I attempt to feed her with constant praise. On other days she won't even try. I find myself unwittingly getting frustrated with her refusal to try, and it become difficult for me to give her the encouragement she so desperately needs. Tommy exhibits much of the same reactions to reading as Allie. After observing him during the "Bitter Butter Batter" story, I used my field log notes to compose this "I" Story vignette based on my perception of Tommy's thoughts while reading.

HMMMM! Great! Ms. Corbin is here to watch us today. I like Ms. Corbin because she makes me laugh. I don't like it when she calls on me to answer a question, though. When she calls on me I feel like a deer caught in headlights. I hate being put on the spot. I also don't like to read out loud. Sometimes when I get to a word I don't know I forget what I'm suppose to do. Luckily Ms. Berk and Ms. Corbin give me some help getting started. Wow! Allie just put her head down. Yikes! Now it is my turn to read. I hope I can do a good job and show Ms. Berk and Ms. Corbin I can do this reading. I have practiced the words Bitter, Butter and Batter over and over again before we started reading our story. I even had Ms. Berk quiz me. She thought she could mess me up but I got them correct every time she pointed to one of the three words. I think I have

them down. I get nervous when Allie messes up. It makes me feel like I might mess up too. Okay, Ms. Berk said it was my turn. "Her mom began to make the batter. She said, 'We mix sweet butter into the batter.' But the butter she has is not sweet. It was bitter." Wow! I got through all of that and Ms. Berk didn't tell me to go back and fix anything! I am starting to get tired from this reading. I feel myself starting to slip away. Okay, here I go again. I'm reading...oops! that was suppose to be bitter not batter. Ahhh! I started out good but now I can't remember which is bitter or butter or batter. Ms. Berk keeps making me go back and fix my mistakes. Man! I started out so well. Now Ms. Berk keeps stopping me and telling me to look at the word again. One more sentence and then we will be done with reading the story. Then I can just sit and do my workbook page.

While Tommy and Allie often both start out reading quite well, they seem to get reading fatigue, and when that happens they seem to hit a wall and it becomes very difficult to get them to regroup and continue. I have noticed this as well when it comes to conducting a running record with both of them. In Guided Reading, I have begun to limit the amount of new text we read in a lesson. I feel that Allie's reading fatigue is due in part to the fact that her basic sight word vocabulary is not very well developed. She works so hard to decode each and every word she reads that she begins to get tired while reading. Tommy, on the other hand, although he is able to identify many of the sight words in isolation, often does not apply that vocabulary to his text reading. Based on these

observations, I decided to focus on building and strengthening both of their sight word vocabulary lists.

Over the final four weeks of this study, I continued to work on sight words. We played sight word speed games, word wall games, and we went on sight word hunts in their Guided Reading books. Kelly also worked on helping Tommy and Allie develop their sight words. She too worked on flash cards if Tommy and Allie finished their Horizons lesson before it was time to switch groups. We both noticed that our focus on sight words started to pay off and when we administered the final sight word assessment, Tommy and Allie both showed significant growth. Allie mastered the pre-primer sight word list and is near mastery on the primer list. Tommy has probably made the most success with his sight words, having mastered pre-primer through the second grade sight word lists and coming near mastery on the third grade list (see Table 4). Kelly and I will continue to work on building Allie and Tommy's sight word knowledge through games and other fun activities. We will also continue to work on further developing their decoding skills with the use of the Horizons program and reading fluency within Guided Reading texts. My goal is that they will have a strong enough reading foundation and the confidence in their own skills that when they leave us at the end of the school year and move up to the middle school they continue to find success and joy in reading.

Table 4

Allie and Tommy Post Study Data

Name	DRA	AIMSweb		Dolch Sight Words		Observe
		Type	Score	List	%	
Allie	10	R-CBM	33	Pre	90%	Fluency is still difficult. She has made much growth with sight words
		1 st grade		Primer	76%	
Tommy	12	R-CBM	42	Pre	98%	He has gained confidence in reading.
		1 st grade		Primer	89%	
				1 st	93%	
				2 nd	80%	
		3 rd	85%			

Joey, Kate, Paul, and Brad

Joey is an only child who is being raised by his grandparents and lives very much in an adult world. Joey socially interacts with peers and teachers with adult humor. Often funny and extremely active, Joey is diagnosed as a child with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). His grandparents report that each night before bed Joey jumps for a ½ hour so that he is able settle down and sleep at night. Joey does not take medication for ADHD, which adds to his learning difficulties. He started coming to my classroom mid way through second grade and is currently in third grade. Joey initially only qualified for support in reading and language arts, but due to his inattentiveness he has fallen behind and now comes to my room in the afternoon for math as well.

Kate is a third grade student who is new to my classroom this year but not new to special education. Kate qualifies for special education as a student with a seizure disorder and has had traumatic brain injury due to a severe seizure in early

childhood. Kate is the younger of two children. Like other students in my classroom, Kate has personal care issues that trickle down from home life. She often comes to school in clothing that is dirty and too small. Apart from her cleanliness Kate appears to be a happy and loving child and often seeks hugs from adults.

Paul, also a new student to my room this year, received special education in second grade within an inclusion setting. He made minimal progress in reading, so this year he was assigned to my room for reading and language arts, which is a more restrictive program. Paul is currently in third grade. Paul stays in his homeroom class for mathematics. Paul comes from what appears to be a stable home, where he lives with his father, stepmother and older sister. Quiet and reserved, Paul does not choose to offer information unless he is directly asked.

Brad is also a third grader and has been coming to my classroom since the beginning of second grade. Brad comes to school with much baggage. He has a Behavioral Specialist who comes for a report every couple of weeks. When he initially entered my room last year, Brad was being observed for possible emotional support. While Brad should be attending another school within our district, Brad's mother fought diligently to have him attend school here because she says that she was told that we have the best special education programming in the district. Brad's behavior has come a long way since last year. We no longer

have the temper tantrums and the refusal to work unless there is something negative going on at home. When Brad begins to exhibit negative behaviors it is usually a carry over from home.

Baseline Information

Kate, Joey, Brad and Paul all began the school year with some basic reading skills. They all had a good mastery of their letter sound correlation and had some basic sight words. When given the DRA, Kate and Joey read at level 3 independently but were not able to pass the level 4 test. Brad and Paul were both able to read at level 6 independently. All four students are reading at the beginning of a first grade level. Joey and Brad were returning students so we knew approximately where they would begin within the Horizonss reading program. When given the placement tests Kate and Paul placed within the same area as Brad and Joey.

We also administered the DIBELS assessment for reading fluency to all four students. Kate had a letter naming fluency of 30 letters per minute. Joey and Paul showed mastery in all DIBELS assessments and started with the Kindergarten R-CBM. Paul had a baseline score of 28 words per minute and Joey had a baseline score 9 words per minute. Brad mastered letter naming and sound fluency but only achieved a baseline score of 23 on phonemic segmentation.

When given the Dolch Sight Word Assessment, Kate read 40% of the pre-primer word list; Joey read 60% of the pre-primer list; Brad read 71% of the pre-

primer list and 54% of the primer word list; and Paul was able to read 75% of the pre-primer list, 67% of the primer list and 51% of the first grade list, scoring better than any of my other third grade students. This group all had similarities in their basic reading skills they became my next reading group (see Table 5).

Table 5

Kate, Joey, Brad and Paul Baseline Data

Name	DRA	AIMSweb		Dolch Sight Words		Observe
		Type	Score	List	%	
Kate	3	DIBELS LNF	30	Letters	98%	Very slow but has some basic reading skills
				Sounds	83%	
				Pre	40%	
Joey	3	DIBELS NWF	23	Letters	100%	Very distractible but has some beginning reading skills. Has difficulty blending sounds.
				Sounds	90%	
				Pre	60%	
Brad	6	DIBELS PSF	32	Letters	98%	Has some basic skills and is working to blend sounds together while reading.
				Sounds	92%	
				Pre	71%	
				Primer	54%	
Paul	6	DIBELS LSF	32	Letters	98%	Has most basic reading skills in isolation but has difficulty putting them to use while reading.
				Sounds	98%	
				Pre	75%	
				Primer	67%	
				1 st	51%	

Reading Begins

Although we gathered much baseline data, there were still some skills that I needed to check in order to see what I needed to include in my Guided Reading lessons for this group. We began by playing a game of initial consonants, where each student was shown a card and asked to identify the beginning sound. This group did a great job with this activity, so I knew they could identify the

beginning sounds when given the word orally. Next, I introduced our poem for the week. The first thing I noticed when we went to read it as a group was that they were not consistently looking at the beginning sound to decode an unknown word or any of the other sounds that followed. They often simply took a wild guess. This was our starting point. As we read through their Guided Reading book this first week, I encouraged them to use their sounding out skills they were working on in the *Horizons* program. By the end of the week, they were getting better at looking at the sounds but still needed a verbal reminder from me to stop and try to decode the unknown word. There was a common theme identified in Guided Reading that week. I came to the realization that although my students have the sounding out skills that we worked on developing all last year, they were not transferring those decoding skills to reading outside the *Horizons* lessons.

Progress is Starting!

One morning when we previewed Little Frog's Monster Story, during our Guided Reading lesson, Joey announced, "I don't want you to help me at all today. I want to read it all on my own."

I said, "Great! Just remember when you come to an unknown word...Stop, look at the letters and try to sound it out. Then go back and read the entire word." Joey struggled with this task last year. He could break the word into sounds but could not blend the sounds together to figure out the word. It wasn't until the very end of the year that he was beginning to blend simple letter sounds

together to read a word. When Joey began reading Little Frog's Monster Story, he read the first few lines without any trouble. When he got to the third sentence and came to the word "just," Joey held up his hand as if to stop me from jumping in to help. He said, "I can do this Ms. Corbin without your help."

I said nothing.

Joey looked at the word and said, "/j//u/./ju/.../s//t/.../st/.../ju/ /st/.../just/... JUST! The word is just!" He gave a big smile and continued reading the rest of the line, which was a great sight to see. Joey was so proud of himself. He continued reading his part and sounding out the unknown words as he came to them. When we finished reading through the book Joey looked at me and said, "Ms. Corbin you were right! I can read!"

I smiled and said, "Joey, would I lie to you about that? You just need to trust yourself. You have the skills you need. Now just need to remember to use them on your own."

He smiled and said, "I guess." He couldn't have been more proud of himself during reading that day. Joey has since continued to decode unknown words on his own. He only seeks help on the more difficult words that don't follow the regular phonetic patterns.

Fluency Work!

After spending a few weeks focusing on word decoding I began to see the kids gaining more independence in their reading. I decided to pull back from word decoding and spend additional time working on reading fluency. The best way I know for students to improve their reading fluency is to do repeated readings of a text. I decided the best way to get them to engage in this repeated reading was to introduce reader's theatre scripts that we would practice and then perform for their homeroom classes. The dialogue below shows how this particular group responded to reader's theatre.

Teacher: You guys have made lots of growth in your reading and now it is time to step it up a notch and work on some new reading goals. When you are reading aloud there are things you must add to your reading to make it more interesting to the listener.

Students: *(Look at teacher with blank expressions.)*

Teacher: The first thing you must do when reading aloud is read smoothly and with expression. Does anyone know what that means?

Students: *(Still look at teacher with blank expressions.)*

Teacher: *(models reading from the groups Guided Reading book without expression and then reading with expression.)* Which reading sounds better?

Why?

Paul: It sounded better when your voice went up and down— not when you just read the sentence.

Teacher: Exactly Paul! That is called reading smoothly and with expression.

That is our first Oral Reading Goal.

Teacher writes first goal on chart paper. Teacher reads another couple of lines from their book and ignores punctuation.

Brad: *(before teacher can finish reading)* Wait! Ms. Corbin you didn't stop at that period.

Teacher: *(smiles)* Brad, you are right. We need to pay attention to the ending marks of a sentence. If there is an exclamation mark I need to change my voice to show excitement, surprise, or other feelings. If there is a question mark at the end my voice should go up to sound as if I'm asking a question. *(Teacher adds second goal to the chart paper.)* Now I want you to listen to me read one more page and tell me which sentence sounds better. *(Teacher reads three sentences. The first she reads very slowly, the second one very fast, and the third one at a nice pace.)* Which sentence did I read the best?

Kate: The last one.

Teacher: Why?

Kate: The first one was too slow and the next one was too fast. I couldn't understand what you were saying.

Teacher: Exactly! Our last Oral Reading Goal is to read at a pace that lets listeners understand the words. *(Teacher adds this to the other two goals on the chart paper.)* Okay, now let's read through our Oral Reading Goals. *(The group*

reads the three goals together.) These are the things we are going to focus on when we practice these! *(Teacher shows students their Reader's Theatre Scripts)* We will be practicing reading the scripts and following our Oral Reading Goals. When you have learned your scripts and are able to read them with fluency, then we will make puppets and perform our plays for our homeroom classes. Now let's practice reading through our scripts and then discuss what each play is about.

Brad: I can't wait until we do this for the class!

Over the next three weeks, the groups continued to practice their Reader's Theater scripts, focusing on the Oral Reading Goals. By the end of the second week students began to have their script memorized and to create the puppets for their show. When Joey and Kate practiced their puppet show for the first time hiding under the table, they brought new reactions to the entire play experience. When they first crawled under the table, both just sat and giggled. I went under to see what was so funny.

Teacher: What is so funny under there?

Joey: This is just so cool. I love getting to do this!

(The kids talk through their script and practice holding their puppets while reading.)

Joey: Can we do it again? This was great!

(Both of the kids emerge with huge smiles.)

Teacher: Sure. I think you'll want to a little louder, though, so the audience will be able to hear your play.

Joey: Do I need to be loud like Pikachu?

Teacher: Yes! Joey if thinking about acting like Pikachu helps you read louder, then do that.

(They started out nice and strong with great fluency and expression.

Kate has never before shown so much emotion in her reading.)

Kate: *(laughing)*. That was sooooo much fun!

At the end of the week we were ready to share our puppet shows with the kids' homeroom classes. After the performances we sat down as a group to discuss how we thought the performances went. The following dialogue recreates our discussion.

Teacher: How did you guys feel about your puppet shows today?

Joey: *(jumped up)* Can we do it again?

Kate: It was kind of embarrassing and I felt silly.

Teacher: Would you do it again?

Kate: *(shyly with a giggle)* Yeah.

Brad: Next time can we do a dinosaur play?

Teacher: That might be possible. I will look for a Reader's Theatre script with dinosaurs.

Paul: Ms. Corbin...I think my class really liked our play.

Teacher: What makes you think that?

Paul: They were quiet and listened to us.

Teacher: I agree. I heard some of them talking to your teachers about wanting to do a show for you guys next. Maybe they will invite us to a show? You guys did an excellent job. I am very, very proud of you!

Post Study Results

With the practice of repeated reading of texts the student improved their reading fluency in both speed and expression. The weekly data collection of AIMSweb R-CBMs also demonstrate the students' improved reading fluency. Brad has made the most fluency growth. He was able to demonstrate mastery of all DIBELS assessments and was able to read 81 wpm on the kindergarten R-CBM. Paul and Joey were also able to demonstrate mastery on all the DIBELS assessments. Paul was able to read 30 wpm on the kindergarten R-CBM and Joey was able to read 35 wpm. Kate made growth in Letter Naming Fluency. She started with naming 30 letters per second and was able to reach near mastery at 57 letter names per minute. We have continued to work on applying our Oral Reading Goals to our Guided Reading texts and our poetry reading. With each new book or poem that is introduced, I continued to remind the students to apply those reading goals to their own reading. My hope is that eventually I will not have to give a verbal reminder to them and they will begin to apply the Oral Reading Goals independently to their reading.

This group also showed extreme improvement in their sight word vocabulary. Brad went from reading 57% to 100% of the primer list. Paul went from reading 67% to 85% of the primer list. Joey went from reading 60% to 71% of the pre-primer list. Kate increased her sight word knowledge from 40% to 60% of the pre-primer list.

With increase in fluency and sight words also came increase in reading levels for most of the group. While Paul showed growth in fluency and sight word knowledge, he did not show growth in reading levels according to the Developmental Reading Assessment. Brad again showed the most growth in reading. He went from a DRA level 6 to a level 12. Joey and Kate both increased their DRA level from a 3 to 6 (see Table 6). Clearly, Joey, Kate, Paul, and Brad are all on their way to becoming fluent readers with a strong foundation upon which to grow.

Table 6*Kate, Joey, Brad and Paul Post Study Data*

Name	DRA	AIMSweb		Dolch Sight Words		Observe
		Type	Score	List	%	
Kate	6	DIBELS LNF	50	Letters	98%	Kate has improved in her application of skill to reading. She seeks help less often and attempts to decode on her own.
				Sounds	94%	
				Pre	60%	
Joey	6	R-CBM K	35	Letters	100%	He has made much improvement in his sight words and decoding skills. He is able to decode most unknown words on his own.
				Sounds	90%	
				Pre	71%	
Brad	12	R-CBM 1 st	105	Letters	98%	He has made the most improvement out of any of my students. He enjoys reading and helping other read.
				Sounds	92%	
				Pre	92%	
				Primer	100%	
Paul	6	R-CBM K	30	Letters	98%	Paul has not made as much growth as I had predicted.
				Sounds	98%	
				Pre	92%	
				Primer	85%	
				1 st	63%	

Nan, Robby, Josh and Fonda

This group consists of my fourth grade students Robby, Nan, and Josh, all of whom were with me for third grade. Fonda joined our room with two weeks left last year, so in essence she was new to me for this study. Robby comes from one of my only two parent homes. His mother is also a special education teacher in a neighboring school district. Robby has an older brother whom he looks up to and idolizes. Robby is a kind hearted friendly child and a hard worker who wants to be a good student.

Nan has been with me since the late part of her second grade year. Nan, whose primary home language is Spanish, is classified as an English Language Learner. Nan's English is very good and she often acts as a translator for her parents who do not speak any English. Nan was an only child until August when her mom gave birth to a new little sister. She is the one student who comes in on a regular basis sporting new clothes saying, "My parents bought me these new clothes for no good reason. They just love me!" Along with her many clothes she also comes adorned in earrings, necklaces, rings and bracelets.

Josh is currently living with his grandparents since both of his parents are in jail for what Josh says is, "A very long time." I am not sure what their crimes were, but Josh has been a witness to many illegal activities. When Josh gets in trouble in his homeroom class it takes a great deal of talking and positive coercion to get him to move past what happened in the other room and get to work in our classroom.

To my surprise, Fonda has become my most difficult fourth grader. She has very little respect for authority and refuses to do work on a regular basis. I have spoken to Fonda on numerous occasions to try and figure out if there were other things going on that were affecting her behavior. Some days she comes in ready to work and participate in class, but other days she acts like a small child and pouts, refusing help and refusing to do any work.

Baseline Information

While these four students are my highest readers, Robby is the lowest reader in this group. He had a baseline reading level of 14, which coincides with near the end of a first grade reading level. Nan is reading at a DRA level 18, which is the ending benchmark for first grade. Josh had a baseline DRA level of 20, which is the beginning of second grade and Fonda is our highest reader with a DRA level of 24, which is a mid second grade level. When given the AIMSweb reading passages, all four students were able to pass the benchmarks of the kindergarten and first grade passages. They are all reading second grade AIMSweb reading passages. Nan is able to read approximately 30 words per minute, and Robby is able to read about 40 words per minute. Fonda and Josh are more fluent readers. Fonda reads approximately 50 words per minute, and Josh is able to read nearly 70 words per minute. When given the Dolch Sight Word Assessment, Josh mastered all the lists from pre-primer to third grade with 97%-100% accuracy. Although Fonda is my highest reader, she was only able to read with 95% accuracy or better on the pre-primer through the first grade lists. Nan was able to read 98% of the pre-primer list but was only able to read 70-80% of the primer and first grade lists. Robby was not able to read any of the lists at a mastery level, but was near mastery on the pre-primer through first grade reading lists with a 78% or better. Overall, Nan and Fonda are not very accurate readers but they have good comprehension despite their high error rate. Robby is a

cautious reader. He reads slowly and is often worried about making mistakes.

Finally, Josh reads with fluency but has very little expression when reading aloud (see Table 7).

Table 7

Nan, Robby, Fonda, and Josh Baseline Data

Name	DRA	AIMSweb		Dolch Sight Words		Observe
		Type	Score	List	%	
Nan	18	R-CBM 2 nd	30	Pre	98%	She has a high error rate but has good comprehension
				Primer	85%	
				1 st	76%	
				2 nd	58%	
Robby	14	R-CBM 2 nd	43	Pre	87%	He is a very cautious and nervous reader.
				Primer	81%	
				1 st	78%	
				2 nd	69%	
Fonda	24	R-CBM 2 nd	54	Pre	94%	Accuracy is low. She does not identify errors while reading.
				Primer	96%	
				1 st	93%	
				2 nd	78%	
				3 rd	87%	
Josh	20	R-CBM 2 nd	69	Pre	94%	Reads with little expression. Has good sight word base.
				Primer	100%	
				1 st	100%	
				2 nd	98%	
				3 rd	97%	

Are We Working on Fluency or Having Fun?

For the first few weeks of school we worked on establishing a routine and some basic reading skills. One area that all of my reading groups needed to improve was their reading fluency. It was for this reason I chose to combine Guided Reading and Horizons Direct Instruction as my research intervention.

Last year my students had become so bogged down with decoding a word that they forgot they also needed to maintain a good reading pace so they were able to make better sense of what they were reading.

Just as I did with the other groups, I introduced Reader's Theatre scripts with the goal of repeated readings to increase fluency. To begin this new area of focus in their reading, we discussed the same three Oral Reading goals that I had established with the first two groups. The first goal was to read smoothly and with expression. The second goal was to pay attention to punctuation. The third goal was to read at a pace that lets the listeners understand the word. I explained to the students that when we reach all three goals with their plays, we would make puppets and perform the plays for their homeroom classes, and this group, like the others, was very excited about this.

Nan remembered being invited into a class last year to watch students perform "Where the Wild Thing Are." She said, "Ms. Corbin, I remember you said we would do this after we watched their play. I'm so excited! I was sad last year that we didn't get to do a play for our classes. This will be great!"

Last year I hadn't had the time to do any poetry or plays because I only had time to take students through the activities required by the *Horizons* Direct Instruction program. This year, now that I built time into the schedule for Guided Reading, we could and would also focus on fluency.

After introducing the Reader's Theatre plays, this group in particular really worked hard to reach the fluency goals. Nan, Robby, Fonda and Josh often made me laugh as they played around with changing their voice to be a different character. Each day we read through the play as part of our familiar read. In the beginning some of their parts were a little choppy, but they all did a fabulous job of paying attention to punctuation.

After we practiced reading our Reader's Theatre scripts for a few weeks I thought we would be ready to perform for their homeroom classes. The students had created their puppets and the necessary props. The only thing to do was to practice putting it all together. I thought this would be easy. I was wrong. We practiced one last time in preparation for our performances the next day. The rehearsal didn't go to well. I sat the group down to have a class discussion.

I simply started the discussion with, "Well guys, what do you think? Do you want to do your puppet shows for your classes today or do you want to practice a day or two longer?" I told them that it was their decision and whatever they decided as a group was fine with me.

Robby was the first to speak up. He said, "Well, I want to do a good job for my class and I think my group needs more practice."

Josh spoke up next. He said, "I agree with Robby. Maybe we can do our shows in here again and say good and bad things about our plays. Then we can work on it and fix the things we need to fix."

I was amazed by Robby's speech. He really does have some higher-level thinking. After Robby spoke, everyone else said they wanted to practice a few days more, which was another surprise to me. I thought I would have at least one or two who still wanted to perform their play for their class with no additional preparation.

When we finally performed our puppet shows for the student's homeroom classes, they did a fabulous job. We had three performances. First, fourth grade performed for their classes. At the end of the performances one of the kids in the audience raised his hand and asked if he and his classmates could ask some questions. Robby and Nan both looked at me and said, "Can we, Ms. Corbin?"

I said, "Sure, You guys are in charge of calling on students. It is your show. You are running it."

With that, hands shot up and my students proceeded to run the show. One student asked how the kids made their puppets.

Nan spoke up and said, "We used foam board, material and our imaginations." Another student asked how long they had been practicing their plays.

Fonda spoke up and said, "We have been practicing for a few weeks. First we just practiced reading. Then when we got good we got to make our puppets and practice with them."

All of the kids had huge smiles on their faces. It was obvious that they were proud of their accomplishments. We took their pictures with their puppets in front of the puppet theatre.

After their homeroom classes went back to their rooms we all sat on the floor to talk about how they felt. Nan and Robby both said in unison, “It was sooo cool, Ms. Corbin.”

Nan went on to say, “I can’t wait to do it again.”

Robby chimed in and said, “ME TOO! Are we going to start another play next week?”

I said “no” but that we were going to work on some other things that we could share with their classes some other time.

When I said this, Fonda asked, “Can we do a play with costumes and stuff?”

I said I would think about it.

At that time it seemed like a pretty big task and with the way my schedule is set up it would be hard finding time to practice with everyone.

Josh said he liked making the puppets. Since Josh enjoys drawing in general, every time we have an assignment where they get to draw about their reading he spends diligent time carefully drawing. Sometimes I have to hurry him along and tell him he has to do the writing portion before he finishes his drawing.

They really took pride in this project and wanted to do the best job that they could do for their homeroom class. Throughout this fluency project the pride that went into their work genuinely affected the final outcome and success of the endeavor. The more pride and ownership that each student had toward the project, the harder they worked to make sure it was successful.

Life Gets in the Way of Learning

Of course, throughout the course of my action research study, we seemed to have some significant outside influences that really had an effect on various individuals' learning. This group in particular seemed to be riddled with family problems. When something bad is happening at home it not only affects the home life but it also take a toll on school life and learning. The students in my school seem to have a higher incidence and more than their fair share of troubled home lives. After being witness to so many tragic stories, I composed a series of "I" story vignettes to portray the deep effect home sometimes has on a child's learning.

Will My Parents be Home Tonight?

I don't feel like reading today. I am afraid to tell Ms. Corbin and Ms. Berk what is going on. I just want to crawl in a hole and hope that the day is over soon. I want to go home. I need to see my mom and dad so I know they are safe. I don't really understand what my aunt was talking about on the phone last night. I was lying in my bed and I heard her talking to a friend. I think the friend told

her to stay home from work because the guys that are like police but only look for Mexicans were coming into the factories and taking all the Mexicans away. My mom used to work at the same factory as my aunt. Will they find out where we live and take my mom, my baby sister, my aunt and my baby cousin away while I am gone? Oh I just can't concentrate on my schoolwork. Ms. Corbin keeps asking me what is wrong. She knows that something is wrong but is she safe to tell? I call her my other mom while I am here at school. I know she loves me, but is it safe to tell her? I just want to go home and see my mom. What if they go to my dad's work and take him away? He went to work today. Great, Ms. Corbin just sent the others off to the library to read out of our baskets. Now she is scooting closer to me. I need to tell someone. I'm so scared. Oh great, now I'm starting to cry. I can't hold it in anymore. I have to tell Ms. Corbin the story. Maybe she can help me...I told Ms. Corbin everything. She pulled me into her arms, and I think she cried a little too. I started to feel a little safer after telling her. She took me down to Mrs. L, my ESL teacher, and we called my mom. I just wanted to tell my mom what I heard my aunt talking about. I don't think my aunt told her about the police guys. I just need to know that she and my baby sister are safe. Mrs. L talked to my mom and told her what was going on. I talked to my mom too. She said that she knew about the police guys and so did my dad. My mom said that they were safe and I would be safe at school. You know what was

even better? Ms. Corbin let me eat lunch up in her room today. I think I feel better now.

Why Are They Fighting?

I'm so tired. I didn't get any sleep last night. I feel sick to my stomach. I just want to hide away from everyone and cry. Mrs. B keeps telling me to start my writing. I don't want to write. I can't tell anyone what happened last night. I am scared. I am worried about my mom. It isn't fair that my brother got to stay home from school. I wonder where my dad is. What did he do? Who was he talking to on his cell phone? Why did my mom get so angry? I'm so tired. I think they all thought I was sleeping last night. Really I was lying in my bed and crying. I could hear my mom crying too. I didn't sleep very well. We went to sleep at my brother's friend's house since my parents were fighting. Okay, I guess I will write about PIZZA. I will put that in the middle of my writing web. No, I just can't write about PIZZA. I'll ask Mrs. B how to spell DIVORCE. Mrs. B asked why I want to write about divorce. I just put my head down. Mrs. B took me over to Ms. Corbin and showed her my paper. Ms. Corbin put her arm around me, and I started to cry. I have to tell her what happened last night. I think she will know how to help me. I told Ms. Corbin about the fight between my mom and dad. I told her everything. I even told her that I heard my mom say she wants a divorce. Ms. Corbin called my mom to let her know that I was having a hard time today. I told her that was okay with me. Ms. Corbin also let me stay in

her room for the rest of the day. I got to eat lunch in there and she even let me stay in her room when I was supposed to go back to my other classroom. I feel safe when I am with Ms. Corbin. My mom came in near the end of the school day and found me with Ms. Corbin. Ms. Corbin and my mom talked for a few minutes. My mom cried a little but she told me things were going to be okay.

I HATE Writing!!!!!!

Man! I got stuck starting with writing again this week! I had to start with writing in centers last week! It's not fair! I always have to start with writing. I'm not going to do it. I'm going to go sit in the library. They can't make me write. Great! Here comes Ms. Corbin. She doesn't look very happy. I told her that she couldn't make me write! I'm not going to write. I hate writing! She knows I hate writing. I don't want her to sit and write with me. Doesn't she know I DON'T WANT TO WRITE!!!!!! I would rather draw. Now Ms. Corbin keeps asking me if something is wrong. YES!!! I want to scream. I don't want to write! I got in trouble the whole weekend and I just don't want to be here. Why is everyone so bossy? I yelled at Ms. Corbin. I told her that I wasn't going to write. Now she is mad and said we are going to go call my Grandma. Great! Now I am going to be in more trouble! I just don't want to WRITE!!!!!!

Fighting!

We had the police at my house last night. My dad went to jail. He beat my mom up because she was talking to a guy at work. My mom has a black eye. I

didn't sleep good last night. I get scared when my dad isn't at home. He makes me feel safe. I am scared that he will hit my mom again when he gets out of jail. My dad scares me. I don't want to go to school today. My mom says I can't stay home. I just want to be with my mom. I'm scared that my dad will be mad at me. I was the one who called 911. I thought he was going to kill my mom. My mom just kept screaming that she was only talking to the guy. Why would my dad be mad that she is talking to someone? I can't wait to get out of my homeroom class today. Ms. Corbin and Ms. Berk always tell me I can talk to them if something is bothering me. I need to talk to them. I told Ms. Corbin and Ms. Berk what happened at my house last night. I walked right over to their desks and went down on my knees. I told them everything. It felt good to tell someone. I wonder if my dad will be out of jail when I get home from school?

On these three occasions all learning was lost. For Nan, she was able to come back the next day and work like she normally does. Robby was a different story. Robby's situation took a couple of weeks to work itself out. Josh continues to have anger management issues and has gotten his medication readjusted to keep up with his growing body. Fonda continues to have many troubles at home, where her mother refused to press any charges against her father. Fonda has stated very clearly that her dad never lays a hand on her, but she continues to live with the fear he brings. Unfortunately, these are not isolated incidents. I could probably tell a story or two for each of my students of things

that have happened outside of school but have taken a real toll on their learning. I could tell even more stories for the other children in my school. It is difficult as a teacher to try to get these students to learn when they are in life survival mode.

We Find Success

Despite the personal difficulties this group has managed to find some success with reading. Each group member improved his or her reading level by one or two levels. Nan improved her reading level from an 18 to a 20. Fonda moved from a level 24 to a level 28. Robby increased his reading level from a 14 to a 16 and Josh made the most growth in this group and went from a DRA level 20 to a level 28. This group is all reading within the second grade reading level. They have all mastered the pre-primer to third grade Dolch Sight Word lists. They have also made great improvement in their reading fluency. Nan and Robby went from reading approximately 30-40 wpm to reading between 50-60 wpm. Fonda increased her fluency score from approximately 50 wpm to 80 wpm. Josh increased his reading fluency from approximately 70 wpm to 80 wpm. This group will all be moving up to the middle school next year, so as the year continues Kelly and I will continue to work on strengthening their basic reading skills through continued use of the Horizons program and help them develop more reading independence by working on self selected independent chapter book projects (see Table 8).

Table 8*Nan, Robby, Fonda, and Josh Post Study Data*

Name	DRA	AIMSweb		Dolch Sight Words		Observe
		Type	Score	List	%	
Nan	20	R-CBM 2 nd	49	Pre	98%	Accuracy has shown improvement.
				Primer	91%	
				1 st	83%	
				2 nd	73%	
Robby	16	R-CBM 2 nd	55	Pre	94%	He has grown in his reading confidence.
				Primer	100%	
				1 st	90%	
				2 nd	98%	
Fonda	28	R-CBM 2 nd	65	Pre	94%	Her ability varies with her mood. She does not always read for meaning.
				Primer	96%	
				1 st	93%	
				2 nd	93%	
Josh	28	R-CBM 2 nd	70	Pre	94%	His behavior really dictates his performance ability.
				Primer	100%	
				1 st	100%	
				2 nd	98%	
				3 rd	97%	

DATA ANALYSIS

As a special education teacher, I find data collection and analysis to be of second nature to me because of my teaching position. I felt very confident in my ability to analyze my data throughout the process of my action research study because it is such an enormous part of my job even when I am not conducting a systematic study of my teaching practices. I used a number of methods to help me in my data analysis process.

Ongoing Analysis

Minute by minute, lesson-by-lesson, day-by-day, data analysis was ongoing throughout my action research study. According to Ahar, Holly & Kasten (2001), and Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul (1997), data analysis must be an ongoing process throughout any qualitative research study. As part of my ongoing analysis I used what Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997) call “graphic displays and microanalytic templates” (p.192). The information I put into graphs and charts constituted my quantitative data. I created fluency graphs of the AIMSweb information and graphs of the Running Record assessments I administered during Guided Reading. It was that continuous analysis that helped me modify my lessons and instruction to better meet the needs of my students. When a student had three consecutive data points of an independent reading accuracy rate of 95% or higher I would introduce the next level of Guided Reading text for the following week’s lessons as their new instructional level. This ongoing analysis also helped me to see areas where I needed to gather more or less data to help me maintain focus on my research question.

Codes, Bins and Theme Statements

The most important method I used for analyzing my field log was a process Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997) described in their book On Writing Qualitative Research. As I collected field log notes, I periodically read over my

past field log entries. As I reread over the entries, I identified the root of what I was writing about and wrote that basic idea in the margin of my field log.

sample from field log pg 10:

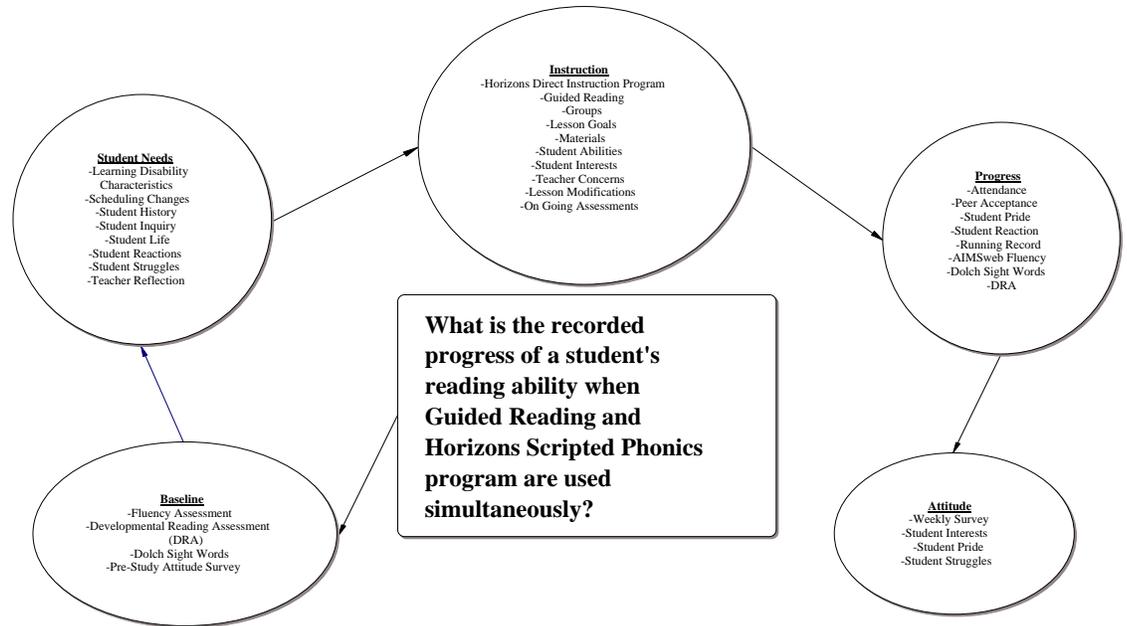
“Tana just put her head down and Fran continued to chew her fingernails.”

– Negative Student Reaction

This is an example of a negative student reaction to a particular lesson, a coding that I used to show that the students were not engaged in the activity. I needed to then determine if the lack of engagement was because of lack of interest in the topic or if the activity was frustrating and too difficult. As I continued to read, I realized the activity was too difficult and I needed to think of another fluency activity that would be on the girls’ level and one that would actively engage them in the process.

After coding my entire field log, I took the codes to another level for analysis. I looked for commonalities between my codes and grouped them into larger bins (See Figure 2). After creating the bins I wrote a series of theme statements that emerged from the commonalities within those bins. Throughout this process I continually asked whether or not I was making progress in answering my original research question. This process helped me to see that I had, in fact, answered my question and also led to the creation of new questions for future action research studies.

Figure 2. Bins



Shows codes grouped into bins in which themes statements were created based on the items within each bin.

Outlines and Table of Contents

Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997) feel that writing up a Table of Contents or generating an outline is another form of analyzing or interpreting data. I used both methods. At the conclusion of my data collection, I was given a class assignment, which asked me to develop an overview or Table of Contents based on the data that I had collected in my field log. At the time I was not certain that I fully understood the purpose of the assignment, but as I dove into the project I began to see its importance. While composing my Table of Contents, I

decided to tell my story through a series of case studies rather than purely chronologically from beginning to end.

After deciding that I would share my stories through a series of relatively short case studies, I then needed to determine which of the many stories I had documented in my log that I would share. To decide which stories I would tell I needed to go back to my theme statements and reorganize my field log. I cut and pasted my field log into four groups that divided the participant observations entries I had written in my field log. I then reread over my field log in its new form and reread my list of theme statements. From this I created an outline of those stories I would tell within each group and came to the realization that I was able to create more theme statements based on this new reorganization of my field log.

Narrative Forms

Another form of analysis that Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997) suggest is the creation of a variety of narrative forms in an attempt to examine the data more closely from the vantage point of different research participants. As part of my story I used various narrative forms to gain a better understanding of my students thoughts and feelings. I wrote “I” Story vignettes, poems, and used my student’s dialogue to create dramatization of their reactions to lessons and activities.

Analytic Memos

Analytic memos are another form of data analysis I conducted throughout my study. I read and examined my observations in light of works written by Dewey (1938), Delpit (2002), Vygotsky (1978), and Friere (1970). Dewey helped me to define traditional education. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development was also important to the creation of my research question, and his theory lies at the core of my study. I set out to improve students' independent reading level while working within their respective Zones of Proximal Development. Delpit (2002) helped me to look more closely at the language of my students and helped me become more aware of looking at their differences as strengths rather than weaknesses. Finally, Friere (1970) helped me to learn how to empower my students in light of the oppression I was feeling when I was assigned a mandated reading program.

FINDINGS

Dewey (1938) made the following statement that was the catalyst for the birth of my study. "When external authority is rejected, it does not follow that all authority should be rejected, but rather that there is need to search for a more effective source of authority" (p. 19). Although Dewey (1938) is supportive of the progressive model of education, in this quote he suggests not to throw out what has been learned from the past but to continue to search for new solutions to recurrent problems. In Dewey's (1938) view of the traditional education model,

the teacher is the authority figure who carries out a predetermined plan that has been based on the past. Dewey (1938) feels that we can draw from the predetermined plans but, that as educators we need to use the progressive model of education and interweave and adapt the traditional plan of action based on our students' past experiences. Dewey (1938) cautions us about throwing away the traditional method and haphazardly embracing a new method without working hard to understand our students' learning and social needs.

In the beginning of my study, I was one of those teachers who wanted to rebel against the use of what Connelly and Clandinin (1998) called teacher-proof materials. This was not an option, so in my study I searched for the right balance between a traditional scripted Direct Instruction phonics program and a more progressive approach of Guided Reading to meet the needs of my learning support students. Throughout the process of this action research study I gathered some essential information to support the combined use of Guided Reading with the *Horizons* Direct Instruction program. By combining these two polar opposite programs into one language arts program, favorable results are evident in my students' growth in their reading skills. It is apparent through teacher observations and reading assessments that our students made progress in their ability to break apart an unknown word into sounds and sound clusters in order to decode and read the word. Guided Reading also helped in the successful reading growth of our class. Since the *Horizonss* program focuses on the phonetic decoding of

words we used Guided Reading to help students focus on sight words, fluency and comprehension of books within their instructional reading level. Using Guided Reading allowed for me to help my student bridge the gap between reading in their Horizonss books to reading picture and chapter books. Their sight word vocabulary and fluency all improved. Overall, the students in our classroom showed a considerable amount of reading growth (see Table 9 & 10).

Table 9

4th Grade Pre/Post Study Reading Assessment Data

Name	DRA		AIMSweb		Sight Words	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Allie	8	10	12 wpm	33 wpm	pre-primer 75% primer 41%	pre-primer 90% primer 76%
Tommy	10	12	14 wpm	42 wpm	pre-primer 87% primer 83% 1 st 76% 2 nd 80% 3 rd 64%	pre-primer 98% primer 89% 1 st 93% 2 nd 80% 3 rd 85%
Nan	18	20	30 wpm	49 wpm	pre-primer 98% primer 85% 1 st 76% 2 nd 58%	pre-primer 98% primer 91% 1 st 83% 2 nd 73%
Robby	14	16	43 wpm	55 wpm	pre-primer 87% primer 81% 1 st 78% 2 nd 69%	pre-primer 100% primer 100% 1 st 100% 2 nd 100% 3 rd 95%
Josh	20	28	69 wpm	84 wpm	pre-primer 94% primer 100% 1 st 100% 2 nd 98% 3 rd 97%	pre-primer 100% primer 100% 1 st 100% 2 nd 100% 3 rd 100%

Fonda	24	28	54 wpm	78 wpm	pre-primer 94%	pre-primer 100%
					primer 96%	primer 96%
					1 st 93%	1 st 93%
					2 nd 78%	2 nd 99%
					3 rd 87%	3 rd 95%

Table 10

3rd Grade Pre/Post Study Reading Assessment Data

Name	DRA		AIMSweb		Sight Words	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Tana	2	3	16 Letters	42 Letters	15% Pre-Primer	33% Pre-Primer
Fran	2	3	25 Letters	62 Letters	35% Pre-Primer	44% Pre-Primer
Kate	3	6	30 Letters	55 Letters	40% Pre-Primer	60% Pre-Primer
Joey	3	6	23 Nonsense Word Sounds	20 wpm	60% Pre-Primer	71% Pre-Primer
Brad	6	12	32 Phoneme Segmentation sounds	76 Nonsense Word Sounds	71% Pre-Primer 54% Primer	92% Pre-Primer 100% Primer
Paul	6	6	32 Sounds	24 wpm	75% Pre-primer 67% Primer 1 st 51%	92% Pre-primer 85% Primer 1 st 63%

As a result of conducting this study, I also learned that gathering a variety of baseline data provides a thorough view of a child’s independent ability level. The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) is a good starting point for figuring out a child’s reading level, but it doesn’t give some specific information such as what sight words a child knows or doesn’t know. Gathering various baseline skills on each individual student provided me with a clearer picture of the

skills my students had so that I could build my instruction to meet their individual needs.

The baseline assessments also provided a starting point for on-going progress monitoring. I found that using well documented and on-going progress monitoring also helped me to determine the direction in which I needed to go to provide new instruction. It was my observation that when on-going progress monitoring is used to drive instruction, the learning environment is more productive and meaningful. I was able to chart the growth my students made in fluency and in reading levels. One tool I used was a Running Record assessment. I used this tool to monitor a student's instructional vs. independent reading level. For Guided Reading, I selected texts that were at each group's instructional level. At the end of each week, I conducted a running record to see if that student was able to pass the book by reading it with a 95% or better. If he or she read it with an accuracy of 95% or better it meant that that book was within his or her independent level. After a student was able to read three books successfully with a 95% or better I was then able to introduce a book on the next level up (see Figure 3). My students made more progress in one semester's time than many of them have made in entire previous school years.

Figure 3. Running Record Chart

Date	Level	Book Title	%
9/14/05	4	Ben's Teddy Bear	98%
9/22/05	4	Father Bear Goes Fishing	100%
9/29/05	4	Blackberries	99%
10/6/05	6	Choosing A Puppy	92%
10/14/05	6	Little Frog's Monster Story	95%
11/4/05	6	The Leaf Boats	96%
11/11/05	6	Where Animals Live	99%
11/18/05	8	A Lucky Day for Little Dinosaur	100%
12/2/05	8	Jumbo	95%

Shows the reading accuracy rate on an individual child. After three consecutive data points were collected with an accuracy rate of 95% or better the child was given the next level of text as his or her Guided Reading book for the following week.

Ehri, (2001), Reutzel & Cooler (2005), and Dudley-Marling & Paugh (2004) feel that students who are struggling readers benefit from explicit phonics instruction. I also found this to be true of the students whom I studied. Clearly, the improvement in decoding that they demonstrated helped in their overall reading progress. Rather than shutting down when they come to an unknown word they now attempt to use their decoding skill that they have acquired and practiced during the Horizonss lesson. More and more often they are recognizing

letter and vowel combinations within words and are applying the rules they have been taught throughout the Horizonss program to their reading to decode an unknown word.

Reading comprehension is another area that has improved for most of my students as they have engaged in a wide array of comprehension activities within our Guided Reading groups, including identifying the main idea of a story, characters, setting, problem, solution and sequencing a story from beginning to end.

It has also been my observation that when some students struggle during a lesson they shut themselves off from the learning task. When a student becomes disengaged in a lesson it is important for the teacher to make immediate changes to the instructional approach. Generally when a student disengages it is because the task is too difficult or too easy. Vygotsky (1978) feels that students should be taught within their respective Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky feels that “The zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state” (p. 86). By this he means a child’s instructional level. The “zone of proximal development” is what a student is able to do with the guidance and assistance of the teacher or a peer who has already mastered a particular task or skill.

In Guided Reading I was able to monitor a student's independent level and provide instruction at his or her instructional level. Guided Reading gave me the control and flexibility to accurately provide instruction based on my students' needs. This ability to change my instruction to meet the needs of my students was evident throughout my field log. There were times when I was in the middle of teaching a lesson and students began to shut down. This behavior showed me the lesson was too hard, so I had to modify what I had originally planned. There were also times when I had planned a lesson and discovered that it was too easy. I love when I found something was too easy, for it allowed me to push the students to work at the next instructional level.

Along with finding academic growth in my students' reading abilities, I also found growth in my students' trust in Kelly, in their peer groups, and in me. Delpit (2002) stated something that I found to be true throughout my action research study. She says, "When they recognize that we believe in them, then they come to trust us, to accept us, to identify with us, and to emulate us." (p. 46) By this, Delpit means that when students trust us they work harder to please us and strive to make progress on their own.

As a special education teacher much of my job is not only focused upon improving students' skills, but also in gaining their trust. Sadly, many of my students have been turned off to school because a teacher or parent has gotten too frustrated with their difficulties in learning and may have begun to take their

frustrations out on the child. The child then shuts down even more and sees himself or herself as a failure. If children feel they can't be successful, they give up before even trying. I found this over and over again with each of my reading groups. As the year moved on and my students became more confident and trusting of Kelly and me and their group members, they became more willing to take risks and attempt to read more independently. This growth in confidence has helped them to work through their struggles in reading and yearn to read more, thus improving their sight word knowledge, their decoding skills, and their fluency, all of which lead to greater comprehension and overall improvement in reading level performance.

It has also been my observation that when students take pride in their work the learning outcome is positive and progress is more likely to occur. This was something that I observed with each of my groups but Tana and Fran's group showed the most support for this finding. The more confidence the girls gathered in reading the more willing they were to take pride and work their hardest; hence, they continued to show more progress in reading. It is a continuous cycle of building confidence and showing students their progress, which leads them to take more pride in their work, which leads to more learning and more progress.

Students also tend to work harder when instruction is driven by student interest. As stated by Delpit (2002) "By not listening, teachers cannot know what students are concerned about, what interests the students, or what is happening in

their lives. Without that knowledge it is difficult to connect the curriculum to anything students find meaningful” (p. 43). In this quote Delpit is stressing that it is important for teachers to listen to the students and have knowledge of what interests them. Using my weekly survey as a tool for gathering information on my students’ attitudes toward reading, I was able to listen to and identify what students liked or disliked about that current week’s reading instruction (Appendix M). I was then able to take that knowledge and use it in the development of my Guided Reading plans. An example of this was after our first week of working with non-fiction text. When Joey filled out his weekly survey he stated that he “loved reading about real things and learning about snakes and lizards.” Joey was highly motivated to read that week. The following week I chose another non-fiction text that was about animal habitats. Joey continued to be highly motivated to read through his book. Another time I observed this motivation to learn was when the students and I were working on our Reader’s Theatre Puppet Shows. The first week I introduced the scripts and the Oral Reading Goals students all put in their survey that reading the scripts was their favorite activity that week. As we continued to read and reread the scripts the students continued to express their pleasure in working on their scripts in preparation for their puppet show. Using the surveys gave me a good idea of students’ interests. Using their interest in the script got them to work repeatedly on fluency goals even though to the students, this didn’t feel as if they were working on the goals.

In her statement Delpit (2002) also stresses that it is not only important to know what interests the child has but also to have knowledge of what is happening in their lives. Throughout my study I was witness to many issues that occurred beyond my classroom walls but nonetheless had an enormous impact on my students' learning. Nan and the other students in her group had some life altering changes in their lives that often kept them from being able to focus on my lessons. They were overwhelmed with what was going on in their personal lives. It would have been useless for me to try and force them to work on the particular day where they were troubled by things going on in their home life. At that moment in time they didn't need instruction from me. They couldn't learn new academic skills when they were simply functioning in survival mode. What they needed was love and support to help them work through their fears in order to regroup and eventually be able to come back to reading.

My goal was to increase my students' reading skills and improve their confidence in their own abilities. I feel that we were successful in our endeavor. We will continue with our learning cycle. With growth come new hurdles as work becomes harder as their development continues we will continue to work hard and grow to love reading!

FINAL THOUGHTS

As the result of the rapid growth of some students and the slower growth of others, Kelly and I once again sat down to make some adjustments to our groups and schedule. Although my official study has concluded, Kelly and I have continued to maintain our unified goal to help our students become better readers. Schedules have changed; caseloads are ever growing; and our time with our students is even more precious.

After conducting this teacher action research, we have raised more and more questions. My special education supervisor asked if I felt my program could be duplicated in other elementary schools within our district. I have asked myself this very question. Another question that must be considered is whether or not one teacher could integrate both components or if a co-teaching setting better supports students' growth as readers. Of course, in a co-teaching setting, the relationship of the co-teachers is another important area of consideration. Another question that has arisen for us is how to continue to maintain an effective program as the caseload numbers continue to increase dramatically. We also wonder how this type of program might be implemented into regular education primary classes where there is a high ratio of at-risk students.

As I continue to grow and further develop my teaching knowledge I look forward to pursuing future action research adventures. I would like to pursue new qualitative research projects as a mentor teacher and have considered

additional coursework to allow me to serve in a supervisory capacity. I would also like to broaden my teacher action research studies to incorporate other subject areas or other facets of the language arts block. Teaching writing to students with learning disabilities may be my next action research venture. Student spelling has improved, but writing continues to be an area of displeasure for my students.

Teacher action research has helped me to grow as an educator. It is my hope to continue developing and fine-tuning the skills and knowledge that I have acquired throughout this teacher action research process.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Student Attitude Survey (Pre / Post Study)

Number _____

1. Reading is:		
		
2. I feel my reading skills are:		
		
3. Reading makes me feel:		
		
4. When I listen to a story I feel:		
		
5. My reading skills are _____ compared to my classmates		
		

What kinds of stories do you like to read or listen to?

Appendix B: AIMSweb® Letter Naming Fluency
Benchmark Assessment #1 (Kindergarten - Fall)

Given To: _____ Given By: _____ Date: _____

u D P S R A X y l n	/ 10 (10)
C V g W A G J z c E	/ 10 (20)
r W Z F M c L t u f	/ 10 (30)
c G S U J d a T K m	/ 10 (40)
R T G I k S q n u A	/ 10 (50)
R k L K s J f E h q	/ 10 (60)
K h b U T l D s l a	/ 10 (70)
N K k v l Z a u A F	/ 10 (80)

Sample

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Appendix B: AIMSweb® Letter Sound Fluency
Benchmark Assessment #1 (Kindergarten – Fall)

Given To: _____ Given By: _____ Date: _____

t d n r p c z v w k	/ 10 (10)
m b t f v z l c d p	/ 10 (20)
v y e l b j s t f a	/ 10 (30)
c n f r m b t h z s	/ 10 (40)
j k p s f h i r o m	/ 10 (50)
s z p i j r e d g o	/ 10 (60)
j g a t s h c r k l	/ 10 (70)

Sample

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Appendix B: AIMSweb® Phoneme Segmentation Fluency
Progress Monitor Assessment #4

Given To: _____ Given By: _____ Date: _____

sort	/s/ /or/ /t/	weight	/w/ /ai/ /t/	6 (6)
match	/m/ /a/ /ch/	touch	/t/ /u/ /ch/	6(12)
meal	/m/ /ea/ /l/	bee	/b/ /ea/	5(17)
put	/p/ /uu/ /t/	trees	/t/ /r/ /ea/ /z/	7(24)
face	/f/ /ai/ /s/	guess	/g/ /e/ /s/	6(30)
mean	/m/ /ea/ / n/	them	/TH/ /e/ /m/	6(36)
swing	/s/ /w/ /i/ /ng/	taught	/t/ /o/ /t/	7 (43)
at	/a/ /t/	hung	/h/ /u/ /ng/	5(48)
hopped	/h/ /o/ /p/ /t/	tight	/t/ /ie/ /t/	7(55)
plays	/p/ /l/ /ai/ /z/	earth	/ir/ /th/	6 (61)
hook	/h/ /uu/ /k/	each	/ea/ /ch/	5(66)
reached	/r/ /ea/ /ch/ /t/	same	/s/ /ai/ /m/	7(73)
wires	/w/ /ie/ /r/ /z/	lips	/l/ /i/ /p/ /s/	8 (81)

Sample

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Appendix B: AIMSweb® Nonsense Word Fluency
 Benchmark Assessment #1 (Kindergarten – Winter)

Given To: _____ Given By: _____ Date: _____

fec	zok	miv	yoc	kod	15 (15)
kol	rez	suz	rev	wev	15 (30)
nam	log	tam	wol	kos	15 (45)
vac	mas	yob	siv	fep	15 (60)
sut	joj	muj	eb	pol	14 (74)
nes	duj	sim	luj	uv	14 (88)
beb	id	et	jag	kac	13 (101)
num	lum	wup	us	hak	14 (115)
tul	wil	meb	pif	yov	15 (130)
wap	hov	tof	mek	mag	15 (145)
rij	fum	pom	dov	pim	15(160)
rel	riz	ij	tup	vip	14 (174)
tud	veb	pep	wal	sid	15 (191)

Sample
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Appendix C: DIBELS Benchmark

School District
DIBELS Benchmarks
AIMSweb: Early Literacy Measures

Median Score		
Letter Naming Fluency (LNF)	Mastery: 60 or more per minute	Timed down for 1 Minute
Letter Sound Fluency (LSF)	Mastery: 25 or more per minute	Timed down for 1 Minute
Phonemic Segmentation	Mastery: 35 or more per minute	Timed down for 1 Minute
Nonsense Word Fluency	Mastery: 20 or more per minute	Timed down for 1 Minute

*Once mastery is achieved in LNF and LSF, continue administering Phonemic Segmentation, Nonsense Word Fluency and Oral Reading Fluency Probes.

Appendix D: Sample R-CBM Passage (3rd Grade)

Jason and Max picked next Friday to carry out their special mission	12
Friday was a week away. They had so many things to accomplish. In	25
order to reach their final goal, the boys made a plan for each day of the	41
week. They had to work hard every day to finish each task. Could they	55
do it all?	58
On Monday, they agreed to meet and put plan A into action.	70
Plan A was to gather as many fallen branches as they could carry. They	84
hailed the wood from the edge of the cornfield and stacked it in a big	99
pile at the edge of the forest.	106
On Tuesday, the boys met near the lazy creak and put plan B into	120
motion. They dug up rocks the size of footballs from the creek's bottom	133
By dusk, they had arranged the rocks in a neat circle next to the pile of	149
branches they had hauled the night before	156
On Wednesday, plan C was to climb into the attic above Jason's	168
garage. They search around with flashlights and both found	177
backpacks. They wore their packs as they rode their bikes to the edge	190
of the forest to complete the day's work.	198
On Thursday, it rained. They had to drop the plan for the day. Still,	212
Jason and Max met at the end of their driveways under umbrellas. They	225
quietly spoke. They decided their mission would word without plan D.	236
When the sun went down on Friday, they met at the edge of the	250
forest. There sat their tent. They'd set it up on Wednesday evening.	262
The wood was ready to go into their campfire ring. Their next step was	276

Sample Passage for Demonstration Purposes Only.

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Appendix E: AIMSweb R-CBM Benchmark

		<i>FALL</i>	<i>WINTER</i>	<i>SPRING</i>
<i>GRADE</i>	<i>%ile</i>	<i>WRC</i>	<i>WRC</i>	<i>WRC</i>
1	90	33	69	102
	75	15	40	75
	50	6	21	48
	25	2	11	26
	10	0	5	14
2	90	98	122	141
	75	73	99	116
	50	49	73	90
	25	23	46	64
	10	12	22	36
3	90	128	144	160
	75	100	119	136
	50	74	91	107
	25	46	60	78
	10	26	36	48
4	90	145	164	181
	75	119	138	153
	50	96	111	123
	25	70	87	99
	10	45	61	71
5	90	164	180	194
	75	136	155	169
	50	109	125	139
	25	83	97	107
	10	58	72	81
6	90	178	194	205
	75	154	167	179
	50	127	140	152
	25	98	111	124
	10	66	81	94

Information Provided by AIMSweb.com

Appendix F: Dolch Sight Word Assessment

Name _____ Date _____

Preprimer Sight Words

A	And	Away	Big	Blue
Can	Come	Down	Find	For
Funny	Go	Help	Hers	I
In	Is	It	Jump	Little
Look	Make	Me	My	Not
One	Play	Red	Run	Said
See	The	Three	To	Two
Up	We	Yellow	You	This
Too	Under	Want	Was	Well
Went	What	White	Who	Will
With	yes			

Primer Sight Words

All	Am	Are	At	Ate
Be	Black	Brown	But	Came
Did	Do	Eat	Four	Get
Good	Has	He	Into	Like
Must	New	No	Now	On
Our	Out	Please	Pretty	Ran
Ride	Saw	Say	She	So
Soon	That	There	They	When
Why	Wish	Work	Would	Write
your				

First Grade Sight Words

After	Again	An	Any	As
Ask	By	Could	Every	Fly
From	Give	Going	Had	Has
Her	Him	How	Just	Know
Let	Live	May	Of	Old
Once	Open	Over	Put	Round
Some	Stop	Take	Thank	Them
Then	Think	Walk	Where	Which
warm				

Second Grade Sight Words

Always	Around	Because	Been	Before
Best	Both	Buy	Call	Cold
Does	Don't	Fast	First	Five
Found	Gave	Goes	Green	Its
Made	Many	Off	Or	Pull
Read	Right	Sing	Sit	Sleep
Tell	Their	These	Those	Upon
Us	Use	Very	Wash	try

Third Grade Sight Words

About	Better	Bring	Carry	Clean
Cut	Done	Draw	Drink	Eight
Fall	Far	Full	Got	Grow
Hold	Hot	Hurt	If	Keep
Kind	Laugh	Light	Long	Much
Myself	Never	Only	Own	Pick
Seven	Shall	Show	Six	Small
Start	Ten	Today	Together	

Word list available from:

<http://gemini.es.brevard.k12.fl.us/sheppard/reading/dolch.html>

Appendix G: Letter Naming and Sound Assessment

Name _____ Date _____

Letter Naming

A	a	B	b
C	c	D	d
E	e	F	f
G	g	H	H
I	i	J	j
K	k	L	l
M	m	N	n
O	o	P	p
Q	q	R	r
S	s	T	t
U	u	V	v
W	w	X	x
Y	y	Z	z

Letter Sounds

A	a	B	b
C	c	D	d
E	e	F	f

G	g	H	H
I	i	J	j
K	k	L	l
M	m	N	n
O	o	P	p
Q	q	R	r
S	s	T	t
U	u	V	v
W	w	X	x
Y	y	Z	z

Appendix H: Running Record

Name _____ Date _____

Book _____

Level _____ Running Words _____ Error Rate _____ % _____

Page #	Running Record	E	SC	MSV

Form modified from Fontas & Pinnell

Appendix I: Conversion Table and Calculations

Error Rate	Percent Accuracy	Level
1:200	99.5	Independent
1:100	99	
1:50	98	
1:35	97	
1:25	96	
1:20	95	
1:17	94	Instructional
1:14	93	
1:12.5	92	
1:11.75	91	
1:10	90	
1:9	89	Frustration
1:8	87.5	
1:7	85.5	
1:6	83	
1:5	80	
1:4	75	
1:3	66	
1:2	50	

Calculation of Error Rate

$$\frac{\text{Running Words}}{\text{Errors}} = \text{Ratio}$$

e.g. $\frac{150}{15} = 1:10$

Found in An Observation Survey by Marie M. Clay

Appendix J: Principal Consent Letter

August 29, 2005

To whom it may concern,

I give my consent for Crissi Corbin to conduct a research study in her classroom. It is my understanding that the research is supported by the educational literature and is a requirement for the completion of her Master's Degree program through Moravian College. Further, I understand that consent for the study will be obtained from all participants and that participants have a right to withdraw from the study at any time. Pseudonyms will be used in discussion of the data collected to protect students' identities. The data from this research study will be held in the strictest confidence, kept in a secure location, and destroyed by shredding upon completion of the study.

Students in Ms. Corbin's resource learning support class will engage in the required curriculum during the course of study. Study participants' experiences will be documented by reading assessments, observation log, interviews, and student surveys. The data collected from non-participants will not be included in the final report.

Finally, I am aware that questions regarding this research should be directed to Ms. Corbin at (610) 250-2542 or email corbinc@eastonsd.org or her advisor, Dr. Joseph Shosh at Moravian College (610) 861-1842 or email jshosh@moravian.edu.

Sincerely,

Ms. Tracy Piazza
Principal
Ada B. Cheston Elementary

Appendix K: Parent Consent Letter

August 29, 2005

Dear Parents/Guardians,

I am currently working toward earning a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. The courses that I am taking allow me to stay current with the most effective teaching methods in order to provide the best learning experience for you child. In order to earn my degree this spring I am required to conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices.

This semester (August 29-December 9) I plan to study the effects of using two programs to teach reading and language arts. I will be using Guided Reading, which is a method I have used in the classroom before with much success, combined with Horizons's Direct Instruction reading program I used last year. Both programs have been long proven to be successful in teaching students to read. Each program offers ways of teaching reading to meet certain needs of the students. If used in isolation may not meet every child's learning needs. I plan to use both programs to better meet all of the learning needs of my students. Research has stated time and time again that both programs have there merits but to truly meet the variety of needs that students have, a combination of the two programs would make a more balanced reading program.

For the study, I will be collecting data from student reading assessments, student interviews, teacher observations, and student surveys. I am asking your permission to use data gathered pertaining to your child's involvement in classroom activities. Participation is entirely voluntary and will not affect your child's grade in any way. Students may withdraw from the study at any time. All student names, faculty members, and the school name will be kept confidential by using pseudonyms in the published report. All research materials will be secured in a protected location and later destroyed by shredding.

If you have any questions about my research please contact me by not, phone (610) 250-2542 or email me at corbinc@eastonsd.org. In addition, our principal has approved my study. My faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh who can be contacted at Moravian College (610) 861-1842 or by email at jshosh@moravian.edu. Please sign and return the consent form below. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Crissi Corbin
Resource Room Learning Support
Cheston Elementary

Please detach and return to Ms. Corbin

I attest that I am the child's legal guardian and that I have received a copy, read, and understand this consent form.

I am willing to have my child participate in this action research study. Please check one.

_____YES _____NO

Parent/guardian signature_____

Child's Name _____

Date: _____

Appendix L: Colleague Consent Letter

August 29, 2005

Dear Colleagues,

I am currently working toward earning a Master's degree in Curriculum and instruction at Moravian College. The courses that I am taking allow me to stay current with the most effective teaching methods in order to provide the best learning experience for our students. In order to earn my degree, this fall I am required to conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices.

This semester (August 29-December 9) I plan to study the effects of using two programs to teaching reading. We will be using Guided Reading combined with the Horizons Direct Instruction reading program. Both programs have been long proven to be successful in teaching students to read. Each program offers ways of teaching reading to meet certain needs of the students. If used in isolation each program may not meet every child's learning needs. In planning to use both programs I hope to better meet all of the learning needs of the students. Research has stated time and time again that both programs have their merits but to truly meet the variety of needs that students have, a combination of the two programs would make a more balanced literacy program.

For the study, I will be collecting data from student reading assessments, student interviews, teacher observations, and student surveys. I am asking your permission to use data gathered pertaining to your involvement in classroom activities. Participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time. Your name and the school name will be kept confidential by using pseudonyms in the published report. All research material will be secured in a protected location and later destroyed by shredding.

If you have any questions about my research please contact me by phone (610) 250-2542 or email me at corbinc@eastonsd.org. In addition, our principal has approved my study. My faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh who can be contacted at Moravian College (610) 861-1482 or by email at jshosh@moravian.edu. Please sign and return the consent form below. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Crissi Corbin
Resource Room Learning Support
Cheston Elementary

I attest that I have received a copy, read and understand this consent form.

I am willing to participate in this action research study. Please check one.

_____yes

_____no

Signature: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix M: Weekly Attitude Survey

Number _____

1. This week my reading was:		
		
2. I liked when we _____.		
3. This week I liked _____ reading group because _____.		