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ABSTRACT

This study describes a program designed to increase reading strategies in the first grade. The targeted population consisted of first grade students in a growing urban community in the Midwest. Evidence for the existence of the problem included records of low district and building reading assessments and academic grades to measure reading progress, a parent survey to assess awareness of their child's reading habits, and child surveys to assess their views of themselves as readers. Analysis of probable causes was evidenced by teachers' observations of students coming to class with a lack of readiness skills and phonemic awareness, a lack of parental involvement, and a low socioeconomic background. Teachers have also noted that whole language strategies used in the classroom were not an appropriate strategy for certain students. A review of solution strategies suggested by cited authors, combined with an analysis of the problem setting, resulted in the selection of three categories of intervention: implementation of direct instruction to improve decoding skills; development of a newsletter to increase parental awareness and involvement; and the selection of various comprehension techniques to improve students' reading skills. Based on the presentation and analysis of the data on decoding skills and comprehension skills, the students showed improvement in all areas. Post test results showed an average improvement of 45% in students' decoding skills. Ideally, students would grow academically at least one month of growth for each month of instruction. Students showed a growth rate of 4 months in a 3-month period. (Contains 23 references and 6 tables of data. Appendixes contain 3 "monthly reader" newsletters; blank story maps; and a reading habits survey.) (Author/RS)

Improving Students Decoding Skills Through The Use of Direct Instruction

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

The students of the targeted first grade classes exhibited a lack of decoding strategies needed to be academically successful in all subject areas. Evidence for the existence of the problem included low district reading assessments, building wide records, and academic grades.

Immediate Problem Context

Site of Study

The school had a student population of 291 students in kindergarten through sixth grade. Average daily attendance rate was 94% with a student mobility level of 23%. Students of the school were primarily Caucasian (88%), while the rest of the student body (12%) was African American. Of the 291 students, 39% received free lunch, and 5% received a reduced cost lunch.

The staff included a full-time principal, and among the 21 certified staff were 15 classroom teachers, 2 special education teachers, a Title I teacher, a physical education specialist, a music specialist, and a speech/language therapist. The educational background of the certified staff were diversified as follows: bachelor's degree (46%),

master's degree (14%), and master's degree with post graduate hours (41%). Teachers at the school had an average of 22 years teaching experience. In addition to the certified staff, a staff of 20 classified personnel served the school, which consisted of a full-time secretary, a building manager, a part-time nurse, a reading aide, a library aide, three special education aides, two Title I aides, two full-time custodians, five part-time cafeteria workers, a part-time counselor, a part-time social worker, and a part-time school psychologist.

The school was constructed in 1971, as a two story, handicap accessible building. Air conditioning was added to the building in the summer of 1999. There were 21 classrooms, with one of the classrooms utilized as a computer lab, and the gymnasium also served as the cafeteria.

The school was served by a school-wide Title I program, and special needs students were included in the regular education classes for based on ability levels. A physical education or music specialist instructed all students for 30 minutes each day. All first grade students received direct instruction reading, and small groups totaling 30 students received reading instruction using the SOAR to Success Reading Program. All fifth grade students participated in Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.), and each of the 15 classrooms had community volunteers who instructed students using the Junior Achievement Program. Gifted students received instruction from an itinerant teacher, and students in sixth grade had the opportunity to participate in band or orchestra. A Teacher Assistance Team (TAT) was in place to help teachers solve problems and meet the needs of children in their classrooms.

Issues of concern to school community members included a lack of parental involvement, lack of effective counseling practices, high incidence of poverty, and a high student mobility rate. The school had recently undergone administrative changes both at the building and district level. The school district was also considering a year round calendar which had caused controversy in the community.

The Surrounding Community

The school was located in a mid-sized, mid-western community with a population of 40,680. Females comprised 51% of the population while males comprised the remaining 49%. This community, with a median income of $27,200, and had a 6% unemployment rate. Jobs centered on agriculture, food processing, insurance, and weapons manufacturing. The median age was 34 with an ethnic mix of 78% Caucasian, 18% African American, 3% Hispanic, and 1% Asian.

Opportunities for continuing education included two four-year colleges and one two-year community college. The community boasted a wide range of entertainment and cultural opportunities including museums, a zoo, a civic center, professional sports teams, live theater and musical events, shopping malls, two public golf courses, a state park historical site, bike trails, riverboat gambling, and an entertainment district. Two hospitals, a mental health center, visiting nurses, and the county health department met the community's medical needs.

The school district served 7000 students and the ethnic mix of students was 60% Caucasian, 29% African American, 5% Hispanic, and 6% Asian. The 430 teachers employed by the district were predominantly Caucasian (91%), with African Americans being 8% and Hispanics being 1%. The district had a 19:1 ratio of students to teachers.

The district also had an inter-district preschool, Head Start, all day kindergarten, and an alternative school. There were 12 elementary schools, 2 junior high schools, and a high school. The annual per pupil expenditure for the district was $5,867. Issues affecting the school district and community included a lack of parental involvement, year round schooling, administrative changes, and a lack of effective counseling for students.

National Context of the Problem

Reading instruction has been a concern of educators for generations. Students who are poor readers will tend to struggle across all subject areas. An important aspect of reading is decoding unfamiliar words.

Students in the lower primary grades are not learning the information and skills that are necessary to form a body of prior knowledge (Traver, 1998). Without this body of prior knowledge, students struggle to generalize across subject areas. Teachers are struggling to meet the needs of students to build higher order thinking skills due to a lack of prior knowledge.

Classrooms are filled with students who are not gaining meaning from text. Meaning can not be attained until a reader can decode words. Grossen (2000), demonstrated that a decoding approach during initial reading instruction was more effective than a meaning emphasis approach. A phonics approach is designed to develop oral language comprehension skills. The majority of reading programs have given scant attention to the teaching of phonics (Grossen, 2000).

Test scores, prior to implementing a highly structured decoding instruction program, revealed a low performance in the major achievement areas (Four Promising Programs, 1998). According to Project Follow Through, students who participated in a

highly structured decoding instruction program improved from the 20th percentile to the 50th percentile. In addition, a follow up study cited in the same article found that 63% of students who participated in the structured decoding instruction program graduated from college, as compared to 38% of the control group (Four Promising Programs, 1998).

As educators continue to struggle to meet the needs of all students, reading instruction will remain at the forefront. By familiarizing students with strategies to decode unfamiliar words, the information and skills mastered will give students a body of prior knowledge which will allow these students to learn higher order content (Traver, 1998). Such skills will enable students to achieve across the curriculum.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

The students of the targeted first grade classes exhibited a lack of reading strategies needed to be academically successful in all subject areas. Evidence for the existence of the problem included low district reading assessments, anecdotal records, and academic grades.

Students at the targeted site exhibited a history of low district reading assessments. Reported results of the 1999 Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) found that 57% of the students were either at the academic warning level or below standards. With over half of the tested students not meeting standards, interventions for academic improvement were needed.

A review of the kindergarten report cards for the incoming first grade subjects indicated that students had a mastery of beginning sounds with 85% of students meeting or exceeding kindergarten standards. While students appeared to be prepared for first grade, ISAT and building assessments demonstrated that students were not meeting first grade expectations at the high level with which they met expectations in kindergarten.

Students who were entering first grade were given the S.R.A. Reading Mastery I Placement Test. The test is divided into two parts; in order to move on to the second part of the test students must obtain a score of at least 19 on Part One. Students scores ranged

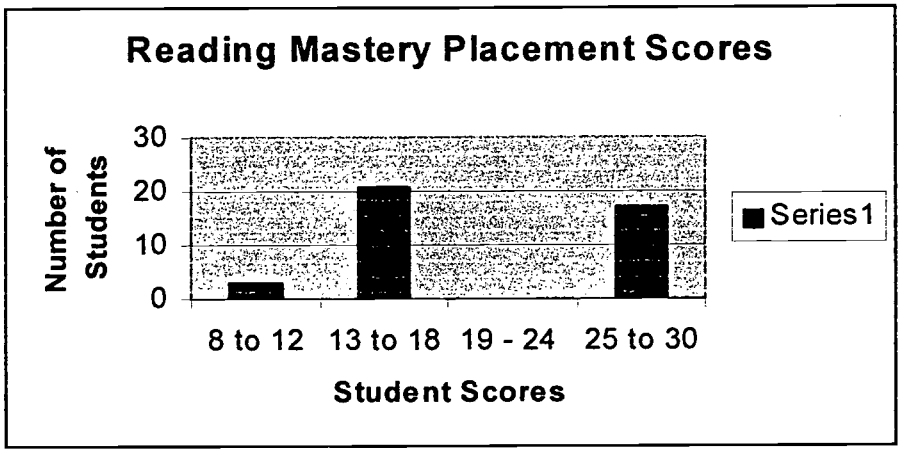

Figure 1: Reading Mastery placement scores of first grade students

from a low score of 8 to a perfect score of 30. This test is utilized to properly place students into the Reading Mastery I program. Results of the initial placement test are shown in Figure 1.

Students were also assessed using the STAR Test. The STAR Test is given to students by computer. Students are directed to read a passage and then answer multiple choice comprehension questions. Test results are reported on both a grade equivalent score and a national percentile rank. Grade Equivalents are shown in Figure 2 with Figure 3 showing the percentile rank. Of the subjects tested during September of 2000, 87% of the first graders tested at a grade equivalent of 1.0 or less and at the 50th percentile or less. Only one subject tested above the first grade level and above the 60th percentile. Students entering first grade would be expected to test out at a 1.0 grade equivalent.

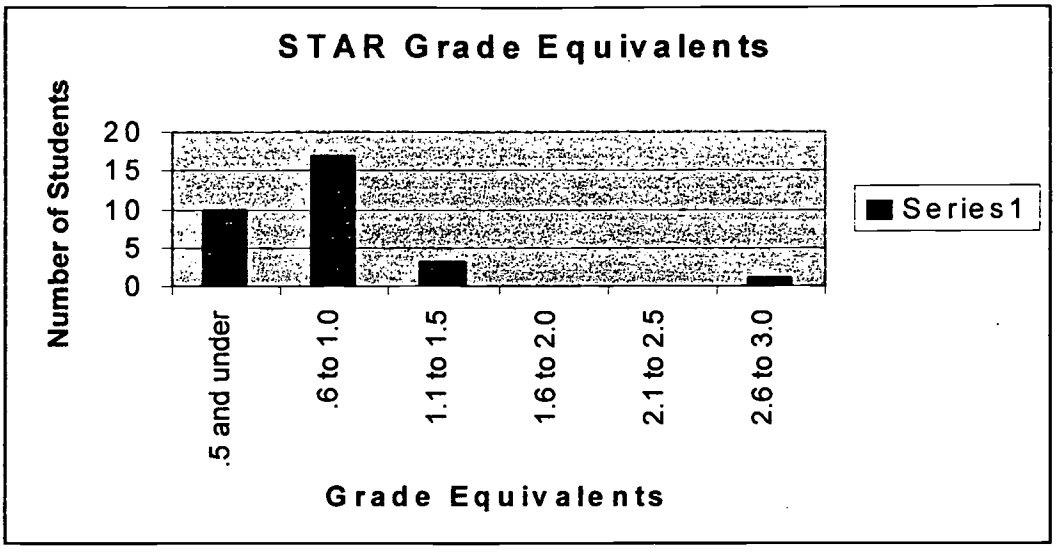

Figure 2: Star pretest grade equivalents of first grade students

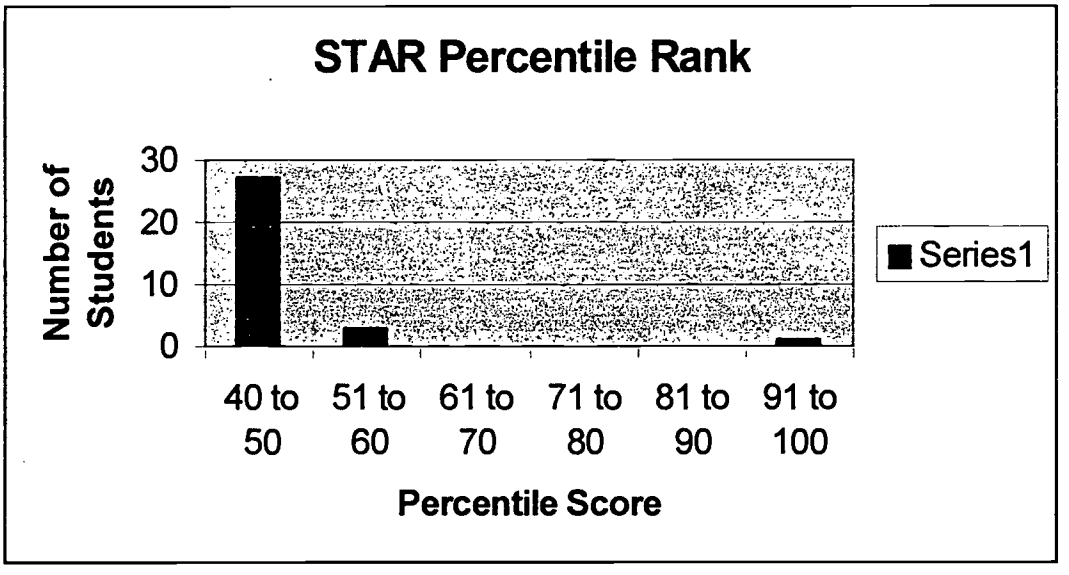

Figure 3: Star percentile rank from pretesting of first grade students

Probable Causes

Students entering first grade exhibited a lack of phonemic awareness and poor readiness skills. In addition to these academic difficulties, minimal parental involvement and a low socio-economic background were contributing to poor reading skills in the

targeted first grade. A survey of parents indicated that many homes, 67%, contained little or no printed materials Parents reported, 67%, having little or no time to spend on academic activities with their children. Difficulties included over-stressed single parent homes, parents working outside of the home, and a variety of other family activities including sports, church groups, and other extracurricular activities vying for the family's time. While many parents were willing to work with their children, they struggled with how to provide that help. Greenberg and Moles (as cited in Danielson, 1997) concluded that parents who had negative school experiences were less likely to make learning a priority in their home. With 44% of students receiving free and reduced lunch, socio-economic factors were also of concern.

There may be several underlying causes for the lack of reading strategies utilized by students. These causes encompass such factors as a lack of phonemic awareness, a lack of parental involvement due to poverty and other issues, and the whole language movement. While many factors contribute to a lack of reading strategies, these factors were overwhelmingly cited in the research. All of these problems cause concern when looked at individually, but together the results can be catastrophic.

According to Smith (1998), reading disorders among various students may be caused by a lack of phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness can be defined as the ability to cognitively and perceptually break down words into individual sounds and place those sounds in the correct order. It is important to note that phonemic awareness has nothing to do with a student's ability to hear. Adams stated "Phonemic awareness can be a more powerful predictor of reading progress than IQ, and kindergarten children's phonemic awareness can predict their levels of reading and spelling achievement 1, 2, or

even as many as 11 years later"(as cited in Smith 1998). Based on this information, one could assume that students who are more able to segment words into individual sounds are more likely to develop into better readers and master the reading process more quickly and easily.

There are many reasons for a lack of parental involvement. Regardless of the reasons, a lack of parental involvement can be devastating to a child's future success in school. According to Lyon (1998) children who develop into poor readers are often not exposed to the language play that is crucial to the development of sound structure and language patterns. Children who are not read to, children who are raised in poverty, children lacking proficiency in the English language, and children whose parents have low reading skills have an increased risk of reading failure. Parker, F.L., Boak, A.Y., & Griffin, K.W. (1999) stated "Recent studies indicate that even at a young age, greater parent involvement positively affects school readiness and adaptation to elementary school."(p. 413). A child's education can not be complete without the support and involvement of parents and caregivers.

For decades teachers have tried to find a balance between a phonics approach and a whole language approach. A whole language approach is defined as recognizing individual words through the actual reading of the text, and the use of pictures, context, and sight words to comprehend the written passages even if the students cannot read every word (Palmaffy, 1997). According to Carbo (1996), while whole language is appropriate for some students, it may seem disorganized and confusing to the analytical learner. Many students are unable to learn to read with the whole language approach because it does not include a phonics based component necessary for mastering the

alphabetic language. Within the whole language approach many students are not given the phonics instruction that they require to be successful readers.

As a result of these problems, students are destined to a lifetime of reading difficulties. Students who exhibit reading difficulties will struggle in all curriculum areas. Not only will these difficulties be present throughout their school years, but they will also significantly impact their ability to succeed as adults in the work force. Identifying and addressing these problems is crucial to the success of all students.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

After analyzing the low district reading assessments, anecdotal records, and academic grades it was determined that students of the targeted first grade classes exhibited a lack of reading strategies needed to be academically successful in all subject areas. When reviewing the literature regarding poor reading performance, the more prevalent factors included little phonemic awareness, minimal parental involvement, and poor readiness skills. There are many opinions as to why students perform poorly in reading; however, for the purposes of this action research project the focus will be on the areas of phonemic awareness, whole language, and parental involvement.

Phonemic awareness is used by professionals to supplement decisions regarding retention or the identification of learning disabilities (Snider, 1997). While the possibility of retention and the diagnosis of learning disabilities is not being addressed in this project, the research does support the importance of phonemic awareness in the classroom. Adams as cited in Busink, (1997), noted that students must develop a familiarity with the alphabetic principle and with spelling-sound correspondences in order to read with fluency.

A study conducted by Joseph (2000) compared the outcomes of two phonic instructional approaches: word boxes instruction and word sort instruction. The word box instruction consisted of three stages. In the first stage students received instruction in articulating sounds. In the second stage students moved to articulating sounds in words. In the third and final stage, students wrote the sounds that they heard in the correct order.

The word sort method was also divided into three stages. The first stage required students to categorize words based on their phonemes. In the second stage students sorted words using spelling patterns. In the third stage students wrote the words that they previously categorized following the spelling patterns. Both of these approaches resulted in a positive performance change on word identification and phonemic awareness tasks (Joseph, 2000). The results of this study support the need for phonemic awareness instruction in the classroom.

Poskiparta, Niemi, and Vauras (1999) conducted a study that described an activity that helped children combine phonemes into words. Initially, the emphasis of instruction was on beginning and ending phonemes found in the children's names; students later created invented words using those phonemes. Students categorized and named pictures by initial and final phonemes and then wrote the alphabetic letters for the phonemes. Students were directed to distinguish between phonemes in a variety of tasks. The final outcome of instruction resulted in students being able to identify a word based on its phonemes. The results of this study indicated that phonological awareness was clearly increased by these activities (Poskiparta et al., 1999). This research demonstrated that dividing words into phonemes and blending those phonemes was an effective strategy and beneficial to young readers.

The Auditory Discrimination in Depth Program (Lindamood Method) is another program that has been utilized to teach phonemic awareness. In this program, students were instructed to focus on how the mouth feels when certain sounds were made (Busink, 1997). Students were given instruction on how to feel, categorize, and manipulate sounds and syllables. Participants in this training achieved significantly above grade level on the reading and spelling standardized tests that were given at the end of the year. Furthermore, students continued to achieve above the control group at both one and three years post training (Busink, 1997). The research for direct teaching of phonological awareness skills is extremely encouraging for the future success of young readers.

"Children who begin school with little phonemic awareness have trouble acquiring the alphabetic principle that will limit their ability to decode words" (Snider, 1997, p.210). The instruction of phonemic awareness is important in the classroom. Phonemic awareness activities will provide a means for productive creativity for some children, whereas for others it will make the difference between frustrated and confident readers (Busink, 1997). A lack of instruction of phonemic awareness skills in early education may impede upon future academic success in all areas of literacy.

An accurate indicator of a student's academic achievement is the extent to which the family can create an encouraging home environment, communicate high reachable expectations for academic achievement, and actively participate in their child's education (DuFour, 2000). While these objectives seem easily obtainable, parents and educators continue to struggle to find a comfortable balance with the various roles of family involvement in the schools. In order to create excellence in education, the educational process must not end when children leave school; parents must be involved.

Parental involvement can be defined in many ways. From an educator's point of view it includes such things as meeting basic home and school needs, participating in school related activities, maintaining contacts with teachers and volunteering as needed in the school, as well as providing direct service to children outside the school building (Powell-Smith, Stoner, & Shin, 2000).

One strategy utilized by Powell-Smith et al. (2000) was home-based parent tutoring. Parents received instruction on specific strategies for correcting reading errors and tutoring their children at home in curriculum and literature based programs. Students were tutored for 20 minutes per night. A tutoring checklist was utilized to monitor activities and parents were telephoned weekly to check for implementation problems. Parents were also directly observed in their home during tutoring sessions. Results indicated that significant improvement occurred when compared with the control group. Follow-up surveys of parents, students, and educators found the program to be beneficial (Powell-Smith et al., 2000). In order to increase parental involvement in schools, educators need to provide specific direction to parents on ways to help their child in school.

Educators can do many things to increase parental involvement. Some suggestions are parental newsletters with specific strategies for success, phone calls, invitations to school events, and student work samples (Jonson, 1999). By utilizing parents as volunteers in the classroom teachers can make parents more aware of ways to help their children to become better readers. Educating parents on strategies to help their children succeed could provide a ripple effect throughout the community. Parents who have positive involvement with the school often recruit other parents to participate in

school activities and become wonderful examples for the school in the community (Raffaele and Knoff, 1999). Research indicates that educators hold higher expectations of students, and that achievement of disadvantaged students improves significantly when parents are involved in the school setting (Pape, 1999). The participation of parents in the educational process positively affects all parties involved. At the very least, an awareness of their children's academic progress is needed for students to become successful, life long learners.

The School Development Program which focuses on school ecology was created by James Comer in 1968. Sandell (as cited in Raffaele and Knoff, 1999) concluded that the fundamental belief supporting this program is that the connection between school and home is a significant factor in a child's educational success. The elements of changing a school's ecology are as follows: a school governance system, the mental health team, and a parent program. All of these elements play an integral role in improving the school's ecology. The school governance system is responsible for planning and must include all parties involved in educating the student. The mental health team is responsible for the various developmental and behavioral needs of children and provides consultation to school personnel. The parent program supports all school programs and allows parents to participate in school activities at their comfort level. Parents are encouraged to participate in all elements of the program (Raffaele and Knoff, 1999). Comer and Haynes (as cited in Raffaele and Knoff, 1999) found that in schools where the program was implemented that parental involvement had significantly increased due to the fact that parents were encouraged to participate at their own comfort level. Providing different levels of parent participation within this program demonstrated an understanding of parents' needs and

educational views and allowed for high, but attainable goals created by school personnel (Raffaele and Knoff, 1999). Again, research demonstrated that parents need specific directives and invitations to become involved in the learning process.

In order to have a positive and meaningful home-school collaboration, the relationship needs to be based upon respect and trust for all involved. By creating a comfortable environment for parents in the school setting, students, parents, and educators will reap the benefits of parental involvement. By empowering parents with specific strategies for involvement in the early years, a precedent for meaningful learning experiences will be established in the family and school.

Another problem is the proliferation of whole language instruction in the schools. "An ongoing 30-year, $200-million study of reading disabilities...by a division of the National Institutes of Health (NIH)" states that "few readers experiencing reading difficulties are ever given the explicit phonics training that they so desperately need" (Palmaffy, 1997, p. 32). During the 1980's, teacher education programs tended to focus solely on whole language programs (Palmaffy, 1997). As a result, millions of children who do not respond to a whole language program are sentenced to a lifetime of unnecessary academic difficulties due to an inability to read.

Reading experts agree that there needs to be a balance between the whole language approach and the phonics method of teaching reading (Ediger, 1998). Many students are left with no strategies to sound out unknown words if whole language methods fail. A phonics approach to sound out parts of unknown words will help students recognize them. "Interest in reading can go side by side including both whole language and phonics instruction. Emphasizing phonics instruction can be taught in an interesting

way together with stressing interest in reading subject matter" (Ediger, 1998, p. 77). The method which is used to teach reading should be the one that is most beneficial to the student. A good balance of approaches seems to be the most appropriate to meet the needs of all learners.

Another strategy that included the whole language approach and phonics instruction is The Cunningham Model. The Cunningham Model combined four specific blocks of direct instruction everyday. Included in the four blocks were writing and editing activities, word study, guided reading, and self-selected reading (Cunningham and Hall, 1998). It was intended that teachers include the four components each day in the language arts program. Students received phonics instruction which included patterning as well as reading and writing strategies. By combining specific strengths and strategies, this program attempted to meet the needs of all beginning readers.

MetaPhonics, a strategy addressed by Demoulin, Loye, and Swan (1999) incorporates whole language and phonics instruction. MetaPhonics combines basic skills and the reading of high quality literature. Students write book reports, make speeches, and give oral presentations. More than three dozen books, articles, and plays are read in this program. Communication by reading, writing, speaking, and responding are emphasized in this program. Although this study does not address gains in student achievement during implementation it is noted that students' scores dropped drastically after the program was discontinued. MetaPhonics is a program where the intention is to combine the strengths of each technique to meet the needs of all readers.

Traweek and Beninger (1997) conducted a study that compared the effectiveness of a phonics instruction program to a whole language program. Two schools within the

same district were targeted for this study. The students in both schools had similar ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and students in both schools consistently scored below normal on standardized tests. Each school had a reading program in place at the beginning of the study. All teachers who were involved in the study had been thoroughly trained and were experienced in their particular program. Integrated Reading-Writing (IR-W) was the program used in one school, while DISTAR was in place at the other school. The school year began in the IR-W program with various story-telling activities. After these activities, students wrote their own stories. Students were taught to think, say, and write. Teachers modeled this process and invented spellings were encouraged.

The DISTAR program is a set, sequenced group of lessons that are explicit about letter-sound correspondences and blends. Although the district did not administer achievement tests to first graders, and teachers were unwilling to interrupt the beginning of the year activities with other testing measures, information was collected at the end of the year with reading and writing samples. The results of the study demonstrated that students in both schools had similar improvements in reading and writing. Further discussion suggested that while students learn in different ways, students from low socio-economic backgrounds often benefit from a more concrete learning approach (Traweek and Beninger, 1997). Palmaffy (1997) noted that children on welfare heard one fourth of the words per hour that children from professional families heard and one half of that of working class families. Combining the whole language approach with phonics instruction may benefit those students who are not gaining language experience in the home.

Although whole language is comprehensive and beneficial to students, the fact remains that many at risk and low to average readers are not making positive gains in

reading achievement. These students often need a more basic and structured approach to reading. In order for students to be successful in the classroom, programs to supplement whole language with specific strategies to identify unknown words are needed.

In order for students to achieve at a higher rate in reading teachers need to implement phonics instruction. Previous studies have shown that at risk students greatly benefit from a structured approach to reading. Phonics instruction will give students strategies for sounding out unknown words. Students will be able to generalize these strategies into all subjects and allow students to become life-long learners.

If students have a strong support system at home, all parties involved will benefit. Teachers need to facilitate communication between home and school through the use of newsletters, phone calls, and invitations to visit the classroom. Research has shown that parents appreciate and desire clear, concrete suggestions for helping their children with school work. When high expectations are placed on the educational process at home, students tend to respond in order to meet those expectations.

The ultimate goal of reading is to comprehend information. Phonics instruction will allow students to decode words, but it is the teacher's responsibility to equip students with techniques and strategies that will allow them to understand what they have read. Students should be encouraged to predict, question, and summarize what they have read. Strategies teachers could utilize to improve comprehension include story maps, webs, and journal responses.

Project Objectives and Processes

Taking into consideration the many strategies available from which to design an effective plan of action to promote change among first grade students, members of this

research team concluded that their approach would encompass a combination of diverse strategies. Teachers would instruct students in a phonics based reading program, implement teacher created activities to increase comprehension, and utilize teacher designed activities to increase parental involvement.

As a result instruction of phonics techniques taught by the teachers during the period from September 2000 through December 2000, the targeted first grade students will increase their ability to decode unfamiliar words when reading a passage as measured by running records and teacher observation. In order to accomplish this objective the following processes are necessary:

1. Administer a pretest to determine baseline data when decoding words in a passage.
2. Utilize a pretest to group students according to ability.
3. Implement the S.R.A. Reading Mastery I Program.
4. Administer a posttest to determine the level of growth when decoding words in a passage.

As a result of the instruction of comprehension techniques taught by the teachers during the period from September 2000 through December 2000, the targeted first grade students will increase their ability to answer comprehension questions when reading a passage as measured by reading assessments. In order to accomplish this objective, the following processes are necessary:

1. Utilize the STAR computerized test to gather baseline data.
2. Implement strategies that require students to use comprehension techniques.
3. Administer the STAR computerized test to determine the level of growth of comprehension skills.

As a result of increasing parent involvement during the period from September 2000 through December 2000 the targeted first grade students will become more active readers, improve their attitude toward reading, recognize the importance of reading as measured by a parent survey, student survey, and teacher observation. In order to accomplish this objective, the following processes are necessary:

1. Develop a series of reading activities that enable parents and students to interact together.

2. Create a monthly newsletter.

3. Develop a parent survey to assess reading habits.

Project Action Plan

The action plan was designed to implement three major solution components: improve decoding techniques through direct instruction of reading, increase reading comprehension, and increase parental involvement in reading habits. The research project Followed a twelve-week time frame beginning the week of September 1, 2000 and concluded December 1, 2000.

Implementation Schedule

Week	Decoding	Comprehension	Parental Involvement
1	Pretest students	Pretest STAR	Letter to inform parents of project
2	Group students	Analyze results	Send home reading survey
3	Implement S.R.A. Program	Implement strategies	Create and send home newsletter and activities
4	Continue program	Implement strategies	
5	Continue program	Implement strategies	
6	Continue program	Implement strategies	
7	Continue program	Implement strategies	Create and send home newsletter and activities
8	Continue program	Implement strategies	

9	Continue program	Implement strategies	
10	Continue program	Implement strategies	Create and send home newsletter and activities
11	Posttest	Posttest STAR	Send home parent survey
12	Analyze Results	Analyze results	Analyze survey results

Methods of Assessment

In order to assess the effects of intensive phonics instruction in first grade assessment devices were administered to determine the level of growth. Comprehension building activities were designed and implemented with the S.T.A.R. test results measuring growth. In addition to parent communication such as newsletters, phone calls, and invitations to the classroom, a reading survey to measure reading habits was developed.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

The students of the targeted first grade classes exhibited a lack of decoding strategies needed to be academically successful in all subject areas. Evidence for the existence of the problem included low district reading assessments, building wide anecdotal records, and academic grades. While students report cards indicated that kindergarten students were meeting standards, reported results of the 1999 Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) found that 57% of students were at either the academic warning level or below standards. Other evidence included parental surveys regarding reading readiness skills and the use of printed materials in the home. While the results of the survey were initially positive regarding reading habits in the home, less than 25% of the surveys were returned. The poor response may be indicative of minimal parental interest and involvement in the students' education. The plan of action to address this problem included the implementation of direct instruction, implementation of various graphic organizers to improve students' rate of comprehension and the development of a parent newsletter to encourage parental involvement.

Prior to the implementation of these strategies, instruction was primarily focused on the use of the district basal reading program and whole language techniques. Each of these programs was weak in the teaching of phonics and decoding strategies. At that time there was not a district policy regarding the implementation of phonics. This resulted in a haphazard approach to phonics instruction based on teachers' experiences, training, and philosophies.

In the first objective the targeted students were to increase their ability to decode unfamiliar words. This was measured by the use of running records. Researchers tabulated omissions, substitutions, additions, repeated words, and accurate reading while listening to students individually read a 100 word passage at a first grade readability. For the second objective the targeted first grade students were to increase their ability to successfully answer comprehension questions when reading a passage as measured by a pre and post test that assesses comprehension. Students were asked five questions upon finishing a 100 word passage at a first grade readability. Students were given no assistance in decoding the words of this passage. The final objective was to improve the parent's involvement in their child's reading habits. Parents were given suggestions and activities through a newsletter. An increase or decrease in parental involvement regarding their child's reading habits was measured by a second survey.

In order to lay the groundwork for the implementation of this study, a letter was sent home to inform parents of the upcoming research project and to gain consent for their children's participation. In addition, the researchers pretested the targeted students for decoding and comprehension skills. Further groundwork was laid by organizing students based on their decoding ability into small groups for phonics instruction. The

researchers also analyzed results of the STAR pretest, which measures comprehension skills. At this time an initial parental survey was sent home with each participating student regarding his or her family's reading habits in the home.

Three weeks into the action research project the researchers implemented the use of the S.R.A. Reading Mastery I Program. This program is a structured phonics-based program that builds from letter sounds to blending sounds into words. Students gradually gain the skills necessary to decode longer passages. The program also reinforces comprehension skills as the passages lengthen. A supplemental worksheet accompanied the lesson to reinforce the skills that were presented each day. A typical lesson would begin with a teacher introduction of new sounds and review and practice of previously taught sounds. The format included the teacher modeling the correct sound, followed by the group practicing the sound aloud with the teacher. At this point the group repeats the sound in unison on the teacher's signal, and students are then given individual turns to say the sound correctly.

After basic sounds are introduced and practice students then receive instruction in the blending of previously taught sounds to form words. Instruction follows the same pattern of the model, lead, practice, and test method that was discussed above for basic sound instruction.

The SRA Program introduced a storybook at lesson 91 out of 160 lessons. Based on their ability grouping many students reached this point during the course of this research project. The first time students read the story aloud as a group in unison focusing on decoding skills. Then students read the story a second time and answer scripted

comprehension questions that accompanied each story. These questions called for both group and individual responses.

After the storybook activities were completed students worked individually on a worksheet designed to practice, reinforce, and assess student's knowledge of the material presented. Approximately every five lessons students were given oral mastery tests and every twenty lessons students took written mastery tests on such tasks as sound identification, word identification, and comprehension questions regarding previously presented material. In addition once students were in the storybooks they took timed readings every five lessons. Students who did not meet mastery levels received remediation and were retested. For the purpose of this research project the duration of each instructional period was 30 minutes every school day.

In addition to implementing the S.R.A. Reading Mastery I Program in week 3, the researchers sent home the first of three newsletters with activities to promote literacy at home. The newsletters included lists of books to read to, and with, children and various activities to enrich quality family reading time. It was the goal of these newsletters to enhance family participation in each student's reading development.

During week four, the researchers met with the participating teachers. At this meeting, discussions were held to evaluate the appropriateness of each child's placement in the program. Several students were moved based on either higher or lower performance than pretesting had suggested.

In addition to placement issues the researchers utilized the bi-monthly teacher meetings to provide participating teachers with various graphic organizers to implement in their reading programs. These organizers were compiled to help teachers improve the

comprehension skills of the targeted first grade students. Teachers were encouraged to try these graphic organizers across the language arts curriculum. The researchers used the bi-monthly meetings to discuss any questions, concerns, or successes with the various organizers. While teachers already used graphic organizers in the classroom, response to the variety used for improving comprehension skills was favorable.

The program continued during weeks five and six. At the end of week six another meeting of participating teachers was held to discuss student progress in the S.R.A. Reading Mastery I Program. At this time teachers felt that the groups of students had stabilized into cohesive groups.

The second newsletter was sent home during week seven. An invitation to the building's annual reading night was extended to families. Response to these newsletters was favorable. Several parents commented to teachers that they appreciated having suggestions for helping their children become better readers. Participating teachers informally questioned students about their reading activities at home. Based on the feedback from students, many parents were apparently utilizing the materials in the newsletters with their child.

During week eight the biweekly teachers meeting was held. Participating teachers expressed satisfaction with student progress. Students were meeting the mastery levels as stated in the program guidelines. Over the course of the implementation of this action research project several new students entered the targeted school's first grade classes. Teachers used these biweekly meetings to discuss the testing, placement, and progress of the new students.

The program continued during weeks nine and ten. During week ten the final newsletter of the action research project was sent home to parents. This newsletter focused on suggested activities for parents and children to utilize during an extended, upcoming winter break. It was the hope of researchers that students would participate in some form of reading activities everyday of the winter break. The researchers realized that this was a lofty goal, but wanted to set high expectations with the hope that all students would participate in at least some reading activities over the winter break. Due to inclement weather and various upcoming holiday festivities, it was decided to postpone the biweekly meeting until after the winter break.

Posttesting began during week 11. Students were administered both the STAR Reading Assessment and the running record which measured student's decoding and comprehension skills. A parental survey was sent home with each student to gain insight into any changes in family reading habits resulting from the implementation of this action research project. During week 12 the researchers analyzed results to measure growth.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

In order to assess the effects of Reading Mastery I, on the student's decoding skills, each child was asked to read a first grade passage aloud to researchers. Students were scored based on the percentage of words read correctly. Figure 4 compares the results during pre-testing with the posttest results. During pre-testing 21 students demonstrated a decoding rate of less than 30% while only 3 students demonstrated a decoding rate of greater than 80%. However during posttesting, no students scored below the 30% range and 20 students had reached a rate of higher than 80%.

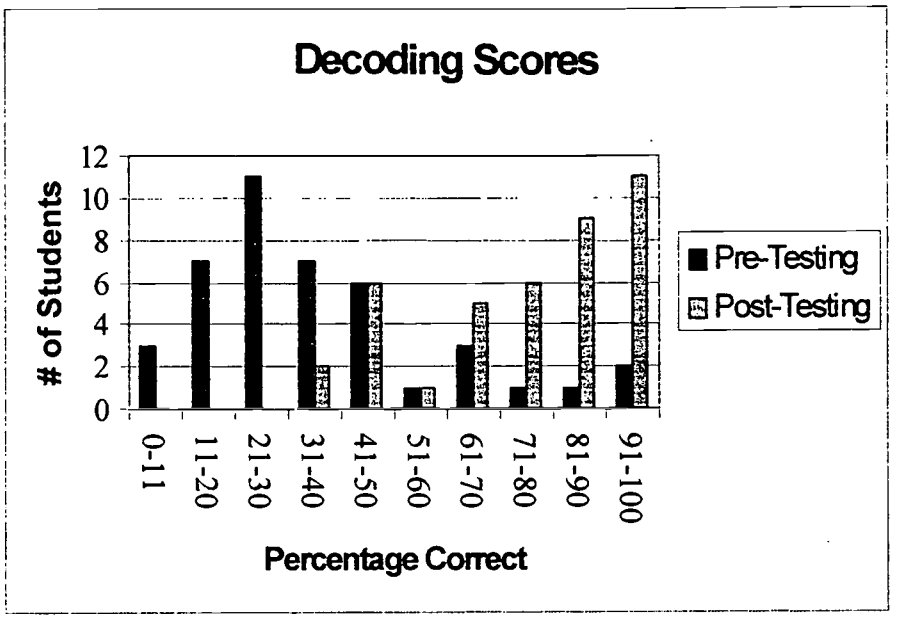

Figure 4: Pretest and posttest decoding scores of first grade students

The intervention appeared to have had a positive effect on the decoding ability of the first grade students. Posttest results showed an average improvement of 45% in students' decoding skills in just 12 weeks.

In order to assess the effects of the comprehension strategies that were implemented, students were asked comprehension questions based on their own reading of a first grade passage. Students were given no help on the passage and the questions were of a literal nature. The pretesting and posttest results are displayed in Figure 5.

Students showed an improvement when answering the comprehension questions during posttesting. Initially over 30 students were unable to answer even one question. This number dropped to 5 when posttesting was completed. While students' scores were raised at every level, it was the hope of the researchers that these comprehension skills would show more improvement. Figure 4 demonstrates that students were able to decode the passage, but Figure 5 shows that while these students were able to decode the

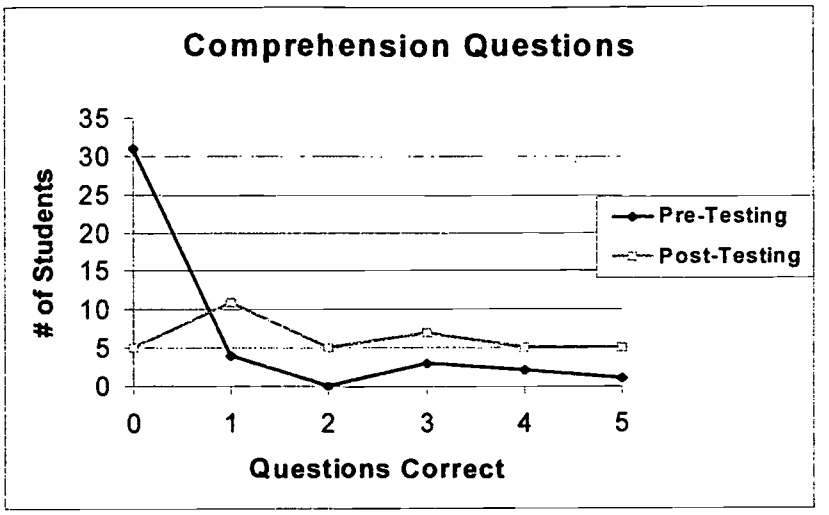

Figure 5: Pretest and posttest results of comprehension questions by first grade students

passage, they continued to have difficulty recalling key points. In order to assess the effects of both Reading Mastery I and comprehension techniques, students were administered the STAR Test before instruction began and after the initial 12 weeks of instruction. The results for the STAR are in Figure 6.

Pretesting results showed that 83% of first graders were below standards to meet a 1.0 grade equivalent and only 2% were functioning at a 1.5 grade equivalent or above. Posttesting indicated that 51% of students remained below a 1.0 grade equivalent, but 24% were functioning at a 1.5 grade equivalent or above.

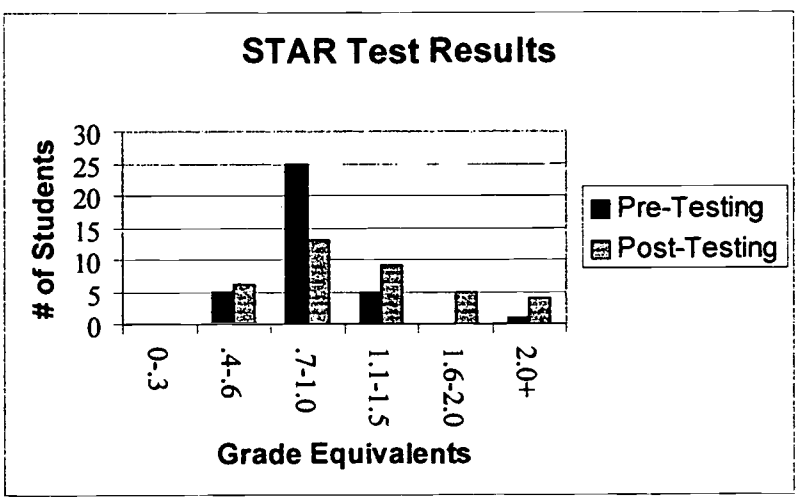

Figure 6: Pretest and posttest STAR results of first grade students

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the presentation and analysis of the data on decoding skills and comprehension skills, the students showed improvement in all areas. The growth was not as notable as the researchers expected. Many outside factors may have contributed to this, such as the natural growth rate of students. All students are expected to improve over the course of the school year. Students would ideally grow academically at least one month of growth for each month of instruction. Targeted students showed an average growth rate of four months during three months of instruction. At this rate students would be three months above the expected nine-month growth rate at the end of the school year.

Another outside factor included the use of the Four Block Method in the classroom. This method includes guided reading, word study, writers' workshop, and self-selected reading. Teachers were inserviced and worked to implement the Four Block with the help of building facilitators.

In addition, students received Title I services which included small group specialized instruction with additional one on one time with a Title Reading Aide. This one on one time provides for optimal student learning and achievement due to the fact that instruction is geared to meet individual student needs. Students also received one on one attention from parent volunteers and college practicum students.

While newsletters to increase parental involvement were positively received, the researchers have no knowledge of what actually transpired at home. Several test subjects showed dramatic downward changes in test results from pretesting to posttesting. These results lowered the overall results of the group. It is unknown why these students performed so poorly on posttesting. The researchers speculate that posttesting during

holiday activities, which took place the last week before winter vacation, was an unavoidable poor choice in scheduling. In addition to testing this final week before break, students participated in a school wide music program, classroom parties, holiday art activities, as well as holiday activities outside of school. Unfortunately all of these factors were compounded by two snow days the last weeks before school let out for break. With all of these distractions, even the best of students struggled to stay focused and on task.

Of the targeted students, an average of 44% fell into the low-income guidelines. Researchers speculate that a lack of money and resources in the home during the holidays contribute to the stress level of students. Students were possibly distracted by fears and concerns regarding their own holiday expectations

If the researchers were to repeat this project, several changes would be made. Upon much reflection and discussion the researchers would eliminate the comprehension component of this study. It is the opinion of the researchers that comprehension skills can not be mastered unless students possess basic decoding skills. Until students master decoding strategies, their focus, when reading, is solely on decoding the text. Meaning is lost when students have to work so hard to decode words. Additionally, the study would be conducted over a longer period of time. It is the opinion of the researchers that 12 weeks is not enough time to show growth in the average to below average student. This would also avoid posttesting during the busy holiday season. Furthermore, the project would give more opportunities for parents to interact with their children at school under the guidance of professionals who can offer support to help this parent/child time to be effective.

It is important that research in the area of student decoding and comprehension skills continue. Students who are unable to decode words and answer basic comprehension questions will struggle across all academic areas. Students who master these skills will possess the key to become life long learners.

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Appendix A

The Monthly Reader

October 1, 2000

Reading can be taught in many different ways. Here are some suggestions to foster literacy in your child.

--Find three things in your kitchen that start with same letter as your child's first name.

--Have your child memorize a poem and recite the poem to family members.

--VISIT THE LIBRARY!

THE READING ROOM!

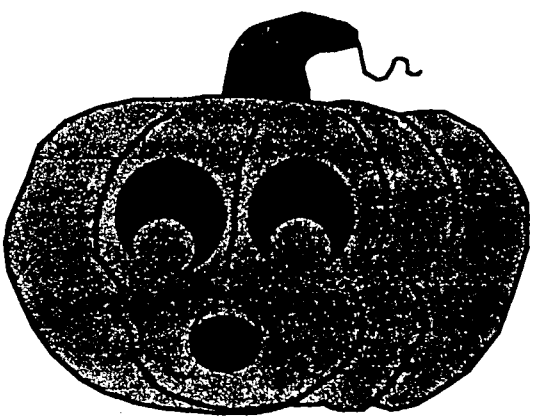
Here are some favorite books available at the Rock Island Library.

My Brother, Ant by Marc Simont

Tiny's Bath by Cari Meister

Turtle and Snake at Work by Kate Spohn

Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak



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401-19th Street
Rock Island, IL 61201
732-7323

Branch:
30th St. & 31st Ave
Rock Island, IL 61201
732-7369

Branch:
9010 Ridgewood Rd.
Rock Island, IL 61201
732-7338

****Remember:**

After reading a story to your child, discuss what happened at the beginning, middle and end of the story.

Arts and Crafts

Accordion Fold Books

Materials:

Paper (at least 22 inches long)
Cardboard
Decorative paper or fabric for the covers
Rubber cement
Ribbon

Tools:

Scissors, ruler, mat knife or paper cutter, glue

1. Cut a piece of paper 3 1/2 inches wide and 22 inches long.

2. Accordion fold the strip every 3 1/2 inches. Trim off any excess.

3. Cut two 4-inch cardboard squares for the covers.

4. Cut two 5-inch squares of fabric or pretty paper for the covers.

5. Spread the cardboard squares with rubber cement and attach the covering material. Smooth out the wrinkles. Leave a 1/2- inch margin all around.

6. Fold the side margins around to the back. Glue them down.

(continued on next page)

The Monthly Reader

November 1, 2000

Reading at home is a great way to help your child improve his or her reading ability. Here are some suggestions to make reading at home more fun and effective:

--Read aloud to your child; books, newspapers, magazine articles, directions, and even the back of the cereal box!

--Listen to your child read homework or favorite stories to you every day.

--Visit the library! Locations and phone numbers are listed below.

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Main Library:
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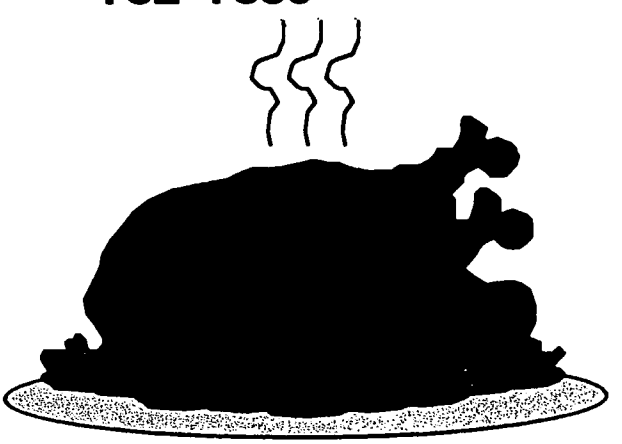
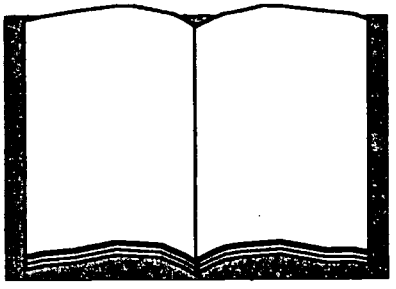


The Reading Room!



Here are some favorite books available at the Rock Island Library:

A, My Name is Alice by Jane Bayer

Bread and Jam for Frances by Russell Hoban

Frog and Toad are Friends by Arnold Lobel

Song and Dance Man by Karen Ackerman

Reading and writing are used every day. Here are some activities to try with your child at home:

--Have your child write a note to a family member. You can also write the note for the child as he tells what he wishes to say.

--Your child can help make out the grocery list for Thanksgiving dinner.

--Have your child write a list of 10 words that start with different letters

The Monthly Reader

December 1, 2000

Even though this time of year can get busy, it's still important to spend at least 20 minutes each day reading with your child.

1. Partway through the story, stop reading and ask your child to predict what will happen next.

2. Encourage your child to read along with you.

3. Many children find it helpful to use a place marker when they read. You can use a recipe card or the front of a window envelope.

4. Visit the library! Locations and phone numbers are listed below.

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401-19th Street
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Great Books to Bake By!

While waiting for the holiday baking to finish, choose from the following list of "baking books" to read with your child.

Waiter the Baker by Eric Carle

A Spoon for Every Bite by Joe Hayes

The Woman Who Flummoxed the Fairies by Heather Forest

The Missing Tarts by B.G. Hennessy

Tony's Bread: An Italian Tale by Tomie de Paola

Bread, Bread, Bread by Ann Morris

Just Desserts Club by Joanna Hurwitz

Arts and Crafts Corner

A Journal Just For You!

Create poems and stories, write about your adventures, or jot down the day's events in this journal. This would also make a wonderful gift for your child to make!

You will need:

- paper bag
- glue
- blank notebook
- soft cloth
- brown cream shoe polish
- markers

1. Rip a bag into pieces, and glue them over the entire cover of the notebook.

2. Using the cloth, rub a little shoe polish smoothly over the cover. Let it dry.

3. Cut out a rectangle from another bag. Fold in the sides to form a frame. Glue it on the cover and add polish. Write "Journal" with markers.

Appendix B

Story Map

Name: _____

Characters

Setting

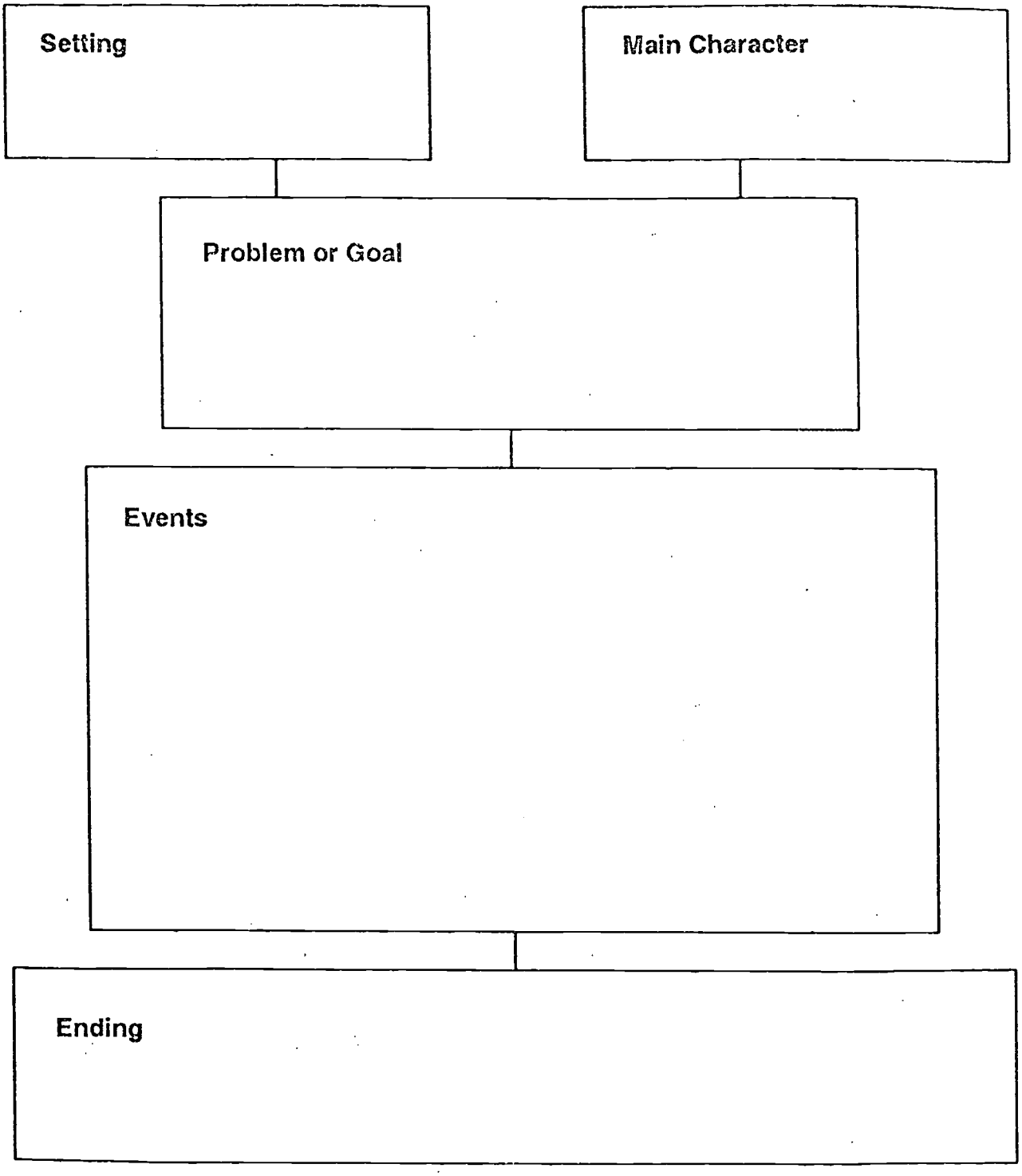
Beginning

Middle

End

Story Map
(Pattern)

Title: _____



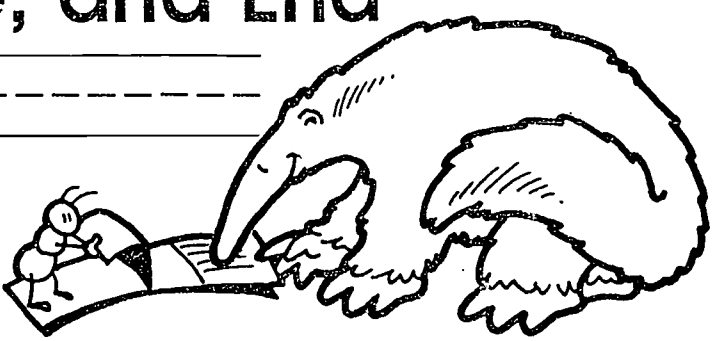
Who was in it?	Where did it take place?
What happened?	How did it end?

Name _____

Beginning, Middle, and End

Story _____

Draw a picture and write what happened in the story. Cut and staple the parts into a booklet.

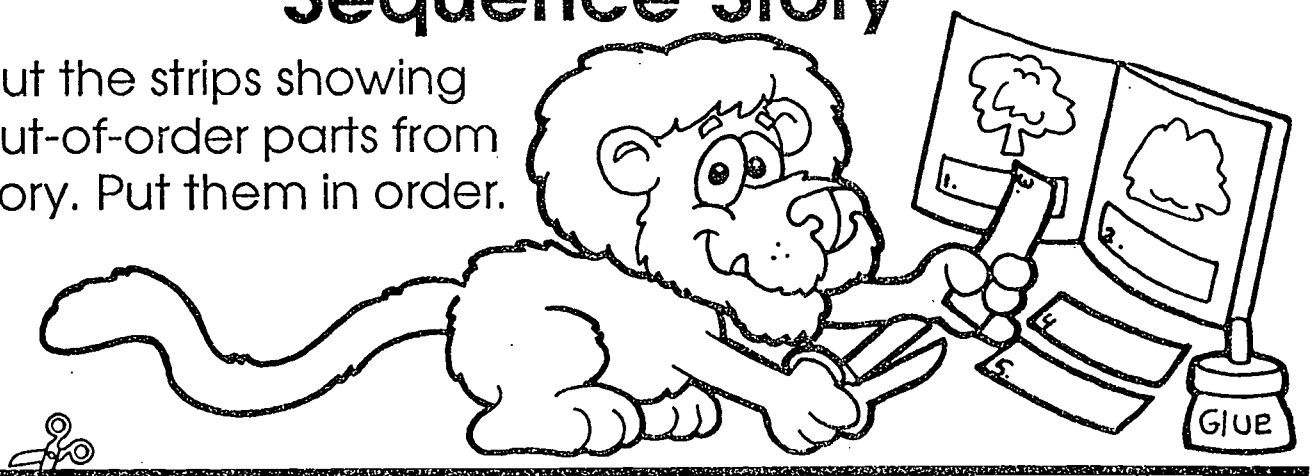


	At the beginning . . .
	In the middle . . .
	At the end . . .

Name _____

Sequence Story

Cut out the strips showing five out-of-order parts from the story. Put them in order.



Teacher: See teacher's guide.

Name _____

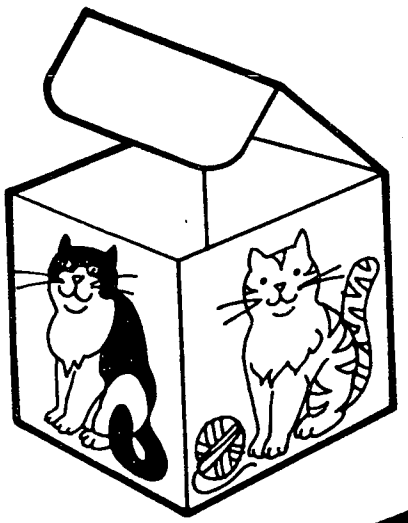
What a Character!

Story _____

Draw a character.

Tell about the character.

Cube Pattern



Write or draw on the sides of the cube. Cut out the pattern. Fold on the dotted lines. Glue the sides together.

glue

glue

glue

glue

Appendix C

Reading Habits Survey

Please answer the following questions regarding your family's reading habits. Circle the answer that best describes your family's reading habits.

1. How often do you or family members read to your child?

Everyday 2-3 times a week once a week not at all

2. How often does your child read by himself/herself?

Everyday 2-3 times a week once a week not at all

3. How often do children see adults read in the house?

Everyday 2-3 times a week once a week not at all

4. How does your family view the importance of reading outside of school?

Very important important somewhat important not important

5. How often does your family visit the library?

Once a week once a month once a year not at all

Comments:

Thank you for your information regarding your family's reading habits.

Student ID #:
Date:

Comprehension Questions: 1 2 3 4 5

Mary was on her way to see Jane.

She came to the little white gate.

Jane came to the little white gate.

Jane had her big doll with her.

She had her black cat with her, too.

They took the big doll and black cat with them to play.

They played on the green grass by the big tree.

A big dog came by.

They saw the big dog.

They took the cat and doll and ran to Jane's mother.

Then Jane's mother gave them some milk.

Jane wanted to feed some milk to the cat.

Then Mary walked home.

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