

**Direct Instruction in Phonological Awareness**

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## **Abstract**

Phonological awareness is thought to contribute to children's ability to read words in various ways. I chose to research this topic because phonological processing deficits, rather than a discrepancy between IQ and achievement, appear to be the best predictor of reading delays.

In the review of literature, I found that a lack of phonemic awareness is reported to be the most prevalent phonological processing deficit in disabled readers. Much of the research suggested that if a child lacks phonological awareness, he or she may be at risk for future reading failure. The explicit teaching of phonemic awareness in the early grades can increase the ease with which students acquire the important skill of reading.

Throughout this research process, I have learned the significance of teaching this directly. In children of a variety of ages, the ability to decode new words is closely related with phonological awareness. It is not difficult to incorporate activities that emphasize phonological awareness into the classroom and these types of activities should be done on a daily basis.

This experience has shown me that sometimes we, as teachers, need to step back and look at our students as individual learners. We need to decide if they have the basic skills necessary to teach the curriculum designed for their grade level. Sometimes we have second graders come to the class without any knowledge of letters or sounds, and they are expected to be beginner readers by that time, therefore, missing the direct instruction that they really need. By teaching these skills directly to students, we are making that connection and allowing them the opportunity to be successful readers and writers.

## Phonological Awareness Introduction

This study was conducted by a Resource Program teacher at Brooklands Elementary in Rochester Hills, Michigan. Brooklands is one of thirteen elementary schools in the sixty-six square miles of Rochester Community Schools. Brooklands has a student population of approximately 500 students. The elementary has grades kindergarten through fifth grade. The classes are not very diverse in ethnicity, majority being Caucasian. However, there is a wide range of students with different socio-economic backgrounds attending Brooklands Elementary.

I have been teaching for four years, three of which have been at Brooklands Elementary. In these three years, I have experienced many different types of learners. Majority of the students I teach struggle in the areas of reading and writing, which is very common for Resource Program teachers. Our program has a language program called Language! that all the Resource teachers use in our district. We have all had extensive training in it and the progress and pace of our students is highly monitored by our administration. Throughout the training, we were provided with extensive research that explains the importance and relevance of phonological awareness in the classroom.

However, there are still many programs and/or teachers that do not spend the quality of time needed in the area of phonological awareness. Many districts/teachers assume that students can learn these skills on their own and do not need direct instruction in it.

Phonological awareness is not only correlated with learning to read, but research has shown that it plays a causal role in reading and writing development. It is the

foundation underlying the learning of spelling-sound correspondences. It has also been said that phonological processing is the primary ability area where children with reading difficulties differ from other children. Phonological processing deficits can be a great predictor for reading difficulties and delays. My goal is to demonstrate that phonological awareness is an imperative skill that must be directly taught to students in the early elementary.

## **Literature Review**

Phonological awareness has been a highly overlooked concept when teaching students how to read and write. Stanovich defines “phonological awareness” as the ability to deal explicitly and segmentally with sound units smaller than the syllable. He also notes that researchers “argue intensely” about the meaning of the term and about the nature of the tasks used to measure it. (Sensenbaugh, 2005). There are several curriculums that are used in the general education setting that do not focus in on the area of phonological awareness when teaching a language program. Phonological awareness has been shown to be one of the most reliable predictors and associates of reading ability (Foy & Mann, 2003). Phonological awareness is the ability to segment spoken words into their constituent sounds and to manipulate these sounds. More than two decades of research have shown that in children of a variety of ages, the ability to decode new words is closely associated with phonological awareness (Busink, 1997).

For many children, explicit phonological awareness, the ability to segment and manipulate sounds in words, does not come naturally. Some children are unable to develop this ability even with direct phonics instruction. Once beginning readers have some awareness of phonemes and their corresponding graphic representations, research has indicated that further reading instruction heightens their awareness of language, assisting then in developing the later stages of phonemic awareness (Sensenbaugh, 2005). However, phonological awareness can be successfully taught, both before and during reading instruction (Busink, 1997). Phonological processing deficits, rather than a discrepancy between IQ and achievement, appear to be the best predictor of reading

delays. Lack of phonemic awareness is reported to be the most prevalent phonological processing deficit in disabled readers (Shaw & Yates, 2002). Based upon this research, some school districts have changed their views of the instructional focus and expectations for their reading disabled students. In-classroom tutoring was usually focused upon helping these students complete classroom assignments in their identified areas of weaknesses, such as reading and written language. This proved to be very successful in many school districts, however, these students continued to be classified as “learning handicapped” and, often times, did not develop the academic skills to become academically self-sufficient. As a result of this research, some districts have changed their approach to special education instruction by no longer solely providing instructional support within the regular classroom, but by providing daily directed instruction in phonemic awareness, reading and written language (Shaw & Yates, 2002).

According to Flett & Conderman (2002), if a child lacks phonemic awareness, he or she may be at risk for future reading failure. The explicit teaching of phonemic awareness in the early grades can increase the ease with which students acquire the important skills of reading. It is not difficult to incorporate activities emphasizing oral language into the classroom each day through formal and informal experiences, says Flett & Conderman. As noted by Busink (1997), the benefits of phonological awareness in training appear to be unaffected by variations in intelligence within the normal range. Therefore, it seems sensible to allow all young children to benefit from activities that encourage explicit phonological segmentation skills. Shaw and Yates state that their district no longer believes that special education should be the first line intervention for students with learning difficulties. They now expect regular education teachers to

recognize and to substantially remediate student weaknesses in phonemic awareness skills. Only when phonemic awareness intervention by the regular classroom teacher do not lead to success in reading will a student be referred for consideration for special education services (Shaw & Yates, 2002). In this district's recent studies, the number of student referrals for consideration for special education services has decreased the past two years for their primary grade level students. "We believe this is a consequence of early diagnosis and skillful interventions provided by our primary teachers to address diagnosed difficulties with phonemic awareness" (Shaw & Yates, 2002, pg.2).

Phonological awareness instruction should begin prior to formal reading instruction for children at risk for reading delay, says Chard and Peinado (2001). However, they believe the benefit is not limited to children at risk for reading delay. All children benefit from phonological awareness instruction prior to formal reading instruction. According to Chard and Peinado, phonological awareness is comprised of multiple dimensions, such as rhyme, phoneme detection, blending, segmenting, and phoneme deletion. They believe that not all of these components are equally important. The three dimensions that they believe are critical prerequisites for beginning to reading skills are detection of phonemes, blending, and segmenting.

It must be remembered, however, that phonemic awareness activities are not sufficient to produce good readers. Mandates that require teachers to spend specific amount of time on phonemic awareness instruction could compromise other important aspects of the literacy curriculum (International Reading Association, 2001). The International Reading Association strongly supports a balanced approach to teaching

reading – one that recognizes the importance of comprehension and enjoyment as much as discrete language skills.

It is evident that in the district I teach in, the general education teachers are not required to teach phonological awareness directly. Phonological awareness is often overlooked and is not included in the curriculum when it should be. Many students that come to “TEAM” to be tested for special education services are lacking in the ability to produce sounds, correlate the sounds and the letters, break apart sounds, blend them together, and many other things that are covered when teaching phonological awareness directly. We should not assume that students know these things, but instead look at the research and see how powerful something so simple can be.



## Research Process

The objective of this action research study is to determine the importance of phonological awareness in the general education and special education setting. In my past experience, many students come to me with no background in this area. They struggle in the areas of sound-symbol correspondence, deleting sounds, and blending sounds in words. My goal for this process is to show the relevance and importance of teaching phonological awareness directly in the classroom.

To determine what types of programs teachers were currently using and what types of phonological awareness was involved, I devised a data collection plan. This data collection plan posed the following three questions:

1. How do language programs with different phonemic awareness approaches differ in respect to the reading and writing development of early elementary students?
2. How does direct instruction in phonemic awareness impact students with a learning disability?
3. How much time should be spent on phonemic awareness in order to produce the desired results and at what grades?

The first level of data that I collected was an interview (see Appendix B). I interviewed a teacher that has been in the district for eight years. She has been teaching first grade for all of those eight years. This interview helped me to see what has been used in the past and what is currently being used as far as the language programs and the teaching of phonological awareness. After the interview I created an observation checklist (see Appendix C). I used this checklist to go into different

classrooms in the lower elementary and see their use of phonological awareness and how much time they spent on it. I also wanted to see their approach to individual students versus the whole class. A teacher survey was also given (see Appendix D) to get feedback from the teachers and their feelings towards the relevance of phonological awareness.

The next level of information I collected focused on the impact of the direct instruction of phonological awareness. A student survey was conducted (see Appendix E) in my language arts group to see how the students felt about reading and writing. Many of my students come to me with not background in phonological awareness. Within a few weeks of letter-sound correspondence, they begin to put the pieces together. I wanted to see what activities they enjoyed doing and what activities they believe helped them to begin to read. I also wanted to see how they felt about reading and writing now that have been in our Resource Program for about one year. I also collected some writing samples to show before and after the development of phonological awareness and see if there was a difference. The last level of data collection I used was to collect data on their district assessments. I wanted to see how they performed on the MLPP prior to our Resource program and then after receiving the direct instruction in phonological awareness. This helped me understand if the students were grasping it yet, or if their learning difficulties affected different areas of language arts.

The last level of data collection focused on the amount of time to be spent on phonological awareness. In our district we have a Language! coach. She is the person that trains us in this nationally-used program. She travels all over the country

and is very knowledgeable in our program. I thought she would be a great resource, so I decided to interview her. I wanted to learn what the research suggests as far as the amount of time and different areas of phonological awareness to focus on. I also did a teacher survey (see Appendix D again). This survey just asked the teachers how long they spend on this every day. The third piece of collection was a checklist. While observing different programs and different teachers, I also noted how long they were spending on different aspects of phonological awareness and how much attention they were paying to it.

The various levels of collection data from a variety of sources allowed me to see the affects and products of the use of direct instruction in phonological awareness.

## **Data Analysis**

This study showed the importance and relevance in having direct instruction in both the special education and the general education classrooms, especially in the lower elementary grades. By teaching students the direct correlation of sound and letter relationships, this can help them to become a better reader and writer.

My initial research for this study started with an interview of a seasoned first grade teacher. This teacher was chosen based on her years of experience and grade level. Here were the questions that I asked her:

1. How long have you been teaching and what grade level/levels have you taught.

This teacher has been teaching for eight years. She has been in first grade for all of those years. Her first two years were in a different district and her last six years have been at Brooklands Elementary.

2. What types of Language Arts programs have you worked with and what is your opinion on each of these programs?

Her response was that in the past, she has used programs such as Scholastic, WrightGroup, Four Blocks, Carden, and Orton-Gillingham. She stated that some of these programs had a very “old-style” phonics program. She said that the children had a hard time understanding the relevance of it because it was very isolated from everything else that was being done in the classroom. She currently uses some of these programs in collaboration with each other. Over the past summer, all the first and second grade teachers in our building were trained in Orton-Gillingham. This teacher, along with several other lower elementary teachers, highly support this program. They like how the

focus is on recognizing phonological awareness and how it relates to a student's reading and writing.

3. The last question I asked her was her opinion of teaching phonological awareness directly in her classroom.

Her response was supportive of teaching direct instruction in phonological awareness. She believes that some students come to first grade with the foundation and background needed to begin reading and writing, but others are lacking in the development of phonological awareness. She also believes that although phonemic awareness is a crucial piece of reading and writing development, it must be taught within a context of reading for more comprehension development. She spends about 30 minutes per day teaching this in isolation, but also includes it throughout the day when relevant. She believes that this is an adequate amount of time for majority of learners in her class, but some students do need more direct instruction in this than others.

This interview gave me more insight in the general education curriculum and the difference in the language arts programs. I also was able to compare how this fairly new first grade teacher compared to other lower elementary teachers in the amount of time specifically used for phonological awareness instruction.

Fortunately, my teaching position requires me to go into different classrooms and work with my students in the general education setting, as well as my own classroom. I go into two different classrooms throughout my day to work with students. While in these classrooms, I was able to observe the amount of time and frequency of phonological awareness in the classroom. My next tool, the observation checklist, was used to determine what the average amount of time was spent on this instruction and in

what grade levels. In addition to the three classrooms I work in, I also chose three others classrooms to observe. I explained to the teachers that I needed to do some research and observe their language arts programs. I did this observation during my planning period over a two-week span. This checklist gave me a chance to compare different grade levels and different amounts of time spent on phonological awareness. The teachers were unaware of what specifically I was observing, so I can assume that no adjustments were made in their instruction.

**Table 1**  
**Observation Checklist**

<b>Teacher/Grade</b>	<b>15 minutes or less</b>	<b>15-30 minutes</b>	<b>More than 30 minutes</b>
Teacher A Kindergarten			<b>X</b>
Teacher B First		<b>X</b>	
Teacher C First Grade		<b>X</b>	
Teacher D First Grade	<b>X</b>		
Teacher E Second Grade	<b>X</b>		

This figure shows that out of 5 classrooms observed, 40% of teachers spent 15 minutes or less with phonological awareness, 40% spent 15-30 minutes, and 20% spent more than 30 minutes on this instruction.

After reviewing these numbers, I decided to interview our districts Language! program coach and trainer. She has been a coach in this program for four years and a

district trainer for two. She has trained all over the country with some of the very best language arts experts. Here are the questions that I asked her:

1. What are your thoughts on phonological awareness in the general education setting?

Her response was that phonological awareness is an essential piece to the literacy instruction. She stated how this needs to be taught in the general education setting in grades kindergarten through second grade.

2. What are some important components of phonological awareness?

“Isolating sounds, deleting sounds, and blending sounds” was her reply. Students need to understand the relationship between sounds and letters before they can connect that to their reading and writing.

3. On the average, how much time should be spent teaching phonological awareness?

“15-25 minutes everyday”.

4. What grades should have direct instruction in phonological awareness?

“Grades kindergarten through second grade.”

5. What has your observations been throughout the years with different language programs and different approaches to phonological awareness?

She replied with stating the language programs typically did not include lessons on phonological awareness. Then publishers started adding activities such as rhyming into the lessons. Rhyming is a part of phonological awareness but is not a “must”. She also stated that publishers were not paying attention to what the scientific research was saying that needed to be included in phonological awareness training. As

laws changed concerning educational practices, programs began to look more seriously at the types of activities that should be included. She then stated that this is when our program, Language! adopted the activities into the program and emphasized a direct instruction in phonological awareness.

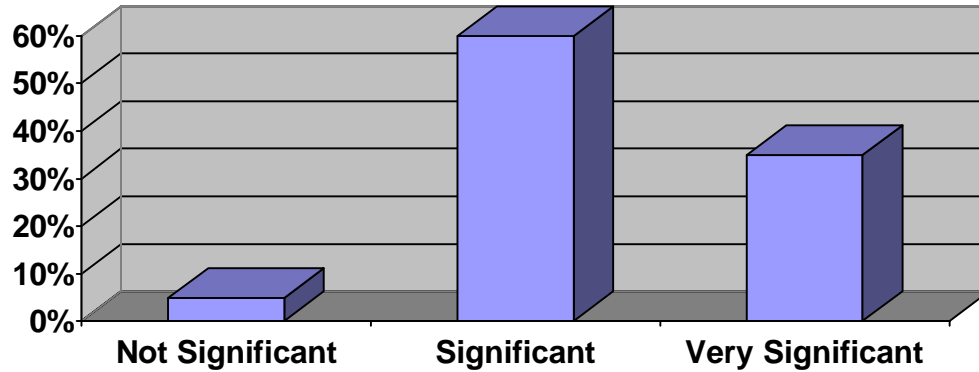
Reflecting on this interview, I got more insight on the development of phonological awareness. It is a powerful thing when you are able to sit through trainings and see the research for yourself. Not only have our students shown growth in this area within our district, but it is also nation-wide.

My next area of data collection was a teacher survey (see Appendix E). I wanted to get other teachers' opinions about the instruction of phonological awareness. I handed out 10 surveys to teachers ranging in grades kindergarten through third grade.

Unfortunately, I only had half of the teachers participate. I found that there were a variety of language arts programs used in the classrooms. The focus in their classroom is not on one program, but using different programs in collaboration. These programs used were Orton-Gillingham, Wright Group, Four Blocks, Scholastic, and some anthology series. I found that on average, teachers spent 15-20 minutes per day on the teaching of phonemic awareness. I also found out that this was not how their teaching styles reflected in the past. Only since last summer when the teachers were trained in Orton-Gillingham, were they spending this amount of time on phonological awareness. Prior to that, they were not even sure they had much direct instruction incorporated into their lesson. When asked how they felt about teaching the instruction of phonological awareness in the classroom, this is the responses that I got:



## Teaching Phonological Awareness in the general education setting

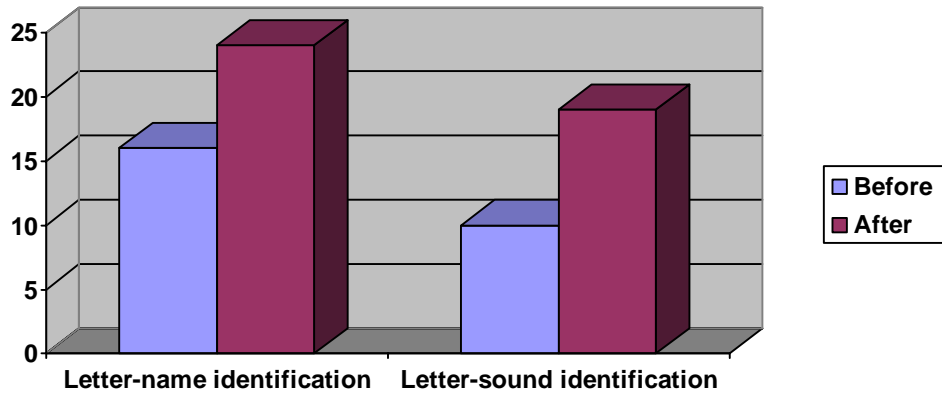


Some teachers did not comment on their opinion, however, some did state that it is an important precursor to reading. The amount of time should vary depending on the grade level and the developmental level. One teacher went on to state that the time should increase as the child enters the school setting, but then decrease as they move through the stages in education. Although this is true for most students, there are still quit a few students that struggle with concept of letters and sounds. I have seen many second graders come to the resource program with no sound-symbol correspondence. If they did not catch on to this in kindergarten and first grade, they are no longer directly taught this skill. They are the ones that slip through the cracks and need more instruction in the phonological awareness skills.

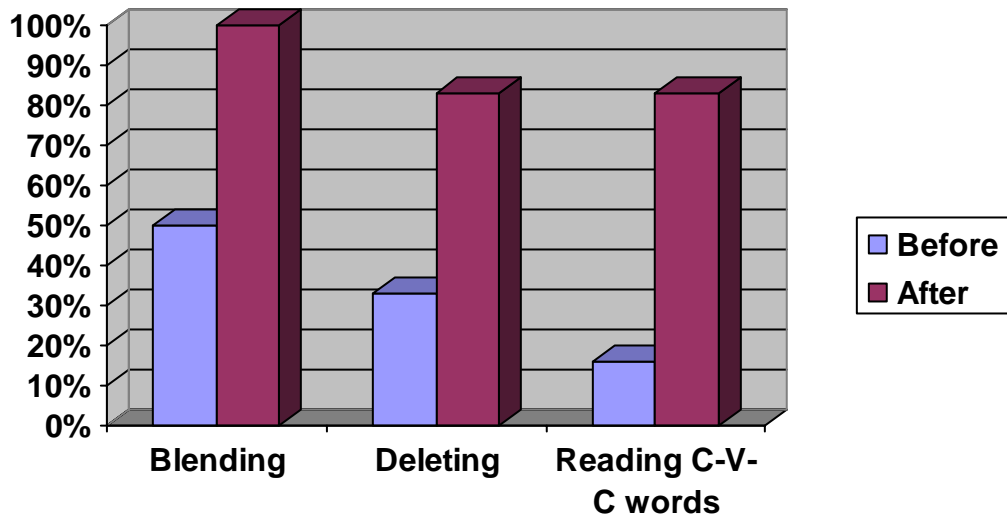
My goal for the next data collection relates to the problem stated above. The process of certifying a student with a disability is a complex task. There are some students that have a learning disability, some are English Second Language Learners, some are emotionally impaired, some cognitively impaired, and so on. However, there

are some students that do come to us because of the so-called “curriculum casualties”. These are the students that are in our resource program for a few years and then they are able to participate in the general curriculum full time. These are the students that have the ability, but had a hard time catching on to the process of our language. After looking at different reading and writing assessments, both district and within the Language! curriculum, I noticed a significant increase in the phonological processing skills. After a year, or sometimes just a few months, some students are better able to understand our language and the concept of our letters and sounds. I have had several teachers come to me after only a few months in the resource program and noticing significant differences in that child. These are the children that came to our program with no background knowledge in phonological awareness, and with our daily direct instruction in this, they were able to pick up reading and show more confidence in themselves.

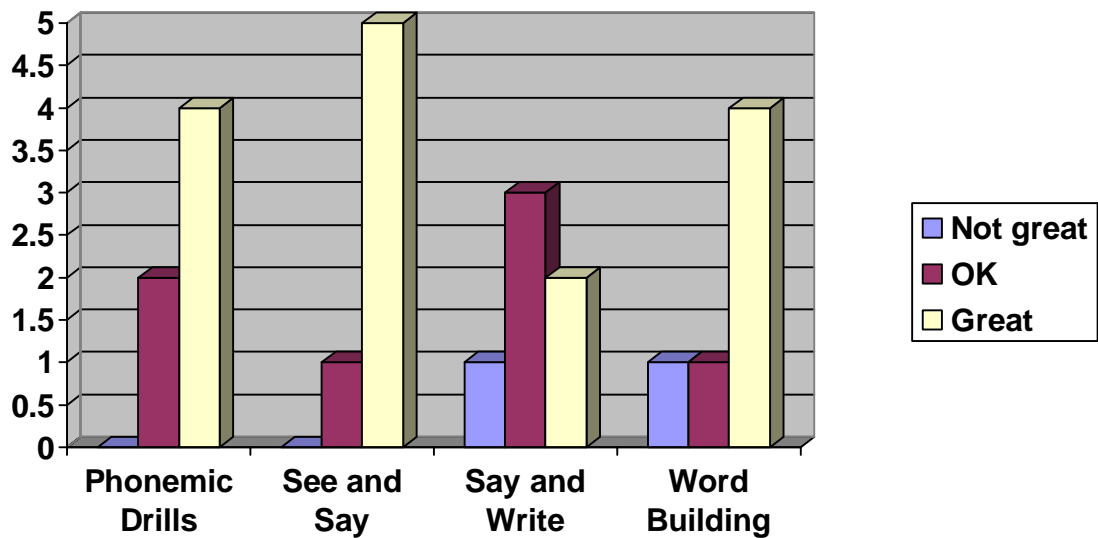
I have a group of six students that are in the second grade. They entered the resource program between September 2004 and October 2005. Each time a student enters the program, there is extensive testing done. The data that I tend to utilize the most when dealing with early elementary students is how many letters in the alphabet can they identify, how many sounds can they identify, are they able to blend sounds together to create a word, are they able to delete sounds from a word, and are they able to read consonant-vowel-consonant words. Here is the first table with comparing how many letters and sounds they were able to identify before entering our program and how many they were able to identify after 5 months with daily instruction on phonological awareness.



Here is a table that shows the percentage of students that could blend, delete, and read consonant-vowel-consonant words before entering our program and after 5 months of direct instruction in phonological awareness. The consonant-vowel-consonant words were chosen based on the introduction of the short vowels a and i. The short vowels e, o, and u had not been taught at this time. They would be introduced in later units.



The final source of data collection was taken from a group of students that I have been instructing for two and a half years. This group consists of six third graders. These are students that have grown tremendously in the areas of reading and writing and now have more confidence in the general curriculum. I wanted to see from a students' point of view which areas of phonological awareness they enjoyed and which they did not. I also wanted to see what they thought has helped them the most in becoming a better reader. Here is what I found:



Looking at this data, it is clear to see that the students enjoy doing phonological awareness. These are all activities that are hands-on for the students and gives them a break from the routine of paper-pencil. Some of these activities are done with a partner and some are done as a whole group. When asked if they thought reading was easier, harder, or the same after being in our language program, they all responded that it was easier. When asked what they thought has helped them the most in reading, there were a

variety of answers. Some replied with our “See and Say”, a few said that SRC (Scholastic Reading Counts) has helped, and some thought that Language! has helped. Overall, I believe this data helps to confirm the research that phonological awareness is a significant contributor to the reading and writing development of students.

## **Action Plan**

As I reflect on my collaborative action research project, I realize how important it is to understand your curriculum and why you teach the things you do. Throughout this process I collected a variety of data to determine the significance of direct instruction in phonological awareness.

My first step in the process involved a significant amount of research. From this, I gathered a strong background in the importance of this topic. With this research, along with my own data collection, I am able to relay this information to other teachers. Often times, teachers are in the process of having a student tested for a learning disability for a significant amount of time. During this time I have teachers come to me looking for any extra accommodations or supplementary aids they can put into place. Now I feel confident in explaining the importance of phonological awareness and the direct teaching of this. I am able to share research and data from a variety of sources and explain why it is so relevant.

Another course of action will be to inform the parents of this data. Along with general education teachers, I have many parents that come to me and ask why their child cannot read yet, or what they can do to help their child start to read. Many times they feel that exposing them to books alone is enough. However, with this research and data, I am able to inform the parents of other activities they can work on. If you have never had a learning disability or if you are not a teacher, it is hard to take a step back and realize what level their child is at and what steps could be done to improve their reading and writing.

A third plan of action is to design a daily checklist. This checklist will be visible in my classroom and will help remind myself and my students of all the different phonological awareness activities there are. It is easy for teachers to get stuck in a routine, especially if something is working. However, for the sake of the student, it is a good idea to keep a variety going inside the classroom. This checklist will be used everyday and will be done at the beginning of each language arts lesson. It will also be available for students to use during centers or independent time. This list will be a visual reminder for both the teacher and the student.

Following this visual checklist, I will have a chart for my students to complete. To motivate them to complete these activities during their independent time or centers, I will fill up a space on their “tower” for each activity that they finish. When they reach the top of the tower, they will be allowed to use a computer program called Earobics. This program is fun, challenging, and great for developing phonological processing skills. Within this program, there is also a “tower” that can be filled up with each new level that is passed. A certificate and a phone call home will be rewarded for each completion of this tower.

As teachers we learn from the beginning that not all students learn the same. We learn that some come to the classroom with a knowledgeable background and some basic skills needed for the development of reading and writing. However, there are some students who, because of various circumstances, do not pick up on this right away. It is imperative that we do not overlook phonological awareness and the power it has on the development of reading and writing. With this action plan into place, more and more

students will be able to experience the success of reading and understand the relationship between sounds and letters.



# **Appendix**

## Appendix A

### Data Collection Plan

Research Questions	Source 1	Source 2	Source 3
1. How do language programs with different phonemic awareness approaches differ in respect to the reading and writing development of early elementary students?	Observation checklist	District reading/writing assessments	Interviews
2. How does direct instruction in phonemic awareness impact students with a learning disability?	District reading/writing assessments	Surveys	Student work
3. How much time should be spent on phonemic awareness in order to produce the desired results and at what grades?	Surveys	Interviews	Observation checklist

The first question relates to the differences between programs that use phonemic awareness and those that do not and how it affects the reading and writing development of early elementary students. The first source I chose was an observation checklist. This will be completed by me after I observe several different classrooms in our building and their use of phonemic awareness while comparing it to the program that I use in the Resource Program. Different grade levels use different language programs or trainings

and some teaches use some things more than the other, so there is not a lot of consistency in our building in regards to the teaching of phonemic awareness. While using the checklist of what teacher teaches phonemic awareness directly, I would then compare their district reading and writing assessments. From these assessments I would hope to see a correlation in the instruction of phonemic awareness, the time allotted, and their reading and writing scores. The third source would be interviews. Majority of our teachers have had experiences with different instructional programs and the teaching of phonemic awareness. They would be a good source to ask if they have noticed any correlations, and if so, what type.

The second question deals with the issue of teaching phonemic awareness to students with learning disabilities. One source for this could be looking at the reading and writing assessments of a student with a learning disability and comparing it to a year with support services in phonemic awareness and one year without the services. Another source could be surveys. I have had numerous teachers in the early elementary level tell me how fast “Johnny” has caught on or improved in his reading and writing since he started coming to our Resource Program. I believe a big contribution to this is the explicit instruction they receive in phonemic awareness. I would like to see how teachers feel their resource students are progressing in reading and writing. Another source would be to look at the students’ work. I would compare the work of a student who has a learning disability and receives support services to their work in previous years. I would compare the two and see if there could be any correlation to the explicit instruction in phonemic awareness.

The third question relates to the amount of time that should be spent on the instruction. Because teachers have so much experience in different programs, a survey would be a good tool to use to see how they feel about the duration of the time spent on phonemic awareness. I would also sit down with a select few of these teachers in the lower elementary level and figure out the positives and negatives of spending the time on this instruction. A third source would be to observe different classrooms and take note to how long they are spending on this and compare it to classes that may be spending more or less time doing phonemic awareness.

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview**

#### **Questions:**

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How many years have you been with Rochester?
3. What grades have you taught?
4. What different Language Arts programs have you used?
5. What has been your experience with teaching phonological awareness in your classroom?

## Appendix C

### Observation Checklist

#### Phonemic Awareness in the Classroom

Teacher/Grade	15 minutes or less	15-30 minutes	More than 30 minutes
Teacher A Kindergarten			X
Teacher B Kindergarten		X	
Teacher C First Grade			X
Teacher D First Grade		X	
Teacher F Third Grade	X		

## Appendix D

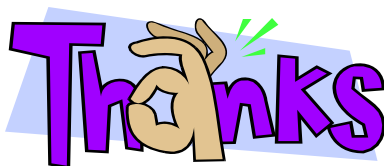
### Interview # 2

1. What are your thoughts on phonemic awareness in the general education setting?
2. On the average, how much time should be spent teaching phonemic awareness?
3. What grades should have direct instruction in phonemic awareness?
4. What has your observations been throughout the years with different language programs and different approaches to phonemic awareness?

## Appendix E

### Teacher Survey

1. What language arts program/s do you currently use in the classroom?
2. On average, how many minutes per day do you spend on phonemic awareness?
3. Have you used any other language programs that differ in the direct instruction of phonemic awareness?
4. What is your feeling on the instruction of phonemic awareness in the classroom (do you support/ not support, amount of time,...)?



Thank you for your time.



Melanie King

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