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THE FLUENCY PUZZLE:
EFFECTIVELY PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER TO CREATE SUCCESSFUL READERS

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Abstract

This qualitative study documented first grade students exploring reading fluency in a variety of meaningful ways over a twelve week period. General education students were instructed in all areas of reading fluency including rate, accuracy, prosody, and comprehension. The teacher used teaching strategies such as direct instruction, repeated readings, interactive learning, strong modeling, and setting high goals. Students also participated in various reading fluency activities with partners including phrase memory, Word Tac Toe, words/phrases/sentences, sentence stars, and punctuation posters. Throughout the study the teacher collected data through observation, interviews, student work, and diagnostic reading assessments. The data from this study suggests that providing varied instruction and practice in all areas of reading fluency can lead to increased fluency performance, the development of social and cooperative skills, increased student engagement, and success in spelling and writing.
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**Researcher Stance**

I cannot recall the moment I learned to read, nor can I remember where it happened or with what book. I can only remember how my first grade teacher made me feel about reading. A tinge of excitement still comes over me when I envision the horseshoe reading bench or squishing in to hear a chapter from *Mr. Popper’s Penguins*. In her room, reading was not the story in the anthology or high frequency word flashcards. It was not phonics drill groups or boring color coded books. In her classroom reading was an experience that all students in the class had access to. Even more, it was an experience that I had felt a part of. Though I cannot know for certain how many fluent readers left her classroom, I can claim that her approach to creating fluent readers left a lasting impression on me and helped me become a fluent reader. Of course, at the time, I never even knew I was learning how to become a lifelong and fluent reader. Ah, if only I had not been six and I had paid more attention to how she worked her magic. Somehow she knew just how to put together all the pieces of reading.

Flash-forward twenty some years, and now I am the one trying to make reading magic in my classroom of first graders. I carefully chose the word “trying”. Teaching children to read is not only complex but leaves much room for failure, I often feel as if I am always just trying. Though I get better at my craft each year, I am still always striving to find the reading magic and it is this quest that has led me to my action research study topic.
Over the past few years I have attended a series of intensive reading training sessions within my district. These teacher in-service meetings have been centered on phonological awareness and phonics, and a majority of the effort has been on direct and systematic small group instruction. I have been faithfully implementing these techniques in my classroom and have seen success in some areas. Towards the middle of every year when fluency becomes emphasized, students seem to underperform formally and informally. It was at these times when I started really thinking about the reading experience I was providing for my students and began to ponder whether or not experience was creating fluent and lifelong readers.

Suddenly I became very aware of my own beliefs about reading fluency. I do not believe that drilling flashcards or testing how many words a student reads in a minute creates fluent readers. Nor do I believe that giving intensive students only increased phonics instruction will create fluent readers. When I thought about it more, I do not even believe that using the strictly color coded, leveled books on my shelves will create fluent readers. What was I doing in my small fluency groups? Ironically, I had come to do exactly and only those things I did not believe would create fluent readers.

After talking to others and researching reading fluency I began to see reading as more of a puzzle. I knew all of the components and was already using most them in my classroom, but in isolation. As a teacher it is my responsibility to
piece the puzzle together more effectively and appropriately for my students. Perhaps this was the key to my childhood reading experience feeling like magic; everything just fit together. My action research topic question evolved into: *What are the observed and reported experiences when first grade students explore reading fluency in a variety of meaningful ways?*

Many of my students do not live in homes that are rich in literacy. I also realize that many of my students might not have as big or as positive of an attachment to reading as I had at their age. I need to make literacy a successful and attainable experience for them, not a bluebirds and blackbirds static routine and it will be important for me to keep an open mind to students’ reading experiences throughout my study. Equally important is that I acknowledge the different opinions, feelings toward, and reading levels my students bring to the table. Therefore I need to piece together the appropriate components of fluency to create a complete and successful picture of reading fluency.

Throughout my action research I expect students to make progress in all areas of fluency, not just the typically, and perhaps over used, words read per minute. I expect my students to start connecting the parts of fluency in their own reading and to create a more positive and natural connection to that reading. I also feel this experience will help foster a well rounded feeling towards reading fluency and lifelong reading habits. I want my students to feel confident picking up and reading a real book, not just a decodable reader from their assigned
reading box. I have to admit this task feels daunting. There is a possibility that I might see advances in fluency that the required fluency screenings and tests do not acknowledge. I am prepared to accept these possibilities as I keep my ultimate goal in mind. Though I might not be able to recreate my own first grade teacher’s magic, I will certainly be doing everything I can to spread some of my own magic dust along the way.
Literature Review

Introduction

During the primary grades students develop important reading skills. These skills are often individual yet multifaceted. They also work together to create a full reading experience. The five essential components of reading include: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Learning Point Associates, 2004). In many classrooms, first grade students are expected to possess the phonemic awareness and phonics skills to develop reading fluency. Therefore students are ready to receive appropriate and well rounded fluency instruction.

However, in recent times reading fluency has become defined with a heavier weight on reading rate. Reading fluency interventions are more likely to be isolated skill instruction within the parameter of a specific intervention context (Mesmer, Hogan, Newry, Hommema, Fletcher, & Boso, 2010). Reading fluency is more complex than simple isolated interventions focused around speed and accuracy. Appropriate, meaningful, and varied instruction within and between the components of reading fluency is necessary for students to achieve full success.

Fluency

In the education world there are many different definitions of reading fluency and educators often have slightly different descriptions themselves. Most definitions of fluency identify three components: accuracy, rate or speed, and
The concept of reading fluency is multifaceted, with prosody (Deeney, 2010) being one of its components. Other definitions add a fourth component of comprehension, suggesting that the other three “are vehicles to comprehension” (Deeney, 2010, p. 440).

**Rate.** The most recognized part of reading fluency is commonly referred to as reading rate. Reading rate incorporates both automaticity and speed (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Automaticity refers to a reader’s ability to recognize and read words quickly without much effort. When readers read with automaticity, their reading speed increases greatly. Readers who do not read with automaticity use more effort to recognize words and are left with little energy to actually comprehend those words.

**Accuracy.** With a large part of reading being comprehension, accuracy plays an influential role in reaching that goal (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). When students struggle to decode a larger percentage of words, they put a larger amount of effort into decoding the words. This leaves little cognitive space for comprehension.

**Prosody.** Prosody is perhaps the most overlooked part of reading fluency. To read with prosody is to read sounding like oral speech (Hudson, L., & P., 2005). Attention must be given to appropriate expression and phrasing while recognizing tone, inflection, and rhythm. Prosody also requires readers to be aware of punctuation, text features, and syntax. Deeney (2010) explains that the connection between prosody and comprehension is blurred by multiple
interpretations. Some feel using features of prosody helps readers understand what they are reading. Others feel that because readers understand the text, they can apply features of prosody. However, a majority of researchers feel that comprehension and prosody affect and ultimately contribute to each other.

**Comprehension.** Many studies show a link between students that show low reading fluency and low comprehension (Learning Point Associates, 2004). When students use larger portions of their cognitive function to recognize and decode words, they have little memory left to interpret and comprehend what they are reading. The more rapidly and with ease a student can perform the task of reading, the more effort they can put into understanding the text.

**Assessing Fluency**

In current times of intense achievement accountability, assessing reading fluency is a daily part of the elementary school classroom (Gallucci, 2008). However, with various definitions of fluency in the education world, it is imperative that the fluency assessment used match the part of fluency that teachers wish to assess (Denney, 2010). Fluency is multifaceted and only the components of rate and accuracy can be assessed in a reliable way.

**Timed reading.** According to Hudson, L., & P. (2005), one-minute measures are frequently used to assess reading fluency. They are quick, reliable, and allow teachers to assess fluency on a regular basis. They also suggest that one-minute speed-reading tasks do not provide a full picture of a struggling
reader’s needs and degree of development. A popular way to assess fluency is using a timed reading. One minute reads are perhaps the most prevalent. Timed readings are effective and reliable in identifying at-risk students. At the same time, reading fast is not the definition of reading fluently (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). This leads to an incomplete picture of a student’s reading issues. It is crucial to consider which aspect of reading fluency timed reading assessments address. Furthermore, it is important to consider which aspects of fluency timed readings do not address and find a suitable way to assess those also.

While reading rate and speed are important to reading fluency, it is significant to note that a high reading rate does not always equal full comprehension (Deeney, 2010). However, much research exists that suggest higher comprehension can be achieved when students possess higher reading rates (Hudson, Isakson, Richman, Lane, & Arriaza-Allen., 2011). This should be taken into consideration but not deemed the be all end all.

Packaged program. Several popular assessments exist for measuring and tracking reading fluency in elementary students. The AIMSweb Standard Reading Assessment Passages and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) use grade-level passages. In each the student reads for one minute and is measured in words read per minute and words read correctly per minute. These programs produce a score only for accuracy and reading rate.
Running records. Running records allow teachers to gain information beyond accuracy and reading rate during one-minute measures (Hudson, L., & P., 2005). By recording and analyzing errors, fluency instruction can be tailored to fit student needs. Teachers should also allow students to finish passages in timed readings to gain information on the student’s reading endurance.

Fluency assessment warnings. Caution needs to be taken so that reading fluency does not become defined by the tests used to assess it. “Widespread use of specific assessments can ultimately define the construct being assessed” (Deeney, 2010, p. 442). The mentioned fluency assessments focus on speed and accuracy. As discussed earlier, fluency contains components beyond speed and accuracy. It is crucial for teachers to recognize the power of observation when evaluating a student’s progress in multiple areas of reading fluency.

Fluency Instruction and Intervention

Appropriate and varied fluency instruction is essential to reading success (Nelson, Alber, & Gordy, 2004). Teachers must believe in the efficiency and effectiveness of these interventions for them to be implemented correctly (Nelson et al., 2004). Providing instruction and intervention that acknowledges multiple components of reading fluency can help build well rounded readers.

Word recognition. Word recognition involves accurately reading a word on the first attempt. It applies to both high frequency and decodable words. With decodable words automaticity can be reached when decoding skills are developed
(Hudson, I., R., L., & A., 2011). With this attained, the reader can find the correct meaning of that word to bring sense to the sentence. The process of word recognition is done quickly and without conscious thinking. Word recognition can be increased through meaningful and appropriate instruction and practice (Learning Point Associates, 2004). Practicing the actual recognition of words will lead to the automatic behavior of recognizing a word.

**Repeated readings.** One way to achieve increase fluency is through repeated readings. Repeated readings require students to read the same text multiple times. They do not require special training or extra time (Nelson et al., 2004). Readings can be timed at the beginning and end of the week to track reading rate (Hudson, L., & P., 2005). In between readings, students can respond to the text. This type of reading is based on progress with practice. When students reach successful word recognition during repeated readings, they can shift their focus to comprehension (Learning Point Associates, 2004). If accuracy and reading rate are measured elsewhere, repeated readings can be used to measure prosody.

Repeated readings can be used during differentiated and guided reading activities. During guided repeated oral reading, students receive teacher support (Learning Point Associates, 2004). While using guided repeated oral reading, teachers can provide extra modeling and instruction on difficult words and phrasing. Many forms of guided repeated reading have been shown to positively
affect student oral reading fluency and a few have not (Hudson, L., & P., 2005). It is important to note that round robin reading has not been proven an effective guided reading instructional strategy. In round robin reading students do not experience repeated practice or opportunities to implement guidance received from the teacher.

In a study by Nelson et al. (2004), students were given error corrections and then repeated practice with the original passage in which they made errors. Offering immediate correction with disregard to phonetic strategies, and having the student repeat it correctly, positively influenced accuracy rates during this study also. Students who received corrections and repeated that reading three times showed a functional relationship to reading accuracy. Though the number of reading errors was decreased, words read per minute only increased slightly.

In another study, students achieved greater fluency achievement when adults were guiding the repeated readings (Mesmer et al., 2010). This study focused on creating generalizations between skills taught and reading contexts. In this way, students were able to apply fluency skills from interventions to additional contexts. A specific generalization system was used to strengthen the link between material used in class and general reading material.

Taken together these two studies offer helpful insight for the use of repeated readings. Teachers need to provide purposeful guidance when using this strategy in their classrooms. By providing immediate and timely feedback
teachers can maximize effectiveness of repeated readings. In addition, teachers can provide instruction and intervention in all areas of reading fluency when leading repeated readings.

**Phonics.** Phonics is the relationship between the spoken and written word. Instruction in phonics allows students to use this relationship to enhance spelling and reading (Vadasy, Sanders, & Tudor, 2007). Effective phonics instruction can help students recognize and use these relationships in a rapid and accurate way. Phonics is a key element in building reading fluency. However, it is important to recognize that it is just a part of a strong reading program. It is easy to become too focused on phonics, especially when using packaged programs. Teachers need to aware that they can address phonics and additional components of fluency together through reading fluency instruction and practice.

One way to make phonics instruction effective is to make it systematic, whether synthetic or larger-unit (Nelson et al., 2004). Used early in a student’s school experience, systematic phonics instruction can yield higher reading achievement than if started later on. Even more success was seen in at-risk readers. Systematic phonics instruction can be either synthetic or larger-unit. In synthetic instruction, students are taught to sound out and blend words. In larger-unit phonics, students recognize and blend word parts, not individual phonemes.

There are mixed results on the effectiveness of either teaching decoding in isolation or in context (Hudson, I., R., L., & A., 2011). Instructing with words in
context allows students to repeatedly encounter and practice more word patterns and ultimately more words. Instructing in isolation allows students to focus on the skill being taught. The individual needs of the student should be considered when deciding to teach decoding words in isolation or in context.

**Phrasing.** Some modern definitions of fluency include a student’s ability to group words within a sentence and read with phrasing (Hudson, L., & P., 2005). By grouping words together into meaningful phrases and adding appropriate expression, readers are better able to comprehend what they read. Phrasing is a skill that needs to be explicitly taught to students.

To instruct phrasing, teachers can call attention to phrase boundaries by cueing them with visual marks in the text (Hudson, I., R., L., & A., 2011). Echo reading can also be used to model appropriate phrasing and provide students with an immediate chance to practice it. Unison and cloze readings also allow teachers to instruct on appropriate phrasing and expression.

**Reading delivery.** There are several different ways reading instruction can be delivered. Explicit instruction is one way to deliver reading fluency support. By using explicit instruction, teachers can help students focus on the important parts of a lesson (Nelson et al., 2004). Studies of effective reading teachers show that they use explicit and systematic early reading skill instruction (Kosanovich, Ladinsky, Nelson, & Torgesen, 2007).
Differentiated instruction is another way to implement reading instruction. During differentiated instruction students are matched to instruction by their individual needs (Kosanovich et al., 2007). Groups are flexible and based on student data. Students are instructed in small groups, while those not in the small group practice skills in learning centers. By matching students to their instructional needs, all students are accommodated. Teacher-led lesson structures for differentiated instruction include guided reading and skills-focused lessons.

Paraeducators can also be effective deliverers of explicit instruction to students with similar needs (Vadasy et al., 2007). They can be trained to deliver this type of instruction for the type of student they work with. In addition, this allows students to receive more explicit instruction on an individualized level. Using paraeducators can also provide students with more opportunities to practice oral reading in a situation where targeted instruction can become a reality.

When choosing delivery for fluency instruction, it is also important to examine methods that are ineffective. Methods that take the teacher out of the picture are not effective. According to What Works Clearinghouse (2010), the Read Naturally program is not effective in raising reading fluency achievements. This program uses teacher modeling but relies heavily on audiotapes and computer software for practice.
**Text choice.** The types and levels of text used in fluency instruction can influence struggling readers. Struggling readers often lack skill development and general reading experience. Therefore they are “further exacerbated” by reading inappropriate levels of text (Compton, Appleton, & Hosp, 2004, p. 176). The use of different text leveling systems has affected struggling second grade readers by increasing their speed, accuracy, and comprehension (Compton et al., 2004). First graders are most influenced by text features in the first term (Hiebert & Fisher, 2007). Accuracy scores can be accurately predicted when texts are leveled and assessed before used in instruction. Texts should be evaluated on: number of high frequency words, sentence length, decodability, readability, and number of multisyllabic words (Hiebert & Fisher, 2007). After evaluating a text, a teacher can determine if the text is truly appropriate for students based on student needs in those specific areas. In this way, teachers can make the most of their intervention time.

Another way to evaluate and index text is using Critical Word Factor (CWF). This index describes primary-level texts in stages of basic reading proficiency (Hiebert & Fisher, 2007). CWF emphasizes word recognition and reading domains. Using the CWF, educators can accurately predict words as hard or easy, and instruct appropriately to these words. Hiebert and Fisher’s study using CWF texts suggests that controlling the CWF of texts used in fluency intervention can increase reading proficiency rates.
Though evaluating text contributes to more effective reading fluency instruction, it does not always lead to increased fluency scores (Compton et al., 2004). Compton’s research suggests that low level and average level readers share a similar relationship with text-leveling passages. It also suggests that text-leveling slightly increases fluency performance in average level students only.

Teachers need to take into account word recognition, repeated readings, phonics, phrasing, reading delivery, and text choice when planning reading fluency instruction and interventions. All components of reading fluency should be acknowledged and included. In this way, students can develop from the interaction between all areas of reading fluency.

**Importance of Fluency**

Reading fluency is immensely important to future reading success. Every component of reading fluency can be linked to reading comprehension (Hudson, L., & P., 2005). Achieving fluency allows students to uncover meaning and avoid misinterpretations. In addition, “slow, laborious movement through text taxes the reader’s capacity to construct an ongoing interpretation of the text” (Hudson, L., & P., 2005). When words are read automatically, quickly, and with appropriate expression, students show they understand what is being read.

**Early reading indicators.** Addressing reading issues early is essential for future reading success (Hudson, I., R., L., & A., 2011). Learning Point Associates recognize that it is better to create strong readers in primary grades
than to deal with struggling readers at an intermediate level (2004). Therefore it is imperative to provide varied and meaningful reading fluency instruction and intervention in the first grade classroom. This can and should be done before they become fluent decoders.

**Summary**

Educators need to have a deeper and wider understanding of fluency. Seeing fluency as a large umbrella and recognizing each of its components and their importance to fluency is crucial. To appropriately instruct struggling readers in fluency, educators should consider how to effectively instruct within and assess all components of fluency as a whole and not isolated pieces. They should also consider the connections between the parts of fluency and allow that to influence their instructional planning. To create effect readers, primary grade teachers must provide students with varied and purposeful reading fluency experiences no matter what the student’s reading level.
Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to show the observed and reported experiences when first grade students explored reading fluency in a variety of meaningful ways. It included carefully chosen fluency interventions and activities to foster and create increased reading fluency. In my study I implemented whole class and small group interventions in the area of phonics, word recognition, prosody, comprehension, and phrasing. I paid special attention to instructing on all the components of fluency and not just the typically mentioned reading rate and accuracy.

Setting

My study took place in an all day first grade classroom in a kindergarten through fourth grade elementary school. The school population is approximately 210 students, 57 percent of whose socioeconomic status qualifies them for free lunch. There are students from the middle class too. A majority of students are Caucasian, eight percent are African American, and twenty-five percent are Hispanic (K. Steidle, personal communication, February 28, 2013). My elementary school also houses the English as a Second Language (ESL) program for all elementary students in the whole district. This ESL population accounts for forty-two percent of the minority population at my school. All of these factors together account for varied students in the regular education classroom.
The school is a modern, well kept neighborhood school. A large majority of students live within a few blocks of the school. The classrooms are cheery and the teachers are welcoming and work closely together. It houses two classrooms for each grade as well as an ESL classroom and an extended day kindergarten program. There is an ESL aide, Title I Reading teacher, and Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTII) coordinator who participate regularly in all classrooms. Each classroom has a few student computers and a Mimio smart board.

Participants

Participants in the study will be students in my first grade class who range between five and six years old. The class is made up of 24 students, seventeen boys and seven girls. Some will have completed a regular kindergarten program while others will have participated in extended day kindergarten the year before. Nineteen of these students had consent to participate in this study. Because our school does not house a learning support program, none of the students are identified or possess individual education plans (IEP) related to learning disabilities. Two students have speech IEPs and receive services once a week. One of these students also receives occupational therapy services. None of my students receive ESL instruction or support. In addition, five students receive Title I services outside the classroom several times a week. All students will be
screened using the Quick Phonics Screener (QPS) and placed appropriately in phonics based skills groups as part of the district’s reading intervention program. These groups are seen four days a week by a classroom teacher, a reading specialist, or a RTII coordinator.

**Procedures**

Previous to implementing my study I submitted an application to the Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB). It was approved as safe and ethical for all students who participate (see Appendix A). My proposal was accepted a semester previous to carrying it out. Consent was obtained from my building principal and parents of my students (see Appendices B & C).

This study took place in my first grade classroom from the third week of September until the third week of January. During this time students participated in a variety of whole group, small group, partner, and individual fluency lessons and activities. The areas of fluency addressed in these lessons and activities were phonics, word recognition, prosody, phrasing, and comprehension.

**Data Sources**

**Work samples.** I gathered student work samples from fluency activities.

**Surveys.** Surveys (see Appendix D) were included to pre-assess and post-assess student understanding and feelings on their reading fluency. Surveys were created ahead of time and approved by my advisor. I used the responses to gather
student feelings and opinions on reading fluency. These surveys also helped me to clarify any misunderstandings I had in interpreting student data.

**Interviews.** I informally interviewed students to gain insight into their feelings about reading fluency, including struggles and progress within it. A whole class interview was conducted three quarters of the way through this study. For this interview I had prepared questions and accepted student answers as they offered them. Throughout the study, I also interviewed students with short questions where I saw it necessary to clarify my interpretations of what I was observing. Included were questions such as: tell me what you were thinking when you said_______, how did you know what to do next, and what helped you to read better here.

**Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)**

**Benchmark.** It is required by my district that this assessment is given to all students in October, January, and May. This study includes results from the October and January Benchmark assessments. The October Benchmark show results in nonsense word fluency (correct letter sounds and whole words read), phoneme segmentation, and letter naming. The January Benchmark shows results in nonsense word fluency (correct letter sounds and whole words read), oral reading fluency (speed and accuracy), and comprehension retelling. Students were tested individually in a quiet room using the DIBELS Next edition and results were recorded on Palm Pilots.
Quick Phonics Screener (QPS). It is required by my district that students be given the QPS (see Appendix E) if their DIBELS results show a need for additional practice and instruction. All students who scored below the benchmark goals were given the QPS. The QPS is broken into sections by phonics skill; each section contains nonsense words and sentences. Students who scored below 93% in a section are placed into a fluency intervention group based on that phonics skill.

Observational Data. During this study I also collected informal data. I used a field log to reflect on and record observations in my classroom each day. In this log I made note of student comments, responses, and actions. I added my reflections on what I saw and heard at the close of each activity or lesson.

Timeline. The following is a timeline from the study.

Week one.
- Received signed consent form from building principal
- Handed out student consent forms
- Received signed student consent forms back

Week two.
- Received student consent forms
- Introduced project to students

Week three.
- Students completed reading surveys (see Appendix D)
- Whole group lesson on phrasing

- Introduced and practiced Word-Tac-Toe (see Appendix F) in partners. This activity was designed to address phrasing, phonics decoding, and word recognition of high frequency words.

- Whole group lesson on punctuation

**Week four.**

- Whole group mini-lesson on phrasing and reading with attention to punctuation

- Introduced and practiced sentence stars (see Appendix G) in partners. This activity was designed to address phrasing, word recognition of high frequency words, phonics decoding, and prosody.

- Introduced and practiced words, phrases, sentences (see Appendix H) in small groups

- Whole group anthology lesson on comprehension

**Week five.**

- Whole class mini-lesson on phrasing

- Introduced and practiced phrase memory (see Appendix I) in partners. This activity was designed to address phrasing, word recognition of high frequency words, and phonics.

- Administer DIBELS to all students
Week six.

- Administered QPS (see Appendix E) to students based on DIBELS results
- Practiced sentence stars in partners
- Practiced Word-Tac-Toe in partners
- Whole class mini-lesson on comprehension (story elements)
- Small group words, phrases, sentences

Week seven.

- Administered high frequency word assessment (see Appendix J)
- Whole group mini-lesson on phrasing and reading with punctuation
- Practiced punctuation posters (see Appendix K) in partners. This activity was designed to address prosody.
- RTII meeting to discuss concerns about students

Week eight.

- Parent/Teacher conferences
- Whole class mini-lesson on comprehension (story elements)
- Conducted comprehension checkpoint on story elements (see Appendix L)
- Practiced phrase memory in partners
- Small group words, phrases, sentences
- Conducted mid-study student interview

**Week nine.** (Thanksgiving Break)

- Whole group comprehension lesson (main idea)
- Choral read of above grade level text

**Week ten.**

- Individual checkpoint writing assignment
- Practiced sentence stars in partners
- Whole class mini-lesson on comprehension (main idea)
- Conducted comprehension checkpoint on main idea (see Appendix M)

**Week eleven.**

- Whole class mini-lesson on reading with phrasing and attention to punctuation
- Practiced Word-Tac-To in partners
- Whole group mini-lesson on reading with punctuation
- Small group words, phrases, sentences

**Week twelve.**

- Administered high frequency word assessment (see Appendix N)

**January.**

- Administered middle of year DIBELS and QPS testing (see Appendix E)
Students were instructed on and practiced the listed activities in both whole group and small group situations. Fluency groups met every day in addition to differentiated reading groups meeting several times a week.

Summary

The intent of my study was to create opportunities for students to explore reading fluency in a variety of meaningful ways. Throughout this study, students participated in interventions and activities that addressed all components of reading fluency. Students were instructed based on individual and whole class needs. They were given opportunities to practice reading fluency within their instructional level. I collected and analyzed the data in an open and honest way. Consideration was given to student needs and slight adjustments were made as needed.
Trustworthiness Statement

Throughout my study I took care to show trustworthiness in every way that I could fathom. I followed the procedures and conditions presented by Hendricks (2013) in my study. I took a great deal of care to ensure trustworthiness from the very start. Before implementing my study I explained it to my class in a kid friendly way. I felt it was important to have them feel some ownership during the study. In order to ensure trustworthiness with my administration and parents I sent home a consent form explaining the project (Appendices B & C). These forms followed the guidelines of the Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board; they were distributed and collected before my study began. All returned forms stated consent and five were never returned at all. Students were treated the same whether or not their parents had given permission for them to be a part of this study. Parents were made aware that they could retract their consent at any time without penalty for their child. In addition, the Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board, my academic advisor, and my school principal granted me written approval and permission to carry out this research study.

Ensuring trustworthiness continued to be a priority as I carried out my study. I was determined to ensure that even my observations were conducted under the most ethical standards. By using a variety of data I was certain I had looked at my students and my study in a complete way (Hendricks, 2013). I
planned observation time into the daily schedule and made sure I was consistent in my collection of data. I used both formal and informal assessments to gain a broad perspective on student needs and progress. I also adapted my data collection methods when needed. Perhaps the biggest way I practiced trustworthiness was by practicing ongoing reflective planning based on my data collection. By allowing myself to remain open to change I made the appropriate adaptations that my students’ needs demanded. I was careful to acknowledge all data and not just what was expected or hoped for. This allowed me to identify convergences in my data while also recognizing things that did not work and possible reasons for those divergences.

Great care was taken to accurately record any data collected. Hendricks (2012) points out how important it is to include both the positive and negative in data collection and to leave personal thoughts out of data. I was careful to constantly self-reflect on how my values were affecting the happenings in my classroom and how I interpreted observations. Cazden (2001) emphasizes the importance of staying self-reflective to collect data with integrity. I recorded observations in a timely fashion and prepared my data collection tools ahead of time. Keeping these things in mind helped to create a more consistent and trustworthy way of collecting data.

According to Hendricks (2012), triangulating data sources is necessary to achieve validity. I collected data in various ways to ensure this. Appropriate data
collection methods were used at appropriate times during the study. Data collection sources included: surveys, interviews, rubrics, reading assessments, student work samples, and my field log. I took extra effort not to rely heavily on one source. By remaining open to and looking at all data sources I created a full picture of my students and their experience throughout the research study. This essentially allowed me to increase the credibility of my results. By triangulating my data sources I also forced myself to consider multiple student viewpoints. Multiple sources revealed different opinions and observations in different lights. Especially with young children, it was important that I gained a full understanding of their experience during this study.

Throughout my study I used several interviews and surveys. I used these to check in on my students’ thoughts and feelings. Checking in on their thoughts allowed me to make any necessary adjustments in my methods (Hendricks, 2012). It also helped me to clarify anything I might have misinterpreted in my observations. Also, using surveys and interviews let me involve my students and give them a voice in my study (Cazden, 2001). During interview and survey administration an environment of privacy was created. This was done to make students feel as though they completed those tasks honestly and without penalty.

In addition, I was certain to maintain all confidentiality during and after the action research was completed. Pseudonyms were used to protect students and ensure anonymity (Cazden, 2001). All data collected and analyzed was kept
in a secure location to which only I had access. At the conclusion of this study all materials and data were destroyed. Safeguarding my students work, opinions, and contributions to my research study was constantly taken into consideration.

In the end, I wanted to be true to my students and their needs while allowing them to contribute to this study. My students are a part of my everyday life and I am not only immersed, but vested in their educational experiences. Together with persistent observations, accurate data collection, member checks, and confidentiality I attempted to create a truly trustworthy action research project and classroom environment.
My Story

“Are You Sure About This?”

There I was sitting in my graduate class surrounded by familiar faces of other students seeking their advanced degrees. It was hard not to notice the look of slight anxiety in everyone’s eyes. Despite the friendly greetings and casual jokes, we all knew why we were here: to complete action research for our thesis papers. All of a sudden, things became serious.

Quickly I ran over the details in my head. I had done my research, created a plan, been approved by the HSIRB, and conferenced with my advisor. Why did I feel so unprepared? It occurred to me that the unknown of what could happen was making me feel this way. As panic began to set in, my syllabus arrived on my folder. I paged through it and noticed several of my neighbors doing the same. The looks we exchanged said it all and I realized I was not alone in my anxiety. The words, “Are you sure about this?” escaped as a whisper from my mouth before I could even think about it. The response was faint laughter from both sides of me which seemed to ease my fears.

I wish I could go back in time and give myself the answer. The answer was “yes”. I was ready for it. Slowly but surely I would prove to myself that I was prepared to accept the challenge of action research. Was it a clean, clear path? No. But then again, I was dealing with a real classroom full of real
children. Anything and everything was possible in this action research journey. In fact, this very statement that initially caused all of my panic would turn out to be most valuable in the end.

**Hurry Up and Wait**

Though I was extremely nervous, I was also excited to get started. Perhaps I was a little bit too excited because the beginning days seemed to last for weeks. I had handed a consent form to my principal and was anxiously awaiting approval. The beginning of the year is always hectic and I knew that he was swamped with responsibilities and issues. Still, I could not help but feel anxious with the process. I also could not help but entertain the idea that he possibly was not going to give me permission. There it was again, the idea that anything could happen.

The following week ended my waiting game. My principal gave his consent and my action research was officially under way. As I sent home my parent consent forms, I made a promise to myself not to get lost in the process of waiting for consent again. After only receiving nine out of twenty-four forms the first week, I reminded myself of my promise. Little by little a few more consent forms were returned. My second waiting game was over.
Let Me See Your Colors

Today my class was tested using the DIBELS assessment. For the beginning of year period, students would be tested in letter naming, phoneme segmentation, and nonsense word fluency. My principal taught my class as me, the reading specialist, and RTI teacher assessed students. All students were taken to a quiet conference room for this testing. The following is a class summary of the results (see Table 1).
Table 1.

Beginning of Year DIBELS Class Summary Results

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>BOY</th>
<th>LNF Score</th>
<th>PSF Goal 40</th>
<th>CLS Goal 27</th>
<th>WWR Goal 1</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Core</td>
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<td>44</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>Strategic</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Heather

Colby
**Note.** Scores are read across. A higher score indicates a better performance. LNF stands for letter naming, PSF stands for phonemic segmentation fluency, and NWF stands for nonsense word fluency. Under NWF, CLS stands for correct letter sounds and WWR stands for whole words read. Green scores indicate no need for interventions, yellow scores indicate a need for strategic intervention, and red scores indicate a need for intensive intervention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BOY</th>
<th>LNF</th>
<th>PSF</th>
<th>CLS</th>
<th>WWR</th>
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<td>58</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Now That’s Easy!”

I decided to have a classroom meeting to introduce the project to my students. We often have classroom meetings to discuss important things or reminders, so it seemed appropriate.

**MRS. VOGEL:** Boys and girls, today our classroom meeting is going to be about something new. Rub your belly if you remember me talking about the teacher school I go to at nighttime.

(most students are rubbing their stomachs)

**CHRISTOPHER:** Oh, yeh. And you have to leave with us after school early.

**MRS. VOGEL:** Yes, that school. Well, I need your help for my next project. I want to learn more about how first graders learn how to read. I know you are all great readers already. You can really help me by letting me watch and maybe write down some things about what you say and do while you learn to read.

**JAMES:** (raises his hand) You mean like in a notebook? I have a notebook to write in.

**MRS. VOGEL:** Sometimes yes, I will use a notebook. Other times I might ask you to write something for me.
(students make excited noises and look around at each other)

MRS. VOGEL: (holding up copy of consent form) Last week everyone got a take home letter in their mailbox about this project. Your grown-up has to say yes for me to put your name in my project. Some kids brought back this paper already.

ALICIA: What if my mom doesn’t let me bring it back?

MRS. VOGEL: The good thing is, you can still do all the fun reading activities and games with us even if your grown-up says no. But if they put it back in your folder you can give it to me.

KAITLYN: (raises her hand) Is it for homework?

MRS. VOGEL: Sort of. But you don’t have to do anything except give me the paper if your grown-up puts it in your folder and try your best when we practice reading in school.

KAITLYN: (nods and smiles) Now that’s easy!

I’m so glad I decided to introduce my project in a way that was familiar to students. I was impressed by their positive reaction to the project and their questions about it. They remained excited throughout the whole project and often asked me if activities were for my teacher. Over the next few days I received
more consent forms and my total number of participants reached nineteen. I do feel explaining the project to the class encouraged them to talk to their parents about it. Their ability to recognize and accept ownership in my action research surprised me. In the future, I would move this meeting up and present it to my students before sending home any consent forms.

We Are All Smiles

First graders deserve more credit than what their age would indicate. My seven years in the classroom and over fifteen years working with early elementary students has shown me that they rise to the challenges given to them. They are capable of so many things and I try not to let their age undermine their ability to progress and accept responsibility. However, I am also reminded each day of the innocence that lives in my students. Whether it is watching them make a discovery, hearing them talk with honesty, or reading their creative stories I am always pleased to note this character trait. Today was no exception.

It was time for my students to take the pre-study survey (see Appendix D). Like always, I met students at the carpet to talk it over first. This was my first official piece of data collection and I have to admit that it made me a little nervous. Again, it was the possibility of what students could answer that was uncomfortable to me. *What if all of my students indicated they did not like reading? What if they all thought they were bad readers?* Opinions like these
would create major stumbling blocks in my plan to create better and interested readers.

“Today I need you to fill out a survey about reading. A survey is a way for you to tell how you feel about something.” I noticed my students squirming in their spots and exchanging wide eyed looks with their neighbors. I was not sure if these looks were from excitement or terror so I decided to ask, “How do you feel about taking a survey about reading?” Their responses confirmed positive anticipation so I continued with my explanation.

It was important to me to create an environment of honesty and confidentiality for this survey. “What can we do at our seats to help us feel safe and honest about our answers?” Andrew raised his hand and said, “Folders just like for tests!” The class erupted with signs of agreement. “And no sharing your answers!” Adam shouted. The reaction of and comments from students helped me to see that they understood the survey was a private task.

After a quick review on privacy we moved onto honesty. “And I want you to be honest with your answers. You will not get in trouble for coloring a frown face. In fact I won’t even know who wrote on which paper because you are not going to put your names on them” I explained. This was met with a chorus of “ooooooh”s. I had expected them to be excited about this, but I could see they were having trouble getting past this divergence from our regular routine. 

Would
other parts of my study evoke similar reactions? Would it be too far from the regular reading routine?

I continued to explain, “I know it feels weird not to write your name. But it’s important that everyone can be honest about their answers. This is different from a test because your answers can’t be right or wrong. They can only show how you feel.” James called out, “Like when you say that we know in our hearts about what really happened?” I chuckled out loud. This is the terminology I use when we have moral squabbles in the classroom. Though he shouted out, I was pleased to see him make the connection and restate my words in a better way for his classmates to understand. I reassured the class that what James said was exactly what I meant. Maybe I should have asked them to rephrase it in the first place!

Though it took much longer than I planned, I finally felt satisfied that my students understood the survey and the conditions under which they should complete it. We worked through the questions as a class and students filled out their surveys at their desks. They were very attentive and cooperative and I felt as though they were taking it seriously. Though it was extremely hard not to peek at their responses, I remained at the front board the whole time as I promised I would. Just one peek….please, please, please! During the survey no students asked questions or offered any verbal comments.
Later that day I rushed back from dropping my class off at special to review the surveys. As I paged through them my eyes were met with smile face after smile face. Almost all my students colored the smile face for each and every question. Only a few students answered by coloring the face that indicated a “sometimes” or “no” response (see Table 2). Were these honest answers?

Table 2. Pre-Study Reading Survey Questions

**Question 1: I am a good reader.**

Happy Smiley Face- 19  
Sideways Smiley Face- 0  
Frown Smiley Face- 0  

**Question 2: I am a fast reader.**

Happy Smiley Face- 18  
Sideways Smiley Face- 1  
Frown Smiley Face- 0
Question 3: I read the words correctly.

Happy Smiley Face- 19
Sideways Smiley Face- 0
Frown Smiley Face- 0

Question 4: I have to sound out my words.

Happy Smiley Face- 17
Sideways Smiley Face- 0
Frown Smiley Face- 2

Question 1: I read like talking.

Happy Smiley Face- 18
Sideways Smiley Face- 1
Frown Smiley Face- 0

Question 1: When I read, I understand what the story is about.

Happy Smiley Face- 19
Sideways Smiley Face- 0
Frown Smiley Face- 0

Note. Numbers after smiley face choices indicate the number of students who responded with that answer on the survey.
Looking back I should have anticipated my students would complete the surveys in this way. Just as they had shown me in the past, I feel my students were trying to please me with their answers. Why would they do this after our discussion? Did they not completely understand or is this just an age appropriate response? Or, were they simply not aware of their reading deficits? Their innocence was shining through. Though the survey results were hard to accept as completely honest and reflective of student reading, they certainly did open my eyes to some of the obstacles I would have to deal with in using surveys with young children.

Let the Games Begin!

Chatter erupts throughout the room. Students are not sitting flat, but up on their knees or lying on their bellies. Some are even running up to me to share a comment. Ordinarily, this type of scene would move me to turn off the lights, call for attention to the rules, and demand better choices. Not today. I had to settle my urge to interrupt the activity. Wow this is harder than I thought! I had to let my students feel the power and success of practicing fluency with a partner. Boy am I glad I did!

My mind quickly thought back to how I previously addressed reading fluency intervention. I simply followed my school district’s required program. This program consists of phonics based interventions and does not require
instruction on or practice with all the components of fluency. I often felt students were not interested or engaged in these interventions. I did, of course, still follow this fluency intervention during my study. The difference was, I was now providing students with opportunities to progress in all areas of reading fluency in addition to what my school required.

After much thought, I decided to use a familiar game as a springboard for our first fluency activity. My class was very familiar with Tic-Tac-Toe from a learning center that featured that game. To create a fluency activity I added phrases featuring words with current phonic skills and high frequency words in phrases (see Appendix F). Students had to correctly read the phrase to place their marker on the board.

“Is Alec red?” “Does he go first?” “Wait, so I put a marker down?” Avante ran back and forth to me firing off these questions. It did not surprise me that he could not recall the basics of the game. Avante has Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and more often than not, is not paying attention or participating in lessons and activities. For some reason though, he was interested in playing this game. Interested enough to ask me direct questions that would help him continue to be an active participant in this game. I felt a small success in just this simple activity. I began to feel hopeful of seeing other small successes in future activities.
I did not have to wait long. The next small success came within the very same fluency activity. After a few minutes of circulating, I was drawn back to Avante and Alec. Alec, who is an on level reader, read, “when they had” and covered the space with a chip. Avante started to read, “fit it….” but he could not read the last word. *Should I step in and help him? He should know this word because we have been practicing it all week!* To my surprise Alec leaned in, pointed to the word, gave his partner the word, and followed up with, “try it again”. Avante pointed to the words and repeated the phrase, including the word he missed. I could not have done it better myself!

The two boys continued playing without another thought. I, however, continued to remain in the moment of this success. *Were my students actually helping each other reach fluency goals?* I had not taught my class how to use these techniques. I had only been using these techniques with my class. I began to wonder if other students were helping their partners read fluently in similar ways. Unfortunately, the timer took this opportunity away from me and we had to clean up in preparation for intervention groups.

I have to admit that at first I felt like I was tricking them into reading. *Would my trick work? Would they see through it and abandon the game in the end?* However after observing the activity, I was glad I did! The students were
very engaged and were playing despite the fact that I added words to the game boards.

Even more, the majority of the groups were reading the words correctly and using phrasing. They were meeting my goals already and this was only the first activity! I had not anticipated my students becoming so engaged or buying into the learning games so much. A little of my anxiety turned into excitement.

*Let the games begin!*

**They Can? They Can. They Can!**

Today was the day I would prove to myself and my class that first graders could read with expression and attention to punctuation before mastering decoding skills. Nervous? Yes. Hopeful? Yes. A strange mix of emotions was with me that day. Still I held up the book I read for snack and story the previous day and began to read. As I moved onto the second page Brian called out, “Why are you reading weird like that?” I asked him to explain what he meant by weird. He replied, “Slow, like I’m going to fall asleep!” The class started to giggle and nod in agreement. They recognized it and I had them hooked.

I then went back and read those two pages keeping the punctuation in mind. The class agreed that they liked that version more. I tumbled right into a lesson on reading with attention to punctuation. Students were introduced to the
period, exclamation point, and question mark. I was pleased to learn that most students at least recognized and could name these marks.

Part of the mini-lesson involved associating motions with each of these punctuation marks. “Ok, everyone. When we read a telling sentence with a period, our voices go down a little at the end. Put up your arm and make a diagonal down like this.” Students were very interested in repeating my motion. “Onto the question mark. When we say an asking sentence, our voice goes up a little. Put up your arm again and make a diagonal up this time. Very good!” Again, students repeat my motion. Strangely enough, there were no talkers during this part of the lesson. “Now for the most fun one: exclamation points. When we say a sentence with this mark at the end we need to get more excited and make people pay attention to us. Put out your arm and make it go up and down like you are making mountains.” The class begins to chatter as they turned to show each other their arm movements. I overhear Ryan saying, “I like that book!” in an animated voice with his arm moving up and down. “Yes, Ryan. If you wanted to tell your audience that you really liked this book then you would say it like that and use an exclamation point.”

I brought their attention back to the book and reread the first two pages using our new hand motions. Someone shouted out, “Let’s do more!” though I am not exactly sure who it was. It was not in my original plans, but I decided to
take this lesson a step further and apply it to a phonics reader. I purposely chose an easy reader so my students could concentrate on the punctuation. After finding and highlighting the learned punctuation in the book, I went into a model read. A few of my students could hardly contain themselves and read along with me for the model read. As I looked up, I saw many students moving their arms with the punctuation motions. Yes! *I am so thrilled they are applying our new fluency skill!* When we moved into the choral read, students continued to read and use appropriate hand motions at the same time. As I looked around, I saw smiles and facial expressions to match the punctuation. My class was reading a book with attention to punctuation, and reading it well.

There were several students who were not actually reading the words during this activity. I knew very well that they did not have the decoding skills to read this book on their own. However, they were able to see the punctuation on the page and make the appropriate hand motions. Both Hannah and Ryan were using what they heard the rest of the class saying to read themselves. Despite this, I did see them start each sentence with the punctuation hand motion and mumble through with the correct voice variations and tones. Right in front of me were two students showing me they could read with attention to punctuation at any level.
Where’s My Time Machine?

I wish I had a time machine. I would go back in time and be a better reading teacher to my past classes. After only a few activities and lessons into my study, it is very clear to me that I can demand more of my students than I have in the past. In the past, I have waited to introduce and practice fluency until students were solid phonics decoders. I will never entertain that thought again.

I am no longer uneasy about bringing components of fluency other than phonics into classroom lessons and activities. Not only have my students been able to apply these skills but they are interested and excited to practice them. I am confident that I can introduce and provide practice in all components of fluency this early in the year. The difference is that I started with a more basic application of fluency. We did not dive right into sentence or paragraph fluency, but rather started with sound, word, and phrase fluency. It is now so clear to me that I can teach and provide practice in fluency no matter if I am teaching a letter or an advanced vowel pattern. If only I could go back in time and tell myself that.

Star Quality

My school very much emphasizes acting and thinking as star students. This translates easily into classroom goals, activities, and rules. I decided to use this connection in our fluency practice also. It seemed like an appropriate point to
introduce a new fluency activity game. It also seemed that my students were ready to apply multiple components of fluency in a single practice activity.

“Today we are going to practice our reading with sentence stars.” An underlying “ooooh” spread through the class. “You will get to read sentences with your partner. When you read remember to look at the punctuation, read like talking, and let your brain see the words that you know.” I continued to model the simple process: read the sentence and color the star if you read it like a star using all of our reminders (see Appendix G). My example was met with clapping and squeals of excitement. Really? This was only a sentence with a star at the end. I thought it would take more convincing than this, but I am not complaining! After reviewing the directions, students were quickly partnered off and began to disperse around the room.

A whoosh of chatter and movement overtook the room. Again, I had to remind myself to overlook the commotion if students were truly reading in a productive way. Several things stood out to me as I passed by the groups. I was seeing and hearing similar things in multiple groups (see Figure 1). I could hardly believe my eyes and ears. In most cases, my students were applying the fluency techniques we had been working with. I was starting to see a “star quality” in my readers.
Letting Go

This activity turned out to be a valuable learning opportunity for both my students and me. We were gathered at the carpet with crayons and sheets containing words, phrases, and sentences (see Appendix H). The purpose of this activity was to practice word recognition, decoding, phrasing, and prosody. It was more structured than the partner practice we had done previously for this study.
MRS. VOGEL: Today we are going to practice reading using words, phrases, and sentences. Let’s look at our papers. Please touch the sections and repeat after me. Words. Phrases, Sentences.

(The class touches each section and repeats each section name)

MRS. VOGEL: The words at the top are inside of each phrase and sentence. Can you touch and see that?

COLBY: Look! The word can is in all these places.

MRS. VOGEL: Good eyes Colby. That same word is in a phrase and then a sentence. Good readers remember words in their heads and sometimes don’t have to sound them all out. Let’s get to work because I know that you are all good readers.

I led the class through the words and then the phrases. Each time we followed a model, choral, and independent read. During the independent read students checked off boxes next to the words and phrases they read. I noticed that some students were reading with me during the model read even though I told them to just touch and look at the words. Was I going too slow for them? Was it hindering them to not read with me the first time? When we got to the sentence section, the class helped answer these questions for me.

JAMES: When can we read these by ourself?
SAUL: *Yeah, we can read these words. Can we?*

MRS. VOGEL: *Well, I am happy to hear that you think you can read these by yourself. This is our first time doing a sheet like this. How about if we do a great job on these sentences together, I will have you do more of the reading next time?*

*(The class nodded and shared excited facial expressions.)*

Never had I expected them to ask me to complete this activity on their own. I was very surprised at their request and even more surprised at my reaction to it. My inability to let go was keeping them from the independent practice they were asking for and perhaps needed. *Was I falling back into old habits? Did I believe they could or couldn’t read using multiple aspects of fluency this early in the year?* While I did need to familiarize them with the format, perhaps I could have created more opportunity for them to read on their own. What an important lesson I had learned during words, phrases, and sentences that day.

**Mudge Who?**

The children were all staring at Ryan with disbelief and some with their hands on their heads almost as if in shock. Honestly, it was hard to hide the look of shock on my face also as we reacted to what Ryan had just called out: “Wait who’s Mudge again?” We had been reading Henry and Mudge books for a few minutes after lunch for several weeks now. *How could he possibly not know who*
Mudge was? We read about, listened about, talked about, and saw him every day. This was a strong reminder that students need to be exposed to and taught comprehension strategies. Boy was I glad I had a comprehension lesson planned for the next day.

You Read, But Do You Understand?

My students were really starting to get into the reading fluency lessons and activities we were doing in class. I was, however, overlooking a very important component of fluency. Comprehension was addressed only in passing up until this point. After yesterday’s Mudge mystery, I was very ready to teach my class directly about comprehension.

I chose the weekly anthology story for this lesson. The class had already read this story together with me the previous day and should have had a general understanding of it. The Farmers Market follows a family as they go shopping at a farmers market but have to leave because it starts to rain. There is a clear part in the story where understanding the plot should influence the way you read the words. My goal today was for students to see the connection between understanding what you read and changing your voice to read it.

We started off with a model read, much like the day before. This time around I stopped to ask students questions about how my voice changed and why
they think I changed my voice. “How did my voice change when I read the part about the family arriving at the market?” I asked. Their little hands shot up and they were extremely willing to share, almost as if they had solved a mystery. Gretchen raised her hand and answered, “It was louder and happier.” I asked the class to give me thumbs up or down if they agreed. There was much agreement so I pressed on by saying, “I did make my voice a little louder and I added my happy feeling. Why do you think I did that?” There was a slight delay in the hands raised. *Oh no, was I pushing too hard? Were they ready?* I called on Alaina and she answered, “Because the kids were happy to get there.” I pressed further saying, “Yes, my reading brain told me that the kids were happy to get there. But how did my reading brain know that?” This time hands were raised quickly and before I could call on someone Andrew shouted out, “See they are on their toes looking out the window because they are excited. And they are smiling. And at the house they asked their mom and dad when they were going.” Again, I asked the class for thumbs up or down if they agreed and was met with thumbs up. I directed them to give their brain a thumb kiss and followed up by explaining, “You just did something great readers do! They pay attention to the pictures and what already happened in the story so they can read it with the right feelings.” Several claps spread through the class.

I decided to try one more part of the book to take this lesson to its full potential. We continued to choral read the story and finally arrived at the part
where it starts to rain. I dropped my voice out so I could hear the students well. My ears were met with sweet relief as they read the next sentence in a melancholy tone. “Round of applause!” I yelled. “We have some smart readers in here for sure! I just heard you read that last sentence with a sad feeling. How did your reading brain know to add that feeling to your voice when you read it?” Clearly they felt my excitement in their accomplishment because every hand in the class was raised high. *It was now or never.* I thought this to myself and called on a student who I know could not read this story by herself. “Well. It was raining. And they, the kids were happy but not now because they have to go back home. So I read sad!”, Hannah said. “Thumbs up if you agree with Hannah. Her brain did smart thinking to remember that the kids were happy to go to the market. Then she thought about how the rain might make them feel and her brain told her sad. So she read with a sad voice. Great job Hannah!”

I know that not all my students will use their understanding of a story to read with prosody all the time. However, I felt another small moment of success today when my students were able to apply this to our anthology story. The moment became a little more magical to me when a low reader saw the connection and applied it. There is so much more to reading fluency than actually reading the words and today I was able to see and understand that.
Let Me Read My Way

At this point in my study I had the opportunity to see and hear my students experience reading fluency in many different situations. I was starting to feel pieces of my study coming together. I felt compelled to include a creative culmination of by data.

_Humming, talking to my neighbor, not looking at the words._

_I never get to read what I want in school._

I play a sentence star game with a partner.

"Let's read the one with the question mark." I am engaged while reading with a partner.

_Chatting, singing, tapping my pencil on my book._

_Why won’t she let me read?_

I play a phrase matching game with a partner.

"You read a match. You’re good at this game!"

_I feel smart when I read with a partner._

_Feet tapping, playing with my shirt, looking around at others._

_It’s boring when my teacher reads to me._

I play Word-Tac-Toe with a partner.
“I can help you read that word! Touch the letters and say the sounds in your head.”

I am like a teacher when I help my partner read.

Social Butterflies

My class has a talking problem. They talk all day, every day, at any chance they get. In my seven years of teaching, I have never encountered such a chatty bunch. Their excessive talking has been quite a challenge to me this year. I feel as though I spend countless minutes trying to manage it. Still, my class’s talking takes away from learning time often.

I watched and listened as my class played phrase memory match in partners. Today my students were working on work recognition, phrasing, speed, and decoding during this activity. I was beginning to get used to the buzz of movement and noise that came with the partner fluency activities. As I moved from group to group, it started to dawn on me. If I cannot change it, I might as well use it!

I could not believe it took me this long to piece it all together. What had I been observing all this time? Why had I not seen what was happening right in front of me? I needed to harness my class’s tendency to chat and use it to support reading fluency. That was exactly what this partner activity was doing! By
allowing them to verbally participate in fluency practice, I was giving them a choice and a voice. The very same voice I had spent countless minutes trying to control. It was today I realized I did not necessarily have to control it, but direct it in the appropriate way. Reading fluency in the classroom does not always have to be teacher led or directed. It was time to acknowledge my social butterflies and let them spread their wings.

Read My Lips

Just to make sure my students understood reading with attention to punctuation, I decided to revisit this topic with a mini lesson and partner activity. However, my plans did not seem to jive with that of the class. I started out by reviewing the period, question mark, and exclamation point. Then I moved into the associated hand movements and tone of voice for each. Throughout this, my students seemed to be calling out and interrupting my explanation more than usual. As I looked out at them, I began to notice many of them had their mouths open and heads tipped back. Clearly they were trying to give me a message.

Despite this, I continued by showing them a punctuation poster on the Mimio projector. It was made of three sentences that were exactly the same except for the punctuation mark at the end (see Appendix K). I modeled noticing the punctuation and changing my voice to read appropriately. During the third
sentence I was interrupted by Christopher: “Oh c’mon. When can we do it?”
“Yeh, yeh!” came from several other areas of the carpet.

At first I was annoyed by his comment, but then I began to feel almost flattered. It was coming right from their lips and all on its own. They were asking me to let them experience this activity on their own. Should I let them go forth and practice with partners? Was I hindering their fluency by rehashing something they already knew? I interpreted the comments as confidence and I asked, “You are telling me that you understand how good readers use punctuation to change their voice and can show me that in a partner activity?” I was met with a resounding “YES!”

In a quick decision, I moved into partner practice and discontinued the guided practice part of this lesson. As I circulated, I began to feel better about my decision. Group after group was reading their punctuation posters with not only accuracy, but phrasing and prosody. I was seeing smiles, hearing laughter, and witnessing their success. Next time, I need to pay more attention to what they are trying to tell me.

Where Did You Learn to Write Like That?

“Can you help me spell basketball?” Brian leaned over and asked his neighbor Alicia. Alicia responded, “Stretch it out. Do basket, then do ball.”
Brian nodded and seemed satisfied as he returned to his writing. I was ecstatic to see my students helping each other during writing in the same way they were helping each other during reading fluency activities.

Originally, I had overlooked the link between reading and writing in my study. After completing and collecting two writing assignments this week, I could not overlook it anymore. The connection was manifesting itself right in front of my eyes….and my ears.

The first was a creative writing assignment that followed several lessons on writing complete sentences (see Figure 2). Students chose a magazine clipping from a hat which was then glued in the picture box of their paper. Their job was to create and write one or more complete sentences about the picture. Students wasted no time and began gluing their pictures down. I did make them think about and verbally share their sentences before writing. The writing music was turned on and students were already writing. With the exception of two or three students who had speech and language needs, the class had no trouble coming up with an idea to put into writing.
Figure 2. Student Work: Creative Writing Assignment
Figure 2 Continued. Student Work: Creative Writing Assignment

Note. These samples are representative of most students. The first represents a lower achieving student, the middle an average achieving student, and the last a high achieving student.
As I circulated to help students, I began smiling immediately. *Were they really using exclamation and question marks in their writing?* Yes! *Were they really spelling high frequency words correctly that we had not practiced spelling, but only reading?* Yes! I decided to investigate more and stopped to ask Alaina to read me her story, “Your story looks so interesting Alaina. Would you read it to me?” Alaina began reading, “The dog was at the vet and was getting a check-up. He was scared!” After praising her for her work, I did a silent cheer in my head. Not only had she written an exclamation mark, but she read it to me with the appropriate tone of voice for the punctuation she chose.

The second writing assignment of the week was a required writing assessment (see Figure 3). Students had to respond to a prompt by telling about a time they helped someone. Once again, my class got right to work. This time, I was not allowed to offer help of any kind and neither were the students. Even without help, I was thrilled with their writing overall. As I walked around, I noticed paper after paper that contained correctly spelled high frequency words. A few of these words we had practiced spelling, but the majority we had not. *Could they have learned how to spell them by all the reading practice we had done?* I had purposely included our high frequency words in all of our partner ready fluency practice games. I had not anticipated seeing this shine through during writing, but was sure glad it did.
Figure 3. Student Work: Required Writing Assignment

I helped my hand
wash the dishes.

I helped my rabbit
go to a better place.
He was going to a farm.
Figure 3 Continued. Student Work: Required Writing Assignment

Note. These samples are representative of most students. The first represents a lower achieving student, the middle an average achieving student, and the last a high achieving student.
I have to admit, I was nervous about asking them to create and write their own sentences. We were not that far into the school year and writing at this point was often disjointed and hard to make sense of. My students wrote some amazing sentences and were using effective techniques to help each other in the process. Even more was that they wrote using different types of punctuation and high frequency words. We had focused on prosody and word recognition only during reading fluency activities yet some students were translating this skill into their writing. Another small, and unintended, success for well rounded reading fluency!

**Piles of Progress**

After noticing how reading fluency efforts were affecting student writing, I felt it beneficial to notice the connections to spelling also. In my classroom, phonics is taught through both decoding and encoding lessons and activities as part of core instruction. Students are given plenty of opportunities to work with phonics skills. Weekly spelling tests are based on these phonics skills. The words on the test do not come from a set list, but rather from a set skill. We were far enough into the study that I had collected several spelling tests (see Tables 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, & 8). I analyzed them keeping decoding and high frequency words in mind.
Table 3.

*Results of Spelling Test, List 3*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90%-99%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-89%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70%-79%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%-69%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%-59%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* One student absent for this test.
Table 4.

*Results of Spelling Test, List 4*

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<th>Score</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>60%-69%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%-59%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* All students present for this test.
Table 5.

*Results of Spelling Test, List 5*

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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%-59%</td>
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</table>

*Note.* Two students absent for this test.
Table 6.

Results of Spelling Test, List 6

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<tr>
<th>Score</th>
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</thead>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%-59%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. No students absent for this test.
Table 7.

*Results of Heart Word Spelling Test 1 (High Frequency Words Practiced as Spelling Words)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Spelled Correctly</th>
<th>Spelled Incorrectly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>the</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>she</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>her</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>look</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Four students absent for this test.
Table 8.

*Results of Heart Word Spelling Test 2 (High Frequency Words Practiced as Spelling Words)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Spelled Correctly</th>
<th>Spelled Incorrectly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>my</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>she</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>her</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saw</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>them</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>want</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Four students absent for this test.
A Sweet Repeat

At this point in the study, I was repeating many of the partner fluency practice activities. I had seen such success with phrase memory, sentence stars, Word-Tac-Toe, and punctuation posters that I made a decision to continue them. The formats remained the same and only the words used changed. I changed the words to provide practice with that week’s core skills and review of past skills. The following is a representation of what I observed and heard during repeats of these activities (see Figure 4).
Alicia points for her partner and says, “sound it out”.

Students rush to their spots and lay out their game cards.

Alec was reading in his head, then out loud with phrasing!

She did, however, have an appropriate tone in her voice when she read the sentence.

They are choosing the sentences with exclamation and question marks first!

My students are applying multiple components of fluency at the same time!

“Oooh, I love these!” shouts Adam.

There were no social squabbles and they worked cooperatively with each other.

“Hey, that is a word wall word that I know!” says Katitlyn.

The students are decoding phonics based words in their heads.

Colby smiles and says, “I am so good at this!”

Brianna nods and gives her partner thumbs up.

Students rush to their spots and lay out their game cards.

Alec was reading in his head, then out loud with phrasing!

She did, however, have an appropriate tone in her voice when she read the sentence.

They are choosing the sentences with exclamation and question marks first!

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“Oooh, I love these!” shouts Adam.

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“Hey, that is a word wall word that I know!” says Katitlyn.

The students are decoding phonics based words in their heads.

Colby smiles and says, “I am so good at this!”

Brianna nods and gives her partner thumbs up.

Figure 4. Student Behaviors During Fluency Activities
What Went Wrong?

I have seen a number of successes during my study so far. Each one of these achievements, be it academic or other, was a happy moment for me. So far, I had been pretty good at focusing on the positive within my study. I had been noting both positive and negative experiences in my log and data collection. It was at this point in my study that I needed to focus on the few students who were not seeing as much, or the same kind of, success as most other students were.

Each time I encountered a student who was not making progress, or significant progress, I began asking myself what went wrong. Was I wrong about the possibility that students could develop all areas of fluency despite decoding abilities? Was this student not getting enough support? Would this student be better off working with me instead of a partner for practice activities? The answers were not clear and they did not come fast. However, I was able to come up with a few suggestions by the end of my study which will be shared later.

A Negative Case

Colby was struggling to apply the fluency skills we had been learning and practicing. During whole group lessons and practice he seemed to be following along and participating well. However, each time I observed him in partner fluency activity he was not applying phrasing, word recognition, prosody, or
accurate and automatic decoding. He was also performing and scoring consistently low on progress monitoring and QPS assessments. The one area where he was showing success was in comprehension activities and assessments.

I could not figure out why he was not responding to all the fluency lessons and practice activities. Colby was not making the same strides as the rest of his peers. I decided to talk to him one on one about it, “Colby, tell me how you feel when we play reading games in partners.” His response was not one I expected at all. Colby replied by saying, “Well I like doing them. I mean it’s fun to read with a partner and to play the games. It’s just…..sometimes…..it’s hard to think of how to read when it’s noisy.” There it was….all I had to do was ask. Why hadn’t I asked earlier in the study? We continued with a discussion on how he and his partner could work outside if that helped.

The majority of my students were finding success so it never occurred to me that I was creating obstacles for some of my students. Perhaps Colby was overwhelmed by all the components of fluency I was throwing at him while trying to work in an energetic environment. I would continue to run fluency activities, but allow Colby the option of practicing reading fluency in a quieter environment. Or perhaps, Colby was showing signs that he needed additional practice with reading naturally before I demanded phrasing and prosody of him.
A Negative Case with a Positive Twist

Heather has been an academic concern throughout kindergarten and now into first grade. She is a happy student who is willing to please and try her best. However, she has shown limited and in some cases no progress on any assessments given. She continues to score intensive on DIBELS testing, fail spelling tests, not recognize high frequency words, and is unable to decode words using basic phonics skills.

On paper and in scores, Heather was looking pretty unsuccessful. However, I had watched her participate day after day in reading fluency activities. She did always need help from her partner, but was able to use that help to try again. She did always miss recognizing and reading the high frequency words, but was able to say a word that began with the same letter. She did mostly make up phrases and sentences instead of reading what was there, but she was able to read it with the correct tone of voice for the punctuation shown.

To me, Heather did make some small gains. She was nowhere near where she needed to be in terms of reading skills, but somehow was able to benefit in some small way from each fluency activity. Though she might be considered one of my negative cases, Heather’s performance helped me see something very important. She was able to understand and perform reading with punctuation and prosody in several situations without actually being able to accurately read the
words. It was possible to address and develop reading fluency even with struggling readers.

**High Frequency Words, Part 1**

It was time to assess students on their ability to read high frequency words from the review unit of the core reading program. We had been working with this set of words since the beginning of the study. Five or six new words were introduced each week and the previous words were reviewed. All of the partner fluency activities in this study included words from this list. Students were asked to read from a list of high frequency words. They were given three seconds to read each word and given the option to skip reading the words they did not know (see Appendix J). The following is a table of assessment results (see Table 9).
Table 9.

High Frequency Word Assessment, Unit R, Weeks 1-3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90%-99%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80%-89%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70%-79%</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>60%-69%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%-59%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I had mixed feelings about scores for this assessment. Slightly over half of the students missed zero to three words. This was important for showing their word recognition skills. However, I was still bothered by the fact that ten students missed over five words. The students who performed poorly were also my lowest achieving students in general. *Why weren’t they able to recognize these words? Weren’t they getting plenty of practice in core activities and fluency activities?* Though it was weeks away, I was becoming anxious to see if their scores on the next high frequency word assessment would improve after several more weeks of fluency practice.
Stop the Ride, I Want to Get Off!

My school transitioned into using the RTII last year and continues to use it this year. Part of this program involves planned meetings to discuss students classroom teachers have concerns for. Present at these meetings are the following people: classroom teacher, grade level teacher, RTII teacher, principal, guidance counselor, reading specialist, and school psychologist. The purpose of the meeting is to identify the issue, set a goal, develop appropriate interventions, and create a plan for monitoring student progress.

This time around I had referred two students, each of whom had a twenty-five minute meeting block. I also sat in on two meetings for students referred by my grade level partner. Throughout these meetings DIBELS, QPS, and progress monitoring scores were brought up and referred to over and over. Why weren’t we talking about anything else? I understand and agree with the value of these assessments, but suddenly felt overwhelmed by our focus on them.

I had seen so much success in my classroom by addressing reading fluency in its entirety. I had plenty of observations to support this. I even had assessment scores to back up my approach. Yet, I felt none of this would have fit into our meeting discussions. Was this true or was it my lack of confidence to bring something to the table? I pondered this question as the meetings continued and was not able to come up with an answer. However, I was able to make a
promise to myself that I would use my observational data in a positive way at our next RTII meeting.

**Bed Time Stories…Parent-Teacher Conferences**

Parent-teacher conferences came along during the latter half of my study. I enjoy meeting with parents and discussing their child’s progress with them. With ten minute conferences, time is truly of the essence. This year I found that I had so much more to cram into those ten minutes than I ever had in the past. Making observations and collecting data for my study had enabled me to gather very individual information on each student. It was incredibly hard not to share it all with parents.

In addition to presenting a report card, DIBELS results, and writing samples, I shared any observations from this study with parents. What I had not anticipated was devoting time to parents sharing their own reading observations with me. I did not ask specific questions about reading at home, but ten parents volunteered information on the topic. There were commonalities among their comments. Most had to do with the enjoyment of reading or reading with attention to punctuation (see Figure 5).
- how much their child loves reading
- how impressed they are with their child's reading
- how their child sneaks books to bed at night to read
- how their child points and punctuation and explains it
- how their child reads using the punctuation

Figure 5. Parent Comments From Conferences

I was so thrilled to hear these comments! I do not remember parents specifically mentioning their child reading with attention to punctuation in past years. Then again, I did not teach reading with punctuation this early in past years. This showed me that my students really were ready to learn, practice, and apply aspects of reading fluency even when they have not mastered decoding
skills. I had observed it in my classroom and now I had heard it confirmed from parents, completely unsolicited.

**A Reading Meeting**

Today I sat down with my class to have an informal chat about the fluency activities we have been doing. I decided that an interview would be a much better way to access their thoughts based on the pre-study survey results. We also discussed feelings towards reading in general. I did have a preset list of questions but felt it necessary to adapt some of my questions for clarification. The following are the questions and responses from our conversation as a class. I chose to include answers that were on topic and that students volunteered to share.

**MRS. VOGEL:** *What are you best at when you read?*

**MITCHELL:** *I am best at sounding out words.*

**COLBY:** *I just feel so happy. I want to read more!*

**GRETCHEAN:** *I am best at the words.*

**ADAM:** *I am good at pointing at the words.*

**MRS. VOGEL:** *What do you think you still need to practice?*

**CHRISTOPHER:** *Reading all the words.*
ALAINA: *I need to practice sounding out the really big words.*

RYAN: *Trying and reading the words.*

MRS. VOGEL: *How do you know that your brain understands what you read?*

KAITLYN: *I know what the words say to read it.*

BRIAN: *The pictures help me.*

ANDREW: *I look at the letters to read the words then my brain thinks about the words.*

MRS. VOGEL: *How do you like to practice reading in school?*

*By yourself? (Six students raised their hand.)*

*With a partner? (Nine students raise their hand)*

*A little by myself and a little with a partner? (Sixteen students raise their hands; some voted twice for this one)*

Based on what I observed during fluency activities so far, I did feel these were honest answers from my kids. During the initial survey, I felt that they gave me answers in an effort to please me. I got a different feeling during this classroom meeting. We had been having a not so great listening day and this was one of the few times they were really focused on me and the topic. Several of
them were bending to see and intensely watching me write responses down on my clipboard.

I was happy to hear some of the strategies I taught shining through in their interview answers. They mentioned pointing to words, sounding out words, and looking at the pictures. I did feel some disappointment too. I was expecting someone to mention “reading like talking” or reading “heart words”, but no one did. I was also expecting them to choose working with a partner by a landslide vote. However, the fact that they liked both practicing by themselves and with partners reinforced that I need to keep their practice varied. Several students commented that they needed more practice sounding out words. I have not been focusing on phonics in my fluency activities because they receive so much practice in this area with core instruction and required interventions. Obviously this is still an important area for them and they would like some additional practice with it. I need to make sure to acknowledge this concern and maybe dig deeper to see what kind of words they meant.

Overall, I am glad I got to sit down and talk with the whole class. I actually wish I had done this earlier. It only took ten minutes from my day and revealed so much to. I think it also made my students feel that I valued their opinions and that they were helping me.
Pushing the Envelope

It had been sitting on my desk all week. I had moved the rubber banded pile of readers around several times, but never to my rocking chair to hand out and read. My lesson plans did not include reading this book either. It was an advanced level reader called *Maria’s Thanksgiving*. The theme was perfect for the day before Thanksgiving break. *But was the word choice appropriate?* The mixed use of punctuation would provide great practice. *But would my students be able to see this through the advance phonics patterns used?* The plot was one that if understood would influence our prosody while reading in. *Could the class see past advanced words and make sense of the plot and how it should influence their reading?* I was not sure, but I decided to push the envelope anyway.

To aid in reading, I projected the book on the Mimio screen. I began by letting students know this book would have some advanced words in it: “Today I have a special book for us to read about Thanksgiving. But it has a lot of words we haven’t learned or practiced yet.” The students reacted with delight and squeals. I was relieved to know they were at least excited for the challenge. I continued by saying, “We will have to use all of the things we learned that good readers do. I have been watching and listening to you read during partner practice and I think you can do it.” Several students raised their hands in triumph and the energy from the class was telling me they believed they could read it also.
We began with a picture walk. This was important because I needed them to have a basic understanding of the story before we attempted to read any of the advanced words. As the class paged through the book, their comments to each other reassured me that they would use the pictures to create meaning (see Figure 6). These comments revealed so much to me. First off, they were effectively using their pre-reading skills and recognizing that they can connect to a text before they read it. Also, several comments were comprehension based and dealt with story elements and the plot line. They were reading for meaning! Most of the phonics stories our school program uses are not enough of a story to apply decent pre-reading strategies. Part of my reason for doing this study was to supplement fluency with real reading activities. It was at this moment I was glad I finally decided to use this book for reading instead of just pushing it around my desk.

“Look, they get happy at the end.”

“What is she giving them?”

“Oooh, look at all the food.”

“I think it’s Thanksgiving.”

“Uh-oh there is a lot of snow!”

*Figure 6. Student Comments During Picture Walk of Above Level Text*
With a basic understanding of the plot now in place we delved into a choral read. Throughout the choral reading, most students were able to keep up with most of the reading. My low readers were simply touching the words and not reading each one. Students who were reading were changing their tone to match the ups and downs in the story plot. They even changed their tone when the characters in the story attempted to console Maria after a snowstorm threatened to ruin Thanksgiving.

I was so relieved when we finished this book. I could not have asked for a better reassurance of my intentions than I had witnessed today. Of course I recognize that several students were not actually reading with us. I cannot overlook how many students were using various components of fluency to read and understand the book either. In this moment, I felt immensely proud of my students for applying these skills and strategies without intense prompting. I also felt a grain of pride for myself and my ability to finally place a piece in the fluency puzzle.

**High Frequency Words, Part 2**

It was once again time to formally assess students’ ability to read high frequency words accurately and quickly. The words included were those presented, practiced, and read each week during core instruction. They were also used in the partner fluency activities. Similar to the previous assessment, students
were given three seconds to read each word before it would be given to them by me (see Appendix N). Students were also given the option to skip words they did not know. The following is a table showcasing student performance on this word recognition assessment (see Table 10).

Table 10.

*High Frequency Word Assessment, Unit R Weeks 1-6*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
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<td>70%-79%</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>60%-69%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%-59%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* All students present for this test.
Overall, I was pleased with the results from this assessment. As with the previous high frequency word assessment, a little more than half of the students missed between zero and three words. Their word recognition skills were staying consistent despite this assessment containing more words. This alone showed me my students were making progress in their word recognition abilities. I was also impressed that the number of students who missed more than five words decreased. It was relieving to have proof that some of my students who showed low word recognition skills on the previous high frequency word assessment were making some type of positive progress. Another small success for balanced fluency instruction.

Ask and You Shall Receive

My students complete take home readers two nights a week as homework. They must read a previously practiced phonics based book to a grown up at home. After the grown up signs it, students return it for a sticker on their reading chart. Today I decided to test the air with a new take home challenge.

Earlier that day the class had practiced reading fluency using punctuation posters in partners. I placed a fresh copy of the punctuation poster on students’ homework folders and explained how they could earn a Mickey Stamp for reading it to their grown up. In my classroom, students may collect Mickey Stamps for
prizes. They are usually handed out for exceptional work or extra effort. I made it clear that this assignment was optional.

Nine students returned signed punctuation posters the next day. Though it was slightly under half participation, I was thrilled to receive so many back so quickly. I was even more elated when three parents made positive comments on the top of the sheets. *Why had I not included such fluency practice as home reading before?* I could not have been more happily surprised that some of my students took advantage of my challenge. It was rewarding to once again receive positive support and comments on our fluency efforts.

**True Readers**

We had been in school for several months now. My class had sat through and participated in countless lessons and activities that addressed various components of reading fluency. Yet I still wondered if I was helping my students get closer to becoming true readers and creating authentic reading experiences. Once again, the idea of the unknown proved to be a wonderful thing.

It was an ordinary snack and story and an ordinary clean up afterwards. After a read aloud and snack students are given five minutes to clean up, get drinks, and socialize with friends. We had been completing this routine day after day in the same way. The extraordinary part came when Adam approached me...
with a question, “Mrs. Vogel, can I read a book from my backpack until the timer goes off?”

Immediately several questions ran through my brain. Was he really willing to give up his free time to read a book? Had I ignored student requests for this before? I answered him with “Sure” and watched as he brought a book about baby animals to the carpet, opened it, and began reading. Immediately a few other boys gathered around him, pointing and reading together. Alaina took a book from the book basket and joined the boys at the carpet. Saul sat down next to her and she began to read to him much like I read to them at snack and story time.

I quickly grabbed a pen and the closest piece of paper I could find to record what was unfolding in front of me. What was happening? Students were flocking to the carpet faster than I could record. All the while, I remained an outside observer and was not a direct participator in the flurry of reading activity. Rose approached me with a book and I nodded yes. She pulled her friend Gretchen over to the carpet and the two began to read together. About half of the class was still finishing snacks and walking around the room.

After several minutes of sitting there in shock, I regained my senses and started listening from my rocking chair. What I heard brought an immediate smile to my face. Alaina was reading to Saul using expression, phrasing, and
attention to punctuation. Saul was responding to her with comments that showed he understood the basic plot. Rose and Gretchen were chorally reading at a decent pace, not getting held up on any words.

Day sixty of school and this has never happened before! Books are available to my students each day, but they seemed more excited about them today. Their actions were completely of their own will. No phonics readers, no intervention groups, no scripted reading. There were no arguments and no problems. Voices were in control and those who came to the carpet were truly interested in the books. I felt as though I had won the lottery as I continued to watch them enjoy not only reading, but reading with each other! Could it be that my students were interested in, enjoying, and practicing strategies we learned in an authentic reading experience? Finally!

**Time Flies**

It was hard to believe that my study was coming to an end this week. I hardly felt as if we were done working on our reading fluency. In fact, I felt as though I had just begun to explore what my class was able to do in terms of reading fluency. Again, I began to see the positive side of uncertainty. I was done collecting data and planning for this study, but my research would continue informally.
I decided to hold another class meeting and interview my students one final time for this study. I felt it necessary to thank them for being a part of my study. Many students answered my gratitude with smiles. For some reason, I felt more relaxed as I questioned students this time around. Perhaps the students picked up on my demeanor because they also seemed more comfortable and willing to share.

Their answers were very similar to those given during the mid-study interview. At first I was aggravated they were still claiming they wanted more practice sounding out words. But as I probed further, I began to realize this was not a failure but a triumph. The types of words they were asking for more practice with were advanced words, or as they put it “second grade words”. They seemed confident in reading words based on phonics patterns we had worked on in core instruction and fluency practice. My students were asking me to help them read beyond what the traditional scope and sequence of first grade offered them at this time of the year. They had accepted my challenge to be better readers and this was a victory.

In my mind, I felt as though the study had just begun days ago. All of the initial anxiety over pushing fluency onto my students seems miles away though. It was actually hard to believe I had felt that. The possibility of anything and everything happening proved to be invaluable. I had been so submerged in this
study that I almost felt as if I could not go on without it. In a way, I would not be
going on without it. Planning, participating in, and observing the various parts of
my study had taught me so much about myself and my students. The things I
learned were now a part of me as a teacher.

The Results Are In

The final assessment to be included in my study was the middle year
DIBELS. For me, this was a moment of truth. Would addressing all components
of reading fluency help boost fluency scores on the DIBELS? In my heart I knew
that the lessons and activities in my study had helped my students become
improved, well rounded readers. However, in an age of standardized testing the
score reigns supreme.

I clicked print class summary (see Table 11) and did all I could to keep
myself from running to the printer in the faculty room. As I stood there glancing
over my class summary my eyes were immediately drawn to the number of green
circles next to student names. The green meant an overall score that was
considered on or above grade level. Next my eyes went to the yellow and red
circles that labeled students in need of strategic or intensive intervention. My
heart sank…..five of each. I took a breath and started to look at the names
associated with the colors. Five students received scores that indicated they
needed intensive interventions and five earned scores indicating they needed
strategic interventions. I began to realize that one student moved from intensive to
the strategic and two students moved from the strategic to the core category.
Small success! Looking closer at the individual test scores I also saw that eight
students labeled intensive or strategic had improved in at least one measure in
some way from the beginning of the year until now. Another success!

It was hard not to focus on the red and yellow circles that otherwise told
me my students were not performing up to par. *Snap out of it! Remember why
you decided to do this study.* I told myself to acknowledge those colors and plan
for appropriate interventions, but not to let it define the way I approach reading
fluency with these students. I had seen and heard the majority of, including my
low achieving, students successfully apply skills from several areas of reading
fluency. It was possible to be well rounded and improve.

The achievements of my students could not be defined in a colored circle.
Their progress was greater than any standardized test could even measure. It
reached beyond numbers and beyond academics. My students improved their self
esteem, social skills, and desires to be better readers. And for that, I give them all
a green circle next to their name.
Table 11.

Middle of Year DIBELS Class Summary Results

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<tr>
<td><strong>CLS</strong></td>
<td>Goal 43</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Acc.</td>
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Heather

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<td>Goal 8</td>
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<td>Acc.</td>
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Colby

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<td>Goal 8</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Goal 8</td>
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<td>Flu.</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Flu.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acc.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Acc.</td>
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**Note.** Scores are read across. A higher score indicates a better performance. NWF stands for nonsense word fluency. Under NWF, CLS stands for correct letter sounds and WWR stands for whole words read. DORF stands for DIBELS oral reading fluency. Under DORF, Flu. stands for fluency (words correct per minute) and Acc. stands for accuracy. Green scores indicate no need for interventions, yellow scores indicate a need for strategic intervention, and red scores indicate a need for intensive intervention.
Data Analysis

Introduction

The underlying goal of my study was to create more fluent readers. I aimed to develop well rounded fluency in my students and not narrow my focus to speed and accuracy. The timing of this goal was important to my study. Students were being asked to develop various aspects of fluency before becoming fluent decoders. Upon completion of my study, analyzing my data helped me see if I made strides toward or met my goal.

Throughout my study I worked to collect both varied and trustworthy data. To ensure triangulation, I did my best to collect data at various times, in various ways, and from various students. My goal was to create a full picture of the study and accurately represent the students that participated in it. My analysis includes data collected through student surveys, student interviews, DIBELS benchmark assessments, Quick Phonics Screener assessments, and observational data from my field log.

Student Survey Analysis

One of the first parts of my study was a reading survey. My purpose in starting my study with a student survey was to learn how students felt about their own reading. The survey consisted of six questions, each centered on a different
component of fluency. To meet the needs of first graders, the survey was answered by coloring in smiley faces. There were three options for answers: a happy smile face, a sideways smile face, and a frown smile face.

**Student Interview Analysis**

When I reached the middle of my study, I felt it necessary to conduct a student interview. The purpose of this interview was to learn more details of student feelings towards reading fluency and their progress within it. I conducted a whole class student interview during a class meeting. My students were used to discussing important things during classroom meetings so it seemed appropriate to present my interview questions in this way. I formulated a list of various interview questions ahead of time that dealt with feelings about reading fluency, including struggles and progress within it. During these interviews, I did add some questions on the spot as I saw necessary for gaining further insight or clarification. The answers students gave during this interview helped me to make appropriate changes to the activities and lessons in the rest of the study. Throughout the study, I conducted shorter and less formal interviews with students as I was observing them. I did this to make sure I was accurately interpreting their words and actions. At the end of my study, I held another class meeting and asked students questions from the same list used during the first
interview. This allowed me to see similarities or differences in student answers from the mid-study interview

**DIBELS Benchmark Analysis**

The DIBELS was given to students near the beginning and end of my study. This was a district required assessment and was given to all students. The DIBELS data allowed me to see student ability in the areas of nonsense word fluency and passage reading fluency. Within these larger tests I was able to see if students were applying word recognition, phonics skills, phrasing, prosody, and comprehension. The purpose of comparing both sets of DIBELS data was to track the growth, lack of progress, or stagnant performance of each student.

**Quick Phonics Screener Analysis**

The QPS was a phonics based diagnostic given to students based on their DIBELS results. This was also a district required assessment. The results of the QPS were used to place students in appropriate phonics based intervention groups. Throughout the length of my study, certain students were given the QPS assessment in between DIBELS testing. The purpose of this was to track progress and move them into a more appropriate phonics based intervention group. By analyzing student QPS results I was able to see their ability to apply phonics skills to both nonsense and real words.
Observational Data Analysis

Throughout my study I kept a field log in which I recorded observations, personal reactions, and reflections. My field log served many purposes. It allowed me to track the fluency lessons and activities I used. Keeping a field log also gave me a central place to write down the things I saw and heard in my classroom. Finally, the set up of my log was helpful in forcing me to record my own feelings and assumptions as separate data.

Codes, Bins, and Theme Statements

I began to code my data during the middle of my study. In doing this, I was able to see commonalities and divergences in my data. Next, I created a code index to notice overall themes. I could then organize these codes into bins (see Figure 7) and visualize the connections among them. Finally I used my codes and bins to create theme statements (see Figure 8) that reflected the findings of my study.
What are the observed and reported experiences when I use varied reading fluency activities in a first grade classroom?

Fluency Activities and Experiences

- Partner sentence stars
- Partner phrase memory
- Partner punctuation posters
- Partner Word-Tac-Toe
- Whole class words/phrases/sentences

Teaching Strategies and Responsibilities

- Use direct instruction
- Use interactive learning
- Use strong and repeated modeling
- Set high expectations

Engagement and Social Interaction

- Increased student confidence
- Increased student interest
- Student use of peer coaching
- Development of cooperative skills between students

Links to Other Learning

- Development of student spelling/encoding skills
- Development of student writing skills
- Student relationship with reading

Reading Successes

- Accuracy
- Speed
- Word recognition
- Prosody (punctuation, emotion)
- Comprehension
- Development of cooperative skills between students

Figure 7. Codes and Bins
**Preliminary Theme Statements**

Research Question: What are the observed and reported experiences when I use varied reading fluency activities in a first grade classroom?

1. **Fluency Activities and Experiences:** Sentence stars, phrase memory, punctuation posters, Word-Tac-Toe, and words/phrases/sentences provide meaningful, varied practice and experience in partner and whole class reading fluency situations.

2. **Teaching Strategies and Responsibilities:** Teachers can be effective in teaching reading fluency before students have a complete understanding of phonics rules and patterns by setting high expectations and using specific teaching strategies such as modeling, direct instruction, and interactive learning.

3. **Links to Other Learning:** Increased reading fluency instruction and practice leads to increased success for most students in other areas of language arts, such as spelling and writing.

4. **Engagement and Social Interaction:** Although the main focus of fluency instruction is reading progress, students also develop increased confidence, interest, coaching ability, and cooperative skills in the process.

5. **Reading Successes** In addition to fostering a relationship between students and reading, a balanced reading fluency program leads to student improvement in the areas of accuracy, speed, word recognition, prosody, and comprehension.

*Figure 8. Theme Statements*
Findings

The purpose of my study was to use varied fluency activities in the first grade classroom to create stronger, well rounded readers. This idea for this study came from my personal experience with using phonics centered intervention groups to increase reading fluency. Phonics and decoding are important parts of reading fluency. However, they are not the only part of reading fluency. I believe all components of reading fluency should be addressed when trying to create fluent readers. No matter what their grade or decoding level, students can benefit from a balanced fluency approach. A reading teacher’s job is much more than producing fast and accurate readers. Reading teachers are also responsible for fostering an interest in reading and a desire to become a better reader. Even more, teachers should show students that reading is more than decoding words on paper. Unvaried and unpurposed reading fluency interventions can lead to unsuccessful readers. For my study, I instructed students in several areas of reading fluency and provided varied opportunities for students to practice reading fluency in the classroom. Instructing students in prosody, comprehension, phrasing, and reading with attention to punctuation opened up reading to them as something more than simply the decoding of words. Once students showed competency in these areas they were asked to participate in partner activities to practice. Fluency activities including: Word-Tac-Toe, punctuation posters, phrase memory, and sentence
stars. Adding a social component to fluency activities helped to engage students and provide effective practice.

By the end of my study I had pages of log data and piles of student work. It seemed as though I might never find the highlights of my study with such a large amount of data to search through. However, Hendricks (2009) advises that reaching conclusions in an action research study is an imperative part of the process. With that in mind I began to read through and analyze my data. After coding my observation log and student work I was able to see themes emerge. These commonalities helped me to create theme statements that synthesized information from my study. It was at that point that I was able to see the pieces of my study come together.

*Fluency Activities and Experiences: Sentence stars, phrase memory, punctuation posters, Word-Tac-Toe, and words/phrases/sentences provide meaningful, varied practice and experience in partner and whole class reading fluency situations.*

When students are given purposeful and appropriate reading fluency experiences, they benefit in a variety of ways. According to Delpit (2012), “rather than teach children to read, we instead give them opportunities to learn how” (60). In my study, these opportunities were in the form of fluency activities. I observed students participating in varied and meaningful reading
activities many times throughout the study. Successful experiences included both whole class and partner activities.

Phrase memory proved to be a student favorite during this study. By carefully choosing the high frequency words and phonics patterns included on the phrase cards, I was able to create phrases students could read effectively. This intervention was designed to help students develop phrasing and phonics skills. Also included was practice in word recognition and decoding. These skills are all important to reading speed and accuracy. Hearing students shout things like, “I am good at this game!” only confirmed this activity as a success.

Punctuation posters were also an important part of this study. I was also able to purposefully include high frequency words and phonics patterns within the sentences on these sheets. Punctuation posters were crafted to give students a chance to read with attention to punctuation. This component of fluency is often overlooked with beginning readers, but it needs to be taught and practiced. I could easily tell that students were grasping these skills when they kept telling me “we already know how to do these” and asking me to practice on their own.

Word-Tac-Toe was another valuable game used several times in my study. Like the previously described activities, I tailored the words used to meet classroom goals. Word-Tac-Toe boards were designed for students to practice phrasing, word recognition, and decoding. My data showed students applying
multiple fluency skills during this game. They were an important part of creating variety among the fluency experiences in my study.

Including sentence starts and words/phrases/sentences in this study was helpful to synthesize a variety of reading fluency skills. Both of these activities provided opportunities for students to practice word recognition, decoding, prosody, phrasing, comprehension, and reading with attention to punctuation. On many occasions, I was able to observe students showcasing layered skills within these activities.

By the end of the study, I could see that varied fluency experiences were crucial to keeping reading student centered and fresh. They also allowed me to easily and successfully address various components of fluency individually and in tandem. Both student work and observational data can be cited as evidence to support this theme.

*Teaching Strategies and Responsibilities:* Teachers can be effective in teaching reading fluency before students have a complete understanding of phonics rules and patterns by setting high expectations and using specific teaching strategies such as modeling, choral reading, direct instruction, and interactive learning.
Teachers must set high expectations for their students. My study would not have even existed if I had not set high expectations for my first graders. Delpit states, “we have to cease attempting to build “teacher-proof” schools with scripted low-level instruction and instead seek to develop (and retain) perceptive, thinking teachers who challenge their students with high-quality, interactive, and thoughtful instruction” (p. 34). I expected and demanded that they learn and practice various aspects of reading fluency beyond our current interventions, and all before becoming fluent decoders. This allowed me to set goals for phrasing, prosody, comprehension, word recognition, and reading with attention to punctuation. Much to my delight, students rose to my challenge and were able to show an understanding of these skills at some level. They were able to make achievements on assessments, within social interactions, in their confidence, and in their reading skills.

As educators it is our responsibility to set the bar high even when it makes us uncomfortable. As time passed, I felt better about this type of fluency practice but still have room for personal improvement in this area. There were many times throughout the study when I physically felt itchy about the noise and bustle of the fluency activities. I soon realized it was a controlled commotion and now believe the partner practice activities were beneficial for students. There were also several points where I felt uneasy about pushing my students too far too soon. Gradually I began to realize it was me who had been holding them back by
not teaching fluency this way in the past. My goals for the class were clear and high, but that was alright. Undoubtedly the positives for my students far outweighed my own awkward feelings.

It is imperative to model skills for students before expecting them to be successful in a group or on their own. Throughout my study I was careful to model fluency over and over before asking students to practice. As a part of direct instruction, modeling is a planned and deliberative way to show students what they need to do. My students were able to quickly grasp and apply fluency skills in various situations during this study. The transition between learning and applying was hastened by using effective modeling within direct instruction.

During fluency instruction students participated in many choral and repeated readings. These whole class readings allowed students multiple chances to practice with the same text. I was able to set the speed and tone for each reading. Students were able to immediately practice skills under my guidance. This provided an opportunity for timely feedback and informal assessment. As in several cases during my study, I was able to gage students’ abilities on the spot. With this guidance, they were able to feel confident and successful about what we were reading. This kind of instruction also let me see that my students were capable of completing reading activities by themselves or with partners. Choral and repeated readings were a great way to gradually release students on their own.
Interactive learning turned out to play a large role in my study. Each of the fluency practice activities required students to work with a partner and play some sort of reading game or challenge. This interactive learning helped engage students while allowing them to practice reading in a student led situation. I observed and collected data on many occasions throughout the study showing that students not only enjoyed, but could be successful in applying fluency skills in interactive learning environments.

*Links to Other Learning:* Increased reading fluency instruction and practice leads to increased success for most students in other areas of language arts, such as spelling and writing.

My study revealed links between fluency and additional areas of learning. Perhaps the most unanticipated theme that emerged was the positive link between reading fluency and other areas of language arts. Of course I was always aware of the connection between reading and writing, but had not thoroughly considered how I would see it in my study. After my study was underway I began to see traces of skills we had learned and practiced with fluency show up in spelling and writing.

I began collecting writing samples half way into my study as part of my regular classroom maintenance. When looking at their writing, I was able to see connections to reading fluency skills. Time after time, students spelled high
frequency words correctly in their writing. We had practiced reading these high
frequency words over and over during fluency instruction and partner work.
Their word recognition was strong enough for them to apply it in their writing.
My students were using question and exclamation marks in their writing before I
even taught punctuation as a writing skill. During my observations, I collected
data of students reading me these sentences with correct prosody. They had a
deep enough understanding of reading with punctuation to apply it to their writing
effectively. I was also drawn to the way students were helping each other during
writing time. Much like the social interaction during fluency practice, students
gave constructive hints and suggestions when helping a friend. On various
occasions I noted students saying things like, “Break it apart and try it”. My
students were interacting in appropriate and helpful ways. Both academically and
socially, my fluency instruction was affecting their writing in a positive way.

Midway through my study, we began taking spelling tests as part of the
core reading program. I expect students to do well on these phonics based tests,
but they performed even better than I expected. Most students were able to
accurately spell both the phonics and high frequency words included in the
spelling tests. Week after week, students continued to perform well on spelling
tests. Many of the words on the tests were also included in previous fluency
lessons and practice activities. I was not giving students additional instruction in
phonics, but in various components of reading fluency. My students were
comfortable with seeing and reading these words in phrase and sentence situations. This level of comfort helped them encode the very same words they had been decoding during reading fluency practice.

Engagement and Social Interaction: Although the main focus of fluency instruction is reading progress, students also develop increased confidence, interest, coaching ability, and cooperative skills in the process.

During the study, students made positive developments in nonacademic areas. I had not initially anticipated that this would manifest itself so early in the study. But I was more than happy to witness it. On countless occasions I was able to collect data that showed students were increasing their confidence, interest, coaching ability, and cooperative skills throughout the study.

Many of my students showed increased confidence during this study. On the initial survey all students indicated they felt they were good readers, but I had never heard them talk about it. Throughout my study I heard many students verbalize their self-assurance in reading. I also observed them showing this confidence through their body language. As teachers, we can become so bogged down with academic success that we often forget that creating confident learners is vital too.
Generating student interest is also an important part of any classroom. The partner activities used in my study were crucial for increasing student interest in fluency activities. I was able to collect observational data showcasing student interest in these activities. Included in this data were verbal statements. Students also expressed interest in fluency activities during whole class interviews. Without this student interest, I do not feel this study would have been as successful or as meaningful for me and my students.

My students became peer coaches in my study. Though I did not instruct them on how to do so, they began giving one another corrective feedback. The words and gestures they used were very similar to those that I used when instructing them in the classroom. I was able to observe this peer coaching interaction during multiple partner fluency activities. I was also able to collect data during writing that showed students using appropriate peer coaching skills.

Another nonacademic area where my students made improvement was their social interactions. My students are very social to begin with and really latched onto the social component of the fluency activities. During the class interview, the majority of students shared that they liked working with a partner. On a multitude of occasions, I heard and saw students working together effectively. They were on task, working cooperatively to solve problems, and
interacting appropriately. Healthy and appropriate social cooperation is something to truly celebrate for the first few months of first grade.

*Reading Successes:* In addition to fostering a relationship between students and reading, a balanced reading fluency program leads to student improvement in the areas of accuracy, speed, word recognition, prosody, and comprehension.

One of the overriding goals of this study was to create more fluent readers using balanced reading fluency instruction. As a reading teacher, I recognize that measuring fluency in speed and accuracy is important. However, I also wanted to measure my students’ fluency in terms of prosody and comprehension. By looking at DIBELS scores, student work, and my own observations I was able to determine if this study has created an effective balanced literacy experience for my students.

The scores my students received on the winter DIBELS showed their ability to read accurately and at what speed. There were several students whose scores for oral reading fluency accuracy and speed showed room for improvement. Unfortunately, students are not tested in oral reading fluency at the beginning of the year so there are no scores to compare in this area. Slightly over half of my students met middle of the year goals, with many of them reaching or
surpassing end of the year goals (see Table 11). When the scores are viewed as a whole unit, they show student achievement in the areas of accuracy and speed.

During this study, I was able to see students improve their word recognition skills. While some students continued to score low on high frequency word assessments, most improved from the first to the second assessment or maintained a percentage correct with more words to recognize. Many times throughout the study I saw and heard students identifying and reading not only high frequency words, but phonics based words quickly and accurately.

It was important to me that I collected data in all areas of reading fluency including prosody. Through my observations I was able to see that most of my students were reading with attention to punctuation and with appropriate tone of voice during partner fluency activities. They took joy in reading sentences with question and exclamation marks and used associated hand motions. These skills translated into many students’ writing also.

I also collected student work samples dealing with reading comprehension. Several of my students who have speech and processing obstacles had trouble in this area of fluency. However, the majority of students were able to identify basic story elements and state the main idea of a text in either verbal or written form. This was visible through assessments and observations during whole class comprehension lessons. Data of this kind helped
confirm that students are able to comprehend basic story elements when they read.
Next Steps

Though my official action research project has ended, my journey into teaching effective reading fluency has not. There were many times during my data collection and writing that I made promises to myself to continue to develop in this area. I have learned an immense amount about myself, my teaching, and reading fluency in this process. Though I did not complete the fluency puzzle, I have definitely placed a few more large pieces on the table. I certainly intend to continue adding more.

A major goal of the project was to improve reading fluency by addressing various components within it. In this study, I used several instructional techniques including modeling, choral reading, direct instruction, and interactive learning. These techniques allowed me to provide instruction and practice with multiple aspects of fluency within the same lesson or activity. Now that I see the value, I plan on continuing to integrate various parts of fluency within single lessons.

Along these lines, another goal of mine is to continue to provide my students with varied and meaningful practice activities. In this study, I used sentence stars, phrase memory, Word-Tac-Toe, words/phrases/sentences, and punctuation posters. I was surprised at how easy it was to create and integrate these activities into the existing curriculum. In the past, I had been intimidated by
the idea of creating fluency supplemental material. I plan on continuing to use these and working to create more to add to the collection.

Using partner activity practice opened my eyes to how beneficial social reading experiences could be. Before my own eyes I watched my students grow socially, cooperatively, maintain motivation, and develop a sense of peer coaching. I will never underestimate this again. In the future, I want to integrate social reading into other subject areas. I also plan on explicitly teaching my students how to be peer reading coaches. This would enrich their partner reading experiences even more. In addition, I think it would be valuable to include more social reading activities in student homework assignments and challenges.

This action research process really opened my eyes to the power of observation. Some days my classroom feels like a tornado and I do not always take the time to see what is in front of me or what my students are trying to tell me. I was forced to create time and energy to observe and interview my students for this project. The information I gained from these data collection strategies proved to be invaluable. The words, interactions, and body language of my students let me see them as individuals and a group. I plan to continue to take the time to observe and interview my students in the future.

Several of my realizations throughout this project were about me as a teacher. I learned that I can increase demands and goals that I place on my
students. There were many uncomfortable moments where I doubted this. Slowly, but surely I began to understand that I was only helping my students by expanding and making clearer my demands. My students were able to handle these demands despite being non-fluent decoders. From this study I also recognize that there might be individual cases where increasing goals too much would not be beneficial. In the future I will not be afraid to address various components of fluency at the phrase and sentence level early in the school year. I intend to begin well rounded fluency instruction as soon as I begin reading instruction.

Perhaps my biggest moment of person growth relates to the reason why I chose this action research topic to begin with. In previous years, I was concerned only with following mandated reading interventions. To be honest, I was overwhelmed with the idea of supplementing them and was unsure if it would even help. This project allowed me to see that I can follow both the required programs and my heart with what I feel is best for my students. In years to come, I will be less timid. I will find confidence within myself to challenge what is placed before me and take the necessary measure to ensure I am meeting my students’ needs.

Both my students and I benefitted from my action research. Now that I have seen just how powerful positive change can be there is no turning back. I
cannot ignore all of the wonderful, and sometimes unanticipated, outcomes that come with addressing all components of reading fluency. With this new mindset I am determined to continue piecing together reading fluency in my classroom.
References


Resources


Appendix A- HSIRB Approval Letter

Dear Megan,

The Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board has accepted your proposal, “The Fluency Puzzle: Effectively Putting the Pieces Together to Create Successful Readers.” A copy of your proposal will remain with the HSIRB Co-Chair, Dr. Adams O’Connell, for the duration of the time of your study and for up to one year from the approval date indicated by the date of this email.

Please note that if you intend on venturing into topics other than the ones indicated in your proposal, you must inform the HSIRB about what those topics will be. Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this email notification, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSIRB before implementation, awaiting HSIRB approval of the changes.

We do still need to collect your electronic signature, so please respond to this email with your name and project title in the subject line. [Redacted] can provide her electronic signature by replying to this email with her name in the subject line. Your replies will serve as your signatures.
Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Virginia Adams O’Connell

Co-Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board

Moravian College

(610) 625-7756

hsirb@moravian.edu

voconne1@moravian.edu
Appendix B- Principal Consent Form

August 2012

Dear Mr. Steidle,

As you know, I am currently taking graduate courses at Moravian College as I work towards my master’s degree in Education and become a certified Reading Specialist. I have been inspired to focus on reading fluency by the interventions our district has recently implemented. This year, I will be studying the effects of using varied interventions in several areas of reading fluency to increase overall reading fluency. I am hoping these activities have a positive effect on overall student reading fluency while raising their progress monitoring and benchmark scores. In addition, I am hopeful that it will help students develop confidence and interest in reading. I will be collecting research data for this study from September through December 2012.

How will this affect the classroom? The research study activities students will fit into the regular first grade curriculum and interventions and will not take away from other learning areas. All students will receive
the same instruction and participate in the same activities in the classroom, whether or not they are serving as research study participants. Students will receive instruction on and practice reading fluency activities in all areas of fluency: reading rate, accuracy, prosody, and comprehension. These will be done as part of a consistent schedule. The words/phrases/texts used will come from the first grade reading curriculum. All instruction and activities will be appropriate to classroom and individual student needs within reading fluency. Students will still receive regular Step By Step phonics intervention instruction and be progress monitored appropriately.

Who will see the research/observations? The results from the research will be used in my graduate course action research paper. Some of my research involves using data from weekly progress monitoring and benchmark testing. All material dealing with a child’s identity will only be seen by me. He or she will be given a pseudonym for the purpose of my research study. All observations/research will be kept in a secure location to which only I will have access to.

What if I have questions or concerns now or during the research study? Please feel free to contact me with any questions, comments, or concerns.
You may also contact my advisor at Moravian College, [redacted], at [redacted] or by email at [redacted].

Thank you in advance for your cooperation. It is great to have your support as I strive to improve our classroom learning!

Sincerely,

Megan Vogel

Consent Form to Conduct Classroom Research Study

Please check and return:

☐ I give my permission for Megan Vogel to conduct this research study in her classroom.

☐ I do not give my permission for Megan Vogel to conduct this research study in her classroom.

Signature: ________________________________

Date: ________________________________
Appendix C- Parent Consent Form

September 2012

Dear Parent or Guardian:

I am currently taking graduate courses at Moravian College as I work towards my master's degree to become a Reading Specialist. This year, I will be studying the effects of using varied methods and activities to increase reading fluency. I am hoping these activities have a positive effect on all components of reading fluency while raising students' reading fluency scores. In addition, I am hopeful that it will help students develop confidence and interest in reading. I will be collecting research data for this study from September through January 2012.

What is reading fluency? Students show reading fluency in many different ways. Fluency includes the speed at which students read, which is recorded in words read per minute. Another part of fluency is how many words students read correctly; this is their reading accuracy. Reading with expression, or prosody, is also an important part of reading fluency. In addition, fluency includes the ability to understand the text one reads; this is their reading comprehension.

Why is it important to practice reading fluency? Reading fluency scores are strong indicators of how well students will handle reading in second grade and beyond. Students need to have strong reading fluency so they can concentrate on comprehending and understanding a story rather than putting all of their effort into the actual decoding of text. Our school's new Step by Step program uses reading fluency scores to place students in intervention groups. These intervention groups are designed to give students the extra learning boost they need to succeed in reading fluency.
Students have been involved in this program since kindergarten. Reading fluency is tested frequently in first grade during small reading groups and formally at the middle and end of the year through the DIBELS test.

**How will this affect the classroom?** The activities students will take part in fit into the regular first grade curriculum and will not take away from other learning areas. All students will receive the same instruction and participate in the same activities in the classroom, whether or not they are serving as research study participants. Students will receive instruction on and practice reading fluency activities in all areas of fluency: reading rate, accuracy, prosody, and comprehension. These will be done as part of a consistent schedule. The words/phrases/texts used will come from the first grade reading curriculum. All instruction and activities will be appropriate to classroom and individual student needs within reading fluency. Students will still receive regular Step By Step phonics intervention instruction.

**Who will see the research/observations?** The results from the research will be used in my graduate course action research paper. All material dealing with your child's identity will only be seen by me. He or she will be given a pseudonym (false name) for the purpose of my research study. All observations/research will be kept in a secure location to which only I will have access to.

**Does my child have to participate?** Your child is not obligated to participate in the research study. Participation in the study is completely voluntary. Students will not be penalized in any way for not participating. Students may choose to discontinue participation in research study at any time without penalty. Regardless of participation, all students will receive the same instruction and participate in the same activities in the classroom. Only data from those who choose to be a part will be included in my study.

**What if I have questions or concerns now or during the research study?** Please feel free to contact me with any questions, comments, or concerns.
You may also contact my advisor at Moravian College, [Blank], at [Blank] or by email at [Blank]. In addition, you may contact our principal, [Blank], at [Blank].

Thank you in advance for your cooperation. It is great to have your support as I strive to improve our classroom learning!

Sincerely,

Megan Vogel

[Blank]

Consent Form to Participate in Classroom Research Study

Please check and return:

☐ I give my permission for my child’s data to be used in this study. I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my own records. I have read this form and understand it.

☐ I do NOT give consent for my child’s data to be used in this study. I understand that this will not affect my child’s grade.

Student’s Name: ________________________________

Parent/Guardian Signature: _______________________

Date: ______________________
Appendix D: Student Survey

1. I am a good reader.

2. I am a fast reader.

3. I read the words correctly.

4. I have to sound out my words.

5. I read like talking.

6. When I read, I understand what the story is about.
Appendix E - Quick Phonics Screener (QPS)

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<td></td>
<td>tnt gat cog tnf hrv</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>whose hat is the gun.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mom had a big pot.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Don can run.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task 3</th>
<th>Common Beginning- and Ending-Consonant Digraphs</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>leah voyh jing gack mich</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>whurn chun thng shrif ship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>The duck had a wet wing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can Chat pack much in the bag?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The big ship is long.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When did fish get in that tub?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task 4</th>
<th>CVCC and CCVC</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>groep rimp mast just sund</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>clef trin smaf prem shun</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Glen will swim past the rape in the pond.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The frog can can and jump and flag in the sand.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task 5</th>
<th>Silences</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>sipe nolc fuse more vate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rine lade sile gane fote</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Mike and Dave use a rape to ride the mule.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peter had fix tapers at home.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F- Fluency Activity: Word Tac Toe

Word-Tac-Toe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>see a mat</th>
<th>we can like</th>
<th>a green bin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>look at it</th>
<th>you fit a</th>
<th>do we sit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>it was green</th>
<th>one red fan</th>
<th>look at my</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Format remained the same for all Word-Tac-Toe activities. Only the words changed to fit the current skills.
Appendix G - Literacy Activity: Sentence Stars

| Tim hops and Mom is packing this bag.   | ⭐⭐
|----------------------------------------|
| Jack sits packing mix to eat.           | ⭐⭐
| The cat sits licking mix too.           | ⭐⭐
| The cat is licking four pots!           | ⭐⭐
| The fox is rocking her kit that naps.   | ⭐⭐
| Five of us can eat the mix Mom is packing. | ⭐⭐

Note. Format remained the same for all sentence star activities. Only the words changed to fit the current skills.
Appendix H- Literacy Activity: Words, Phrases, Sentences

Format remained the same for all words/phrases/ sentences activities. Only the words changed to fit the current skills
Appendix I- Literacy Activity: Phrase Memory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>like the cat</th>
<th>like the cat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>my yellow bib</td>
<td>my yellow bib</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>look at the</td>
<td>look at the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do you like</td>
<td>do you like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it was big</td>
<td>it was big</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one fat pig</td>
<td>one fat pig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we see big</td>
<td>we see big</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Format remained the same for all phrase memory activities. Only the words changed to fit the current skills.
Appendix J - High Frequency Word Assessment: Unit R (Weeks 1-3)

Name: ________________________ Unit 1 (1-3)

High Frequency Word Reading:

on
my
way
come
in

take
up
she
what
blue

little
get
from
help
use

Please study reading the words that are circled
(they were missed) 😊
Appendix K- Literacy Activity: Punctuation Posters

The crab will get wet.
The crab will get wet!
The crab will get wet?

Meg has ten blocks and six bricks!
Meg has ten blocks and six bricks?
Meg has ten blocks and six bricks.

Get on the black sled?
Get on the black sled.
Get on the black sled!

Note. Format remained the same for all punctuation poster activities. Only the words changed to fit the current skills.
Appendix L: Comprehension Checkpoint: Story Elements
Appendix M: Comprehension Checkpoint: Main Idea

Name: 

What is the main idea of the story?
Appendix N: High Frequency Word Assessment: Unit R (Weeks 1-6)

High Frequency Word Reading:

on       my       way       come       in

take     up        she       what       blue

little   get      from      help      use

Please study reading the words that are circled
(they were missed) 😊