

An Evaluation of the Decodable Text in Scholastic Phonics Readers

FIRST-GRADE STUDENTS MAKE SIGNIFICANT
GAINS IN WORD IDENTIFICATION BY
COMBINING PRACTICE WITH THE DECODABLE
TEXT IN SCHOLASTIC PHONICS READERS WITH
SYSTEMATIC AND EXPLICIT PHONICS INSTRUCTION.



THE RESEARCH

Scholastic Phonics Readers include sets of decodable texts that provide purposeful, intentional phonics practice...

PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study, conducted by Wiley Blevins during the 1999–2000 school year, examined the effectiveness of decodable text in promoting word identification skills, phonics and spelling abilities, as well as positive reading attitudes in young children. Previous research on the influence of basal readers has indicated that the types of words that appear in beginning reading texts exert a powerful influence in shaping children’s word identification strategies (Juel, Roper-Schneider, 1985). In this study, it was hypothesized that students receiving reading practice with *Scholastic Phonics Readers’* decodable (controlled) text would achieve greater mastery in early reading skills than students who continued reading with standard classroom trade literature. Decodable text is defined as text in which the vocabulary is controlled based on scientific knowledge of sound-spelling relationships. Trade literature refers to books with a variety of genres and formats designed for children to build their vocabularies and read independently. It should be noted that trade books are not controlled for phonics elements.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Does practice with decodable text in conjunction with a systematic phonics program accelerate word identification skills for first grade students?
- Do first grade students who use decodable text demonstrate significantly greater gains in word identification skills than a comparison group of students who use trade literature?

SAMPLE

Two New York City Public Schools participated in this study from September of 1999 to February of 2000. There were two first grade classrooms selected at each school — one experimental classroom using *Scholastic Phonics Readers* and one control classroom using trade literature. A total of 101 children in first grade participated in this research.



The selected schools were in the lowest third of the district based on achievement scores. 90% of the students in this district qualify for free or reduced lunch. 62% of students were classified as below grade level and 80% of students in the district were identified as Latino.

Both schools used the same systematic and explicit phonics instruction covering identical phonics scope and sequence. The only difference between the experimental and control classrooms was the type of text used for reading practice: the decodable text found in *Scholastic Phonics Readers* or the standard trade literature series.

PROGRAM BACKGROUND

All of Scholastic's phonics resources follow a clear scope and sequence that provides a solid foundation for early reading success. *Scholastic Phonics Readers* include sets of decodable texts that provide purposeful, intentional phonics practice in the context of stories that are written to engage young children. Each of these little books is designed to help children to develop phonemic awareness skills, recognize high-frequency words, connect sounds to symbol, and read independently.

Scholastic Phonics Readers were written to directly address the requirements outlined in *Becoming A Nation of Readers*. In 1985, the government document *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, et al., 1985) provided a set of criteria for creating controlled/decodable text. These criteria mandated that controlled text be:

- Comprehensible — vocabulary must be understandable and natural sounding
- Instructive — the majority of the words must be decodable based on the sound-spellings previously taught
- Interesting — connected text must be engaging enough for students to want to read them again and again

Students in both groups read a major piece of literature for the week and received phonics lessons follow-up practice five days a week. First graders in the experimental group practiced reading with *Scholastic Phonics Readers* for their

THE RESEARCH *continued*

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phonics lessons follow-up. The controlled texts of the *Phonics Readers* were 100% controlled for phonics and sight words (i.e., “Sam sat. Sam sat in the sand. Sam sat and sat and sat”). The major reading text was 80% controlled for phonics and sight words, as well as being specially written and illustrated.

In comparison, the control group's phonics lessons follow-up included patterned and predictable text (i.e., “Sam sees a sandwich. Sam sees a snake. Sam sees a sailor. Sam sees a lot!”). For their major reading text the control group used popular first grade books written by well-known authors that were identified as 35% decodable.

Controlled text percentages were determined through Scholastic's decodability analysis based on a clear scope and sequence of phonics skills. In addition, a review of Marcy Stein's pivotal study “Analyzing Beginning Reading Programs: The Relationship Between Decoding Instruction and Text” (Stein, Johnson, and Gutlohn, 1999) confirmed controlled text percentages for both the experimental and control groups of students.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The primary investigator conducted an initial training session with experimental group teachers on how to incorporate *Scholastic Phonics Readers* into their comprehensive reading program. Each participating classroom was visited and observed four days per week — two days with the primary investigator and two days with the research assistant. This method ensured that all teachers stayed on pace, taught the phonics lessons as intended, and read the required books. Detailed anecdotal notes of these sessions were kept. In addition, each classroom was formally observed for two weeks to develop classroom profiles.

IMPLEMENTATION

Two types of classroom observation were conducted throughout this study: formal and informal.

- Formal Observations — either the primary investigator or the research assistant observed each classroom for two weeks.



Observers made notations in the Teacher's Edition (TE) of specifically what lessons/activities the teachers did during their Language Arts block. During the phonics lessons, observers evaluated how closely teachers stayed verbatim with the prescribed lessons.

- Informal Observations — the research assistant kept a detailed log of what she observed in the classrooms, including consistency in use of lessons and behavioral changes in teachers.

ASSESSMENT MEASURES

This study included four assessment measures:

- **The Woodcock Reading Mastery Test (WRMT) – Word Identification sub-test** — Requires children to look at printed words and read them out loud.
- **The Blevins Phonics-Phonemic Awareness Quick Assessment** — A simple, 5-word spelling test administered at the start of school. Words include *sat*, *big*, *rope*, *chain*, and *flower*. Students fall into three instructional categories — below level, on level, and above level. This test quickly identifies students in need of intervention and provides information about students' phonemic awareness and phonics proficiency.
- **Decoding Assessment** — A phonics mastery assessment developed specifically for the study. It consisted of 20 words, all decodable based on the phonics scope and sequence. Ten of the words presented on the assessment appeared multiple times (four or more) in the reading selections read by both groups of students. The other ten words never appeared in the stories read by both groups, or they appeared only once. Ability to decode 75% of the words or more was necessary to receive a "passing" score.

THE RESEARCH *continued*

- **Reading Attitudes Survey** — An informal interview-style assessment which evaluates how children feel about learning to read, as well as how they perceive themselves as readers.

This study included a pre-and post-test design for the WRMT – Word Identification sub-test, the Blevins Phonics-Phonemic Awareness Quick Assessment, and the Reading Attitudes Survey. Pre-testing was conducted in September, 1999, and post-testing was conducted in February, 2000. The Decoding Assessment was only administered at the end of the study, in February of 2000.

DATA ANALYSIS

Woodcock Scores (WS) were used as the scale scores for statistical analysis in this study. A 2x2 ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) or “repeated measures” design was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in pre-test to post-test WS gains on the WRMT – Word Identification sub-test for students in the control and experimental groups. In keeping with the What Works Clearing House (WWC) standards, this research reported results with accurately derived Effect Sizes (ES) to determine educationally significant outcomes. The Effect Size conveyed the magnitude of the difference between the scores of students in the *Scholastic Phonics Readers* group and students in the Trade Literature group.

In addition to the analysis above, a comparison of phonics mastery was evaluated by using the percentage that students achieved on the Decoding Assessment. Percentages were determined by the number of words read correctly out of 20 total words. 75% was considered the minimal percentage for phonics mastery.

Analysis of variance reveals that students in the controlled text group achieved significantly higher WRMT Word Identification W-scores than students in the trade literature group.



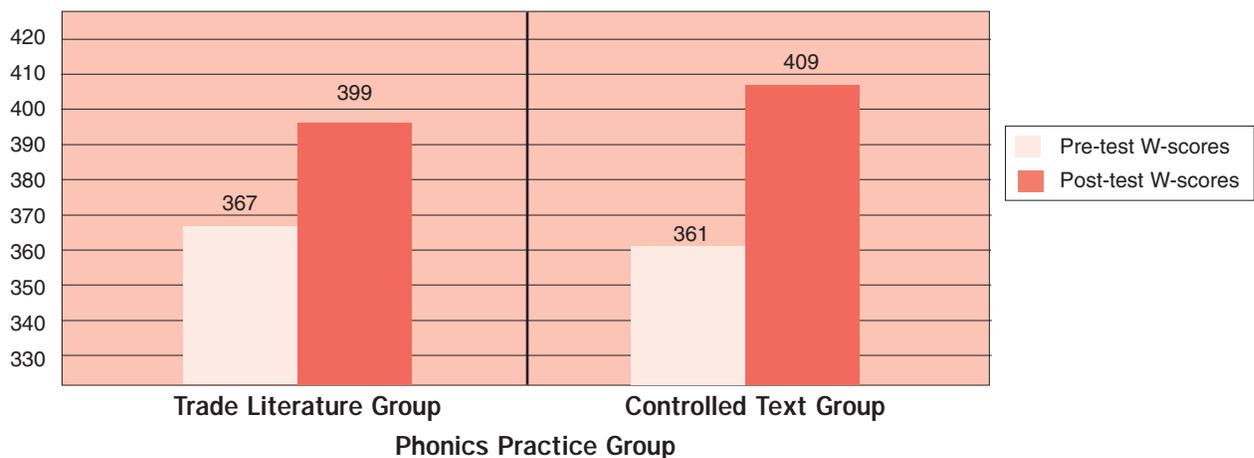
THE RESULTS

WRMT-WORD IDENTIFICATION SUB-TEST RESULTS

Results revealed that students in the experimental group significantly outperformed students in the control group on the WRMT- Word Identification sub-test. Analysis determined that W-score differences were statistically significant at $F(1,69)=12.954, p<.001$. The Effect Size was determined to be $ES=.16$. (See Graph 1 for W-score Improvements.)

Furthermore, results revealed that a significantly greater number of students using *Scholastic Phonics Readers* for their reading practice achieved on-level WRMT mastery: 72% *Scholastic Phonics Readers* students vs. 54% Trade Literature students. The controlled text group made a significant leap from 28% on-level mastery at the beginning of the year to 72% in February. In contrast, the Trade Literature group only increased WRMT on-level mastery from 40% in September to 54% in February. Some students in the controlled text group achieved as much as two years growth in one half year. The average student growth for this group was one year of growth during one half year of school.

GRAPH 1: Changes in Pre-test W-scores on the WRMT-Word Identification Test



Analysis of Variance reveals that students in the controlled text group achieved significantly higher WRMT W-scores than students in the trade literature group.

THE RESULTS *continued*

Findings revealed that a significantly greater number of Scholastic Phonics Readers vs. trade literature students achieved mastery on the Phonics-Phonemic Awareness Quick Assessment.

PHONICS-PHONEMIC AWARENESS QUICK ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Findings revealed that a significantly greater number of *Scholastic Phonics Readers* students vs. Trade Literature students achieved mastery on the Phonics-Phonemic Awareness Quick Assessment: 92% *Scholastic Phonics Readers* students vs. 66% Trade Literature students. 92% of controlled text students were able to spell all five words (*sat, big, rope, chain, flower*) correctly.

DECODING (PHONICS MASTERY) ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Results revealed that 87% of the students using the *Scholastic Phonics Readers* achieved mastery (75% or higher score) on the Decoding Assessment as compared with only 54% of the students in the Trade Literature group.

READING ATTITUDES ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Findings revealed that significantly fewer students reading *Scholastic Phonics Readers* vs. Trade Literature reported a dislike of reading or identified themselves as poor readers. Only 3% of *Scholastic Phonics Readers* students reported that they don't enjoy reading vs. 11% of Trade Literature students. The percentage of students in the controlled text group who reported a dislike of reading decreased during the study from 14% in September to only 3% in February. In comparison, the percentage of students in the trade literature group who reported a dislike of reading actually increased during the study from 6% in September to 11% in February.

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION RESULTS

Classroom observations revealed that working with controlled/decodable text carried over to other important areas of teaching, such as read aloud modeling and writing activities. In general, teachers were observed over time to pay more attention to words and specifically how words work.

As further evidence of the power of controlled text, classroom observations also revealed that children in the controlled text group were more confident



in tackling difficult books for their read at-home reading choices. It was observed that children in the experimental group would examine the words in books before selecting a story to take home. Conversely, children in the control group were observed to have difficulty choosing books with appropriate text for their reading level. The observers concluded that children in the controlled text group gained a greater confidence in their ability to decode the words in more challenging books.

DISCUSSION

Students in the controlled text group were more prepared to transfer their phonics skills to new words presented to them in formal assessments. In addition, these results reinforce what previous research by motivation experts, such as Linda Gambrell, has revealed: reading success breeds reading self-confidence and enjoyment of reading.

It is important to note that although students in the controlled text group could decode more words, their automaticity was relatively weak. As current reading research indicates, more attention needs to be paid to building fluency with early reading patterns (Maryanne Wolf, 2002). Additional research on the effectiveness of fluency instruction by both Scholastic and early reading experts should provide illumination.

This study reinforces that the type of text in beginning readers does matter. It is important to note that students in this research only practiced with *Scholastic Phonics Readers* for six months during the critical first grade year. These students achieved significant gains with only six months of controlled text reading practice. Thus, a minimal amount of time with controlled text is necessary to make a difference in reading achievement and prepare children for reading success.

THE RESULTS *continued*

SUMMARY

Results of this study reveal that *Scholastic Phonics Readers* do make a significant difference in beginning reading skills. The positive impact of this teaching method is measurable through standardized assessments, such as the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test, as well as more informal phonics, spelling, and reading attitude instruments. Phonics instruction in addition to reading practice with decodable text also made a positive impact on spelling ability, which was demonstrated in students' independent writing. It is evident that using controlled text as an alternative to traditional trade literature for phonics lesson follow-up is preferable for getting young children off to the best start in learning to read. Furthermore, the results indicate that children gain reading self-confidence using *Scholastic Phonics Readers*, which then leads to reading enjoyment. *Scholastic Phonics Readers* contain stories that both teachers and children will enjoy spending time with — stories that are worth reading, discussing, and writing about. Thus, decodable texts can be engaging and motivating to students. Most importantly, the evidence is that they make a significant difference in teaching young children to read.

It is evident that using controlled text as an alternative to traditional Trade Literature for phonics lesson follow-up is preferable for getting young children off to the best start in learning to read.

Lined writing area for student responses.



For more information call
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