Differentiated Phonics Lessons Effect on Fluency and School Culture

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DIFFERENTIATED PHONICS LESSONS EFFECT ON FLUENCY AND SCHOOL CULTURE

A Dissertation
Presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Educational Leadership
The University of Mississippi

By
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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study investigates the effect of differentiated phonics lessons on reading fluency and examines the effect of these lessons on student and teacher perceptions of school culture. The study examines quantitative data on the effectiveness of the skill lessons. The qualitative findings examine the impact of the lessons on the dynamics of school culture as perceived by students and teachers given the opportunity to interact with wider and varying school groups. The understandings gained from the combination of the quantitative and qualitative data interpret the effect of the structure of differentiated across grade-level lessons on school culture.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Robin Boyd, my soul mate.
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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

School leaders, teachers and principals are continually seeking ways to make learning more accessible to all students and to address the achievement gap that persists despite continued and concentrated efforts. This gap, which is a measure of the marginalization of low socioeconomic status and racially diverse groups, begins early in formal education and is most noted in reading achievement (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 1998). The cost of reading failure has been determined to be enormous to individuals both socially and economically. Research has identified a high correlation between early reading failure and later school failure, poverty, incarceration, and crime (Cooter & Reutzel, 2004). Fielding et al. (1998) described the most expensive burden on society as the students we have failed to teach to read well. These poor readers often become adults that are unemployable. They are the largest identifiable group of the incarcerated. Society must provide many poor readers with social service assistance such as housing and medical care. The National Adult Literacy Panel (2008) described adults with low literacy proficiencies as “unable to take advantage of the benefits of society” (p. xiii). Access to health care, political participation, involvement in church and leisure activities all become limited. These adults are unable to support their children’s learning; therefore, the problems attributed to poor reading ability are perpetuated across generations. The challenge for educators is how to create and sustain a school culture that supports children’s literacy development regardless of the parents’ literacy skills. School leaders must guide teachers to plan and deliver
reading instruction that meets the needs of all students with the ultimate goal of closing the achievement gap.

The National Reading Panel [NRP] (2000), in a synthesis of evidenced-based reading research, identified five components necessary for successful reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. The National Institute for Literacy (2001) described these components in Put Reading First. “Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify and manipulate individual sounds in spoken words” (p.10). “Phonics is the alphabetic system of letter sound correspondences, spelling patterns, and the application to reading” (NRP, 2000, p. 2-89). Phonics is the skill that allows a reader to decode the letter sound system. “Fluency is the ability to read text quickly, accurately, and with expression” (NRP, 2000, p.3-5). According to Padak and Rasinski (2008), “Proficient and fluent reading requires effortless, automatic decoding” (p. 202). “Reading vocabulary is the comprehension of words used to express ideas in print. Text comprehension is a cognitive process that integrates all the previous skills” (NRP, 2000, p. 4-1). When teachers consider these five areas, they are better able to organize instruction based on the developmental needs of students.

Researchers (Ehri, 1979, Murray & Stahl, 1994 and Torgesen 1987) found relationships between phonemic awareness and success in early reading skills. When beginning readers understand the sounds of language, they are ready to begin phonics instructions. The International Reading Association [IRA] (2002) reports that learning phonemic awareness requires between 5 and 18 hours of instruction. The IRA recommends about two years of ongoing phonics instruction in the early grades before children are reading independently.

Considering the importance and amount of instructional time required for phonics lessons, teachers and school leaders must consider evidence-based practices for phonics lessons.
Research findings regarding phonics instruction indicate that systematic phonics lessons are most beneficial to beginning readers (Armbuster, Lehr & Osborn, 2001; Ehri, 2003; Glasser & Moats, 2008). Barth, Cirino, Francis, Fletcher, and Stuebing (2008) determined that phonics instruction should be directly taught and not presented in a manner that requires students to make inferences about letter to sound relationships. Additionally, there is data to support the relationship between phonics instruction and reading fluency (Chard, Harn, & Stoolmiller 2008). Elderidge (2005) found that growth in phonics knowledge would influence growth in word recognition, which would influence growth in fluency. Therefore, one could surmise that students who are skilled in phonics become fluent readers. The purpose of phonics and fluency instruction is to enable children to “recognize words, quickly and automatically, so that they can turn their attention to comprehension of the text” (Stahl, 1992, p. 624).

Because phonics has been identified as a key component to reading instruction and the alphabetic system is an early skill requirement, the delivery of phonics instruction is an important consideration for educational leaders and primary grade teachers. Children enter school with diverse abilities in phonics and respond to instruction with varying levels of skills acquisition. Some children need to begin with letter identification and others are ready to blend and segment individual sounds, while others are ready to learn about consonant clusters and vowel blends. To meet the diverse instructional needs, a possible strategy for organization of students for phonics instruction is to group children by instructional needs based on assessment data. Ability grouping, also known as differentiated instruction, is a frequently investigated educational topic. Tomlinson (2004) calls on differentiated instruction as a means to accelerate learning for all ability level students. Tobin (2008) advocates for both interest grouping and
needs based grouping. Reutzel and Smith (2004) describe “dynamic and flexible grouping practices” as a way to organize for instructional goals (p.70).

Considering the goal of systematic and direct phonics instruction and the variety of skill levels of beginning students, a possible solution is to provide time for phonics lessons organized across grades or entire primary schools. This was the rationale for the design of phonics skills-group lessons called Skill Builders. Skill Builders was designed by school administrators and teachers in a pre-kindergarten through second-grade elementary school in a rural north Mississippi school district and implemented in the fall semester of 2009. These lessons provided specific and sequenced phonics skills instructions, are grouped by student ability needs, and are flexible requiring re-grouping frequently. While the organization and implementation of Skill Builders has been successful, two important questions need to be answered. First, what is the impact Skill Builders lessons on student learning as measured by letter-sound fluency and beginning reading fluency? Second, what is the perception of teachers and students regarding the impact of Skill Builders lessons on school culture?

**Statement of the Purpose**

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to investigate the effect of differentiated phonics lessons on reading fluency and to examine the effect of these lessons on student and teacher perceptions of school culture for primary grade students in a southeastern school district. The intent of the study was to obtain descriptive quantitative data on the effectiveness of the Skill Builder lessons of fluency measures and to discover the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the impact of Skill Builders lessons on school culture. The understandings gained from the combination of the quantitative and qualitative data helps determine the value of the across grade-level phonics skills lessons.
Similar to many reading programs and research inquiries, the impetus of Skill Builders was an examination of children’s reading achievement scores and the search for the underlying deficit in reading skills. The quasi-experimental design compares the control group to the experimental group that received a strategic teaching strategy to reach the children at their current instructional levels. Using AimsWeb measures combined with teacher observations, a deficit in reading fluency was detected and a possible underlying problem in decoding was identified. Children’s reading fluency was adversely affected by slow decoding. This sluggish decoding was traced back to a problem with phonics skills. The experimental instructional strategy was to improve phonics skills and teach children to apply these skills to fluently decode connected text. The phonics skills were divided into sequenced and discrete skills. A list of the skills was created beginning with letter identification and consonant sounds advancing through vowel combinations. Assessments and observations were used to determine where in this continuum of skills to begin each child. With the sequenced list of skills and recommendations for students, class groups were formed and teachers were assigned a specific skill to teach. These lessons were dubbed Skill Builders. Children were assigned to a group to learn and practice a specific phonics skill for six 30-minute lessons. As the skill was mastered, the children moved on to the next skill. Through this learning process, children moved from teacher to teacher, mastering skills, and getting to know more classmates and more teachers. The grouping was fluid and based only on phonics skills. During the remainder of the school day, children remained with their homeroom teacher and heterogeneously grouped classmates.

The design of the Skill Builder lessons was intended to appeal to the learning styles of a wide variety of children. The lessons were creative, hands-on, active, and limit pencil and paper activities and traditional testing. Skill Builder lessons provided children and teachers the
opportunity to interact with wider and varying school groups. Because of the interaction across classrooms and grade levels, a change in the school culture was perceived that required further examination.

**Hypothesis and Research Questions**

The quantitative phase of the study examined three null hypotheses.

Hypothesis One: For kindergarten children, there is no significant difference in mean scores of letter-sound fluency by types of phonics lessons.

Hypothesis Two: For first grade children, there is no significant difference in mean scores of reading fluency by types of phonics lessons.

Hypothesis Three: For second grade children, there is no significant difference in mean scores of reading fluency by types of phonics lessons.

In each hypothesis the dependent variable is fluency scores and the independent variable is the delivery method of phonics instruction. A t-test was used to calculate significance levels.

The qualitative phase of the study examined the perceptions of across-grade level differentiated phonics lessons on school culture. Wagner (2006) described one component of school culture as the “common agreement on curricular and instructional components” (p. 41). School culture is influenced by instructional programs like Skill Builder lessons, and it is important for educational leaders to consider how the introduction and change of focus on curriculum impacts school culture. The investigation of the impact of Skill Builder lessons on school culture was structured around three general areas: phonics and fluency, student relations, and school atmosphere. Teachers and students were interviewed, the discussion recorded, transcribed, coded and examined for recurring themes. Some of the teacher interview questions were: What was the impact of Skill Builder lessons on your teaching and your students’ skills
with phonics? What did you like least and most about Skill Builder lesson time? What was the impact of Skill Builder lessons on your instructional choices and strategies? Did Skill Builder lessons change the school culture, particularly student/teacher interactions? Did the experience of Skill Builder lessons impact your caring relationships with children?

The intent of the mixed method study was to obtain descriptive quantitative data on the effectiveness of the skill lessons. Findings from the quantitative data were expanded using qualitative research. Interviews with individual students and teachers provided an understanding of the changing dynamics of school culture.

**Significance**

This study adds to the research on phonics instruction as it examines instruction delivered through ability groupings. While there is a large body of research on phonics (Ehri, 2003; Eldredge, 2005; Chard, Harn & Stoolmiller, 2008; Butterfield, Eldredge & Quinn 2001), fluency (Padak & Rasinski, 2008; Algozzine, Portfeli & Wang, 2008; Compton, Fuchs & Fuchs, 2004), and ability grouping (Allan & Tomlinson, 2000; Slavin 1987, Mahdavi & Menzies, 2008) there is little research on across-grade ability grouping when applied to specific reading skills instruction. Additionally, the impact of phonics instruction is measured through the growth of letter-sound correspondence knowledge and reading fluency which adds to the body of knowledge that relates phonics to reading fluency. The qualitative phase of the study adds to the research on the impact of across-grade ability grouping on school culture. The findings of the study serve to inform practice for elementary school reading instruction, a primary concern to elementary school leaders. The results of the study assists school leaders in the selection and implementation of lessons that meet the instructional needs of their students. The study also
informs school leaders about the possible effect of across-grade ability grouping on school culture.

**Limitations of the Study**

The study is limited to the students in one elementary school in rural north Mississippi. The Skill Builder lessons were designed by the author, other administrators, and teachers in the school and are based on the *Mississippi Curriculum Language Arts Frameworks*. Therefore, it would be appropriate that the findings be generalized to other primary grade schools in Mississippi.

**Delimitations**

A trial period for the ability-grouped phonics lessons was conducted in November and December of the 2009 school-year. Observations of instruction led to modifications in lesson format and ability group organization to improve content and delivery. In addition, the weekly schedule was adjusted to give children and teachers more time for the application of phonics knowledge to reading instruction when children returned to their homeroom teacher. Skill Builders lessons continued in the spring semester of 2010 which provided opportunities for additional refinements, data collection and verification of findings. The student fluency rates were measured using AimsWeb, a screening tool reviewed by the National Center on Response to Intervention and determined to be valid and reliable.

**Definitions of Terms**

The following operational terms and definitions were used in this study to describe the reading instructional techniques, describe the participants, and identify the concepts investigated.

*Skill Builders* is a series of lessons designed and perfected by a teacher for specific phonics skills. Phonic skills are sequential building from letter recognition, through sound
identification and progressing to inflectional endings. The lessons are based on the *Mississippi Frameworks, Language Arts, Competency Section 1c.* Lessons are tied to encoding and decoding words and vocabulary development. Skill builder lessons are creative and require active student involvement. Teachers are not allowed to use pencil and paper, worksheet-type drill and practice activities and no formal assessment is permitted during the lessons. Teacher observational assessment determines a student’s readiness to move to the next group. Skill builder lessons are organized by ability level and groups are reorganized every six lessons. Lessons occur three days a week and are forty minutes in length.

*Ability grouping* is the grouping of students which permits teachers to adapt their level and pace of instruction to accommodate student levels of readiness and learning rates (Slavin, 1987).

*Joplin Plan* is a method of ability grouping in which students are grouped specifically by skill level and are constantly reevaluated. Students remain in the heterogeneous classroom groups except for a specific skill instruction (Slavin, 1987).

*Differentiated instruction* is “attending to the learning needs of a particular student or a small group of students rather than the more typical pattern of teaching the class as if all individuals were basically the same” (Allan & Tomlinson, 2000, p. 4).

*Alphabetic principle* is the knowledge that a specific letter or letter combination represents each of the speech sounds (Byrne & Fielding, 1990).

*Phonics* is the alphabetic system of letter-sound correspondences, spelling patterns, and the application to reading. Phonics is the skill that allows a reader to decode the letter-sound system (National Reading Panel, 2008, p. 2-89).
Fluency is the ability to read text quickly, accurately, and with expression (NRP, 2000). “Proficient and fluent reading requires effortless, automatic decoding” (Padak & Rasinski, 2008, p. 202).

AimsWeb is a screening tool used to measure letter-sound and reading fluency (Romsdahl, 2008).

Mississippi Frameworks, Language Arts, Section 1.c is the competency which describes the phonics skills required for Mississippi students. The broad category of the competency is stated as “the student will use word recognition and vocabulary skills to communicate” (Mississippi Department of Education, 2006).

School Culture as defined by Barth (2002) is the way a school does things. School culture comprises the attitudes, beliefs and traditions in a school community and has an impact on curricular and instructional decisions. Wagner (2006) defines school culture as the “shared experiences both in school and out of school that create a sense of community, family, and team membership. People in a healthy organization must have agreement on how to do things and what is worth doing” (p.41). An important aspect of school culture for this study is the teacher and student lived community experience of the changes in school environment.

These terms are used throughout the study and an understanding of the definitions, as they pertain to this research, and an overview of the organization of the study will aid the reader.

Organization of the Study

The study is organized into five chapters. Each chapter has sections which address the quantitative and qualitative phases of investigation and data. Chapter I introduces the study, Chapter II reviews related literature, Chapter III details the methodology, Chapter IV discusses
the results of the data, and Chapter V is a discussion of the findings. This final chapter relates the numerical data and the qualitative findings.

**Summary**

This introductory chapter identified and located the study in relation to reading instruction and ability grouping practices and research. The introduction also began a description of the Skill Builders program on which the study will be centered. The next chapter continues with the literature review for the study.
Chapter II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature related to this mixed-methods study which investigated the effect of differentiated phonics lessons on reading fluency and examined the effect of these lessons on school culture for primary grade students and teachers in a southeastern school district. The process for the literature search began by separating the terms of the independent and dependent variables in the quantitative phase of the study. The key search terms are: differentiation, phonics, and fluency. The literature is organized into these categories. Research which had a relevant qualitative component is categorized under the heading school culture. Each category begins with a definition to clarify the topic of literature included. The search began with articles by researchers such as Slavin, Reutzel, Tomlinson and Wagner that are familiar to school leaders for the topics. The writings were examined for the applicability to the topic and the literature search was extended based on the research these authors cited. The frequent citing of researchers prompted further review of these authors’ work. An attempt was made to find current research; however, if research was pertinent it was not excluded by the date of publication.

Differentiation and Ability or Skill Grouping

For the purpose of this study, the definition of differentiated instruction by Allan and Tomlinson (2000) is most useful. These authors describe differentiation as “attending to the
learning needs of a particular student or a small group of students rather than the more typical pattern of teaching the class as all individuals were basically the same” (Allan & Tomlinson, 2000, p. 4). Slavin (1987) similarly defined ability grouping as the grouping of students which permits teachers to tailor their content and pace of instruction to accommodate student levels of readiness and rates of learning.

The literature on differentiation has a recurring theme that advises school leaders to ensure that grouping practices remain flexible in group members, group size, and objective. Cooter and Ruetzel (2004) provide advice to school leaders in grouping students for effective literacy instruction. These authors advocate flexible grouping in their discussion on organizing for reading instruction. Groups should be dynamic, changing regularly. There should be high expectations for performance with assessment utilizing observation and informal check lists. The following literature illustrates the cautions for grouping to be flexible, dynamic, and skill based.

Robert Slavin (1987) reviewed the many different types of grouping plans in practice in the elementary school. Slavin reviewed previous research and synthesized data to discuss the achievement effects of various grouping methods. He examined two main types of grouping, between class and within class grouping. He reports that evidence from studies, in general, supports that ability grouping plans are beneficial for student achievement when they incorporate the following features:

- Students remain in heterogeneous classes most of the day and are regrouped by performance level only in subjects such as reading and math in which reducing heterogeneity is particularly important.
- The grouping plan reduces heterogeneity in the specific skill being taught.
• Group assignments are flexible and are frequently reassessed.
• Teachers adapt their level and pace of instruction in regrouped classes to accommodate student levels of readiness and learning rates. (p. 116)

Slavin (1987) described the Joplin Plan, which is similar to the grouping in this research. In the Joplin grouping plan, students stay in heterogeneous classes except for reading instruction and are grouped carefully based on reading skills and are continually reevaluated and regrouped by instructional needs. Slavin found this type of grouping to be instructionally effective.

Tomlinson (2004) also found grouping strategies to differentiate instruction based on student needs to be an effective instructional practice. She furthered the discussion by examining teachers’ understanding of student variance and teacher responsiveness in instructional planning. Tomlinson examined three categories of students through a review of previous literature and the constructs that define these categories. The categories of students discussed are giftedness, remedial learners, and race. There is an in-depth discussion of the need for differentiated instruction to meet students’ needs in these categories. Race is discussed as a determinate in instructional patterns. Tomlinson calls on educators to accelerate learning for more students including the remedial and advanced children. She articulates the requirement to pair excellent and responsive differentiated instruction with the engaging, organized, quality curriculum to ensure maximum growth for all students.

Mahdavi and Menzies (2008) also examined differentiation as a means of ensuring student success in learning to read. Their study examined the efforts of an elementary school to draw on validated research practices to design and implement an early intervention reading program that would minimize the occurrence of reading difficulties in the first grade population. The school’s language arts program was changed to include small ability-grouped instruction
with a focus on phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, and guided reading. Instruction and grouping was planned based on the interpretation of student achievement data. Mahdavi and Menzies determined that small ability group instruction significantly improved reading growth in the first grade children.

In a similar study of kindergarten children, Levitt, McCoach and O’Connell (2006) assessed the effects of within-class ability grouping on reading growth. The researchers hypothesized a positive relationship between the frequency with which teachers reported using ability groups and children’s reading gains. They used data previously collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). A longitudinal study was designed and a nationally representative sample of children in the United States entering kindergarten was selected. The researchers restricted the sample by selecting first-time kindergarten children that remained in the same school and selected schools with five or more students in the study sample. The NCES used an assessment to measure kindergarten student early literacy skills including word identification, sound identification, word reading and vocabulary and reading comprehension. The researchers computed average school change by comparing fall and spring scaled scores. The research (Levitt et al., 2006) indicated that reading gains were higher in schools in which teachers reported greater frequency of use of ability groups. The features of successful ability grouping included the extent of curricular differentiation, regrouping flexibility and assignment of student groups on the basis of need.

These features were also discussed in an analysis by Reutzel and Smith (2004). They reviewed the findings of an expert study by Rona Flippo (2001) and compared these findings with three major reading research reports. The findings are summarized into two categories; the areas that facilitate learning to read are contrasted with the areas that make
learning to read more difficult. Recommendations are made for instructional practices that will accelerate learning. The three research reports selected for comparative analysis to the expert findings are: Preventing Reading Difficulties in Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), Every Child a Reader (Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris, 1998) and The Report of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

The best practices for providing effective reading instruction are based on scientific research studies, determined to be of sufficient quality of design and quantity to offer clear, reliable, and replicable results. The area of this review that is of most interest to the current research is the data on ability grouping. Reutzel and Smith (2004) point out that “dynamic and flexible grouping practices are currently viewed as a way to target instruction for students who share similar needs and challenges and it is believed to mitigate negative effect influences on students’ progress, self-image, and achievement” (p. 70).

A review of research on grouping clarifies the advantage of differentiated instruction. Based on the above research (Slavin, 1987, Tomlinson, 2004, Mahdavi & Menzies, 2008, Levitt, McCoach & O’Connell, 2006 Flippo, 2001), school leaders that use differentiated instruction as an organizational structure need to be aware of the importance of basing group membership on skill needs, frequent informal assessment and continually regrouping as skills are mastered. Because phonics, which is necessary to become a fluent reader, is a sequence of discrete skills which are easily observationally assessed, this component of reading instruction lends to grouping children for Skill Builder lessons.

**Phonics**

Phonics is the alphabetic system of letter sound correspondences, spelling patterns, and the application of phonics decoding to reading (National Reading Panel, 2008, p.2-89). Phonics
is the skill that allows a reader to decode the letter sound system. A review of the literature regarding phonics instruction indicates that explicit and systematic phonics instruction has a direct impact on children’s reading progress. Glasser and Moats (2008) describe explicit systematic phonics instruction as direct instruction of phoneme-grapheme correspondences taught in predetermined sequence of skills with a systematic lesson format. The format includes three steps, first explicitly teaching the skill, next practice of the skill with support, and lastly, application of the skill independently. Throughout the research on phonics instruction there is a consistent pattern of results that describe the benefits of systematic and explicit phonics instruction (Barth, Cirino, Francis, Fletcher and Stuebing, 2008, Boseman, deGraaff, Hasselman and Verhoeven, 2009, Bowey, 2006, Butterfield, Eldredge, & Quinn, 2001, Camilli, Wolfe & Smith, 2006, Chard, Harn & Stoolmiller, 2008, Ehri, 2003, Eldredge, 2005, Hatcher, Hulme, & Snowling, 2004, Rose, 2006, Strickland, 2011).

Phonics instruction was one of the topic areas addressed by the National Reading Panel’s (NRP) meta-analysis. The NRP called for more research on how best to motivate children to learn letter-sound associations. This study adds to the body of knowledge about teaching phonics.

The NRP found that systematic sequential phonics instruction introduced in kindergarten and first grade had a significant effect on students when skills were applied to reading and writing. Ehri (2003) reviewed the evidence of the NRP for systematic phonics instruction. The purpose of the review was to determine whether there is experimental evidence showing that systematic phonics instruction helps children learn to read more effectively than unsystematic phonics instruction or instruction teaching little or no phonics. In this meta-analysis, a search of the literature identified experiments on the effectiveness of systematic phonics instruction. The
analysis was limited to experiments with control groups to base findings on strong scientific evidence and 38 studies met this qualification. To determine whether systematic phonics instruction produced higher scores in reading than non-phonics instruction, the researchers calculated effect size. Most of the groups receiving phonics instruction had a positive effect size. The overall mean effect size was +0.41 which indicated that systematic phonics instruction helps children learn to read more effectively than programs with little or no phonics instruction. Additionally, the results indicated that systematic phonics instruction is more beneficial to beginning readers, kindergarten and first grade children.

Barth, Cirino, Francis, Fletcher and Stuebing (2008) also discussed the effects of systematic phonics instruction as presented by the NRP. The NRP found that systematic phonics instruction is significantly important to reading instruction. This finding has been highly scrutinized and was re-evaluated by researchers, and then these findings were also re-evaluated. The discussion about the usefulness and importance of phonics instruction continues. Barth et al. (2008) reexamined two studies. The researchers used multilevel regression to re-examine the first study, *Meta Analysis and Reading Policy* by Camilli, Wolfe and Smith (2006). A re-investigation of effect sizes was used to examine the second study by Hammill and Swanson, *The National Reading Panel’s Meta-Analysis of Phonics Instruction: Another Point of View* (2006). In both re-examinations, the researchers supported the NRP’s conclusion that systematic phonics instruction results in significant reading improvement for many students. The research supported the NRP contention that reading programs need to be comprehensive and that phonics instruction needs to be systematic and explicit. Alphabetic principle knowledge should be directly shared and not presented in a method that requires students to draw inferences to phonics.
Rose (2006) concurred that “synthetic phonics offers the vast majority of young children the best and most direct route to becoming skilled readers and writers” (p.28). He defined synthetic phonics as systematic and sequential lessons. Rose (2006) also recommended that phonics instruction be engaging and motivating to children and that these goals can be accomplished through careful planning. Teacher training is sighted as an important component to the imaginative and skillful delivery of phonics lessons.

Bowery (2006) also discussed the benefits of systematic teaching of phonics as a key component of early literacy instruction. She advised from the results of her meta-analyses that “instruction should focus on teaching letter-sound patterns” (p.80). She further advised that these lessons be imaginatively planned to be engaging to children. She stated (2006), “When these lessons are well-designed, children thoroughly enjoy such activities, and are highly empowered by the fact that they can read and even spell new words for themselves.” (p. 80).

Additionally Bowery determined that phonics lessons worked best for students with little previous exposure to literacy and reading activities. Furthermore, she concluded that all children need to be exposed to letter-sound associations before they can benefit from any other type of reading instruction. With the letter-sound knowledge and the application to decoding skills, children then can be taught to teach themselves new words while engaged in reading new text.

Bosman, deGraff, Hasselman, and Verhoeven further investigated the inclusion of phonics in early reading instruction through a comparison of systematic and nonsystematic instructional approaches. The two approaches were implemented in two computer based programs that introduced the same grapheme-phoneme correspondences. The training consisted of 15 sessions of 15 minutes. The children in systematic program group progressed more compared to the nonsystematic group in phonemic awareness, spelling, and reading. Bosman
et.al (2009) concluded “a systematic-phonics approach generally leads to better results than a nonsystematic approach” (p. 329).

Throughout the literature on reading, there is strong support that phonics is important to all beginning readers, but especially to children at risk of reading failure. Hatcher, Hulme, and Snowling (2004) conducted research with at risk children comparing three different structured methods of tying phonological awareness to reading. The three programs included (1) reading instruction with systematic phonics instruction, (2) reading instruction with a rhyme linkage program and (3) reading instruction with a phoneme program that focused on the identification of words and the manipulation of syllables. Hatcher, Hulme, and Snowling (2004) concluded that a reading program that contains highly structured phonics component is effective for young children to learning to read.

A review of the literature on phonics also ties phonics instruction to other components of reading instruction. Eldredge (2005) investigated whether or not students’ growth in fluent reading is influenced by phonics knowledge. He hypothesized that growth in phonics knowledge would influence growth in word recognition, which would influence growth in fluency. A causal relationship between phonics knowledge and word recognition, and a causal relationship between word recognition and fluency (speed and accuracy) were explored in this study based on a sample of 92 first grade, 92 second grade, and 49 third grade students chosen at random from schools representing all socioeconomic groups located in the southwest United States. Phonics knowledge was measured using three pseudo-word tests created according to the graphophonic structure of real words. Word recognition was tested using running records and four frequency word lists. The number of words read correctly on the running record was tabulated. The word list consisted of 30 words on each list, each of the lists were progressively difficult. Two
instruments were used to test fluency, timed running records and timed word recognition. All test were administered twice, once in February and nine months later in November. The findings in the study suggested that phonics knowledge does cause word recognition growth. The findings also indicated that word-recognition growth has a causal impact on reading fluency. Additionally, the findings suggest that phonics knowledge has a causal relationship with reading fluency that is brought about through word recognition. Because phonics and word recognition precede reading fluency and comprehension, phonics instruction should be important to the classroom teacher. Eldredge’s study is similar to the current research of Skill Builder differentiated phonics lessons in that the outcome is measured by the impact on fluency.

Another study of phonics relationship to fluency was conducted by Chard, Harn and Stoolmiller (2008). The researchers hypothesized an interaction between initial nonsense word fluency (NWF) and NWF slope across first grade in predicting oral reading fluency (ORF) at the end of first grade. Additionally, it was hypothesized that students with more developed unitization skills, the ability to look at word units when decoding words, will read more fluently at the end of the first grade. Results from the study provided an understanding of the relationship between the gains of NWF and the relation to ORF. The students with more developed unitization skills became efficient at ORF. Cluster analysis demonstrated that students who approached NWF without unitization skills scored significantly lower than students using unitization on the spring ORF. The sound-by-sound readers that then unitized the nonsense words also scored significantly lower than the unitizing students because they lacked automaticity. Instructionally, this could mean that students that are able to unitize are more advanced in their phonics skill acquisition and this information would be valuable when designing differentiated lessons and appropriately grouping students.
Researchers, Butterfield, Eldredge, and Quinn (2001) investigated the causal relationships between phonics, reading comprehension, and vocabulary achievement in the second grade. This study suggests that growth in reading comprehension and word knowledge, as measured by standardized test scores, is influenced by a student’s graphophonic knowledge at the second grade level. Phonics achievement was measured using an 81 item multiple choice group-administrated test designed by one of the authors. The validity of the test was examined against a nonsense word graphophonics test and validity correlation of .814 was obtained. Reading comprehension and vocabulary were measured using the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test. The students were given the achievement tests in September and in May. The scores of the phonics tests were compared to the vocabulary and comprehension scores to determine correlations. The causal impact of phonics knowledge on reading comprehension implied in the study is consistent with findings of other studies. This study did not include a discussion of fluency. However, since fluency is related to comprehension (Padak & Rasinski, 1994), it follows that phonics will be related to fluency and phonics instruction which impacts comprehension skills will also impact fluency rates.

The research on phonics instruction presents a consistent pattern of results that describe the benefits of systematic and explicit phonics instruction. In addition to phonics, educational leaders must consider all the components of reading instruction and the sequence and organization of these components. Fluency is an important step toward gaining meaning from print which is the fundamental goal of reading instruction.

Fluency

The NRP (2000, p. 3) definition of fluency is “the ability to read text quickly, accurately, and with expression.” The Mississippi Department of Education, Office of Reading, Early
Childhood and Language Arts (2009) identified the steps in teaching reading fluency.

Instruction begins with the ability to apply phonics skills to decode words in isolation and in connected text. Students then are able to recognize words quickly with little attention or effort. Fluency, the rate of reading, is increased while maintaining accuracy. Rasinski (2000) discusses the advantages that fluent readers experience. Children with high fluency rates read more than less fluent readers; therefore, these students practice their reading skills more and hence become better readers. Fluent readers enjoy reading and are more confident contrasting with less fluent, less efficient readers which become frustrated and avoid reading. Fluency is associated with comprehension so the student with low fluency rates also experiences poor comprehension. Because fluency is an important component in learning to read and reading to learn, it is essential that school leaders have an understanding of fluency and work to improve fluency rates.

Padak and Rasinski (2008) describe the fluent reader as one which adeptly applies phonics decoding skills with automaticity. One of the goals of Skill Builder lessons is the automaticity of letter-sound identification. This skill is then applied to decoding words with automaticity which leads to fluent reading and improved comprehension. A review of the literature about fluency provides ideas about teaching fluency and confirms the need for additional research on instructional techniques.

Rasinski (2000) noted that in his experiences with children in a university reading clinic one of the common manifestations of reading problems is slow and inefficient reading. The researchers examined children (n=600) in grades two through five who had been referred for reading intervention services in a Midwest school district to determine if there was a relationship between fluency and reading difficulties in a wider population. Part of an informal reading inventory (IRA) was administered to these students. Children were asked to read a passage at
their assigned reading grade level and one below their grade level placement. Commonalities of these struggling readers were noted and organized to determine if reading fluency as a characteristic that caused teachers to refer children for intervention services. Rasinski (2000) found that these students read at a rate approximately 60% of their instructional level reading rate and 50% of the rate one level below their expected reading level. Reading fluency was a significant factor in classroom teachers’ perceptions of their students’ proficiency or lack of proficiency in reading. Suggestions for helping slow readers were discussed and these included helping students improve word recognition, finding appropriate text levels, reading poetry, Readers Theater, paired reading, echo reading, and buddy reading. Helping children improve word recognition is related to automatic decoding employing expert phonics skills. This article is important to the current study because it contributes to the validation for the need of fluency. The path from phonics to word recognition, to fluency can be inferred.

Algozzine, Porfeli, and Wang (2008) also examined reading fluency focusing on second grade children. The researchers investigated similarities and differences in oral reading fluency across diverse groups of children. They were interested in relationships among oral reading rates and risk factors identified by previous research, such as gender, reading status, and ethnicity. A random sample of second grade children (n=1153) at 14 elementary schools in the southeastern United States was selected. All the schools used the same reading program. The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) oral reading fluency (ORF) was used to measure accuracy and fluency of connected text. ORF was measured three times during second grade. An analysis of variance with repeated measures was used to examine changes in performance over time across gender, ethnicity, and reading status groups. Two models were used to address the research questions, first to estimate the overall change in all students’ OFR
and the second to address the impact of gender, reading status, and ethnicity. Overall performance of benchmark students was significantly higher than at risk students, girls’ performance was significantly higher than boys, Caucasian children performed significantly better that African American children and the African American students performed significantly better than the Hispanic children. The discussion of this research suggests a need to provide supplemental reading instruction for the children making slower progress in ORF. Skill Builder lessons is a supplemental program that may have an impact on ORF.

Additionally, Padak and Rasinski (1994) identified reading fluency as an essential component to reading instruction and student achievement. This study reviewed an instructional approach for developing reading fluency in second grade students. The study examined the efficacy of the fluency development lesson (FDL) as a supplement to the regular curriculum. The sample for the study was from four second grade classrooms in an ethnically diverse urban school district. Students were assigned randomly to each classroom. All teachers used the same basal reading program to guide instruction so the regular reading program was similar to all students. The FDL is a ten to 15 minute instructional activity that incorporates key principles of effective fluency instruction. The FDL was delivered each day to two classrooms while the same reading texts were delivered to the control group using reading activities typical to second grade. The students were administered a pretest in November and a posttest in May. Effect sizes were calculated for all dependent variables to assess the extent of the treatment. A three-way analysis of covariance was performed on all dependent measures to test statistical significance. The analysis indicated that all groups made significant improvement over time on each dependent variable. Interviews with the teachers were recorded, transcribed and analyzed. The only significant difference between the test group and control group was noted in oral reading rates.
Teacher perceptions were positive and they noted improvement in students’ reading performance and attitude.

Educational leaders need to be well versed in the types of fluency measures to determine if teachers’ efforts benefit fluency rates. Compton, Fuchs and Fuchs (2004) compared the validity of two curriculum based measures (CBM), word identification fluency and nonsense word fluency. For predictive validity, both CBM performance level and CBM slope of improvement were investigated. The researchers assessed first grade children (n = 151) in the fall and spring of the year with the two CBM measures and a criterion referenced measure of reading. Additionally, children were assessed weekly with the CBM’s for 20 weeks. These weekly probes were used to compare slope for progress monitoring. A series of correlations were performed between word identification fluency and nonsense word fluency and the criterion variables. Predictive validity was correlated with the spring criterion measures. Multiple regression analysis compared pairs of predictors. All the comparisons favored the word identification fluency for curriculum based measurement. Consequently, for identifying children in first grade who are at risk for poor end of the year reading outcomes, the CBM word identification fluency measure outperforms the nonsense word fluency task. Word identification fluency slopes were reliably stronger than nonsense word fluency indicating this is a better tool for progress monitoring, making instructional decisions, and predicting end of the year reading outcomes.

Compton, Fuchs and Fuchs’ (2004) study relates to the selection of fluency measures to determine the impact of Skill Builder lessons. Using the CBM nonsense word fluency probe was considered for the current study but it was concluded from observation and supported by this
research that the word identification fluency measure was more useful in determining student progress.

Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006) also made recommendations regarding the use of fluency measures. They recommended having students read a one minute unpracticed passage of grade level text. This measure was not recommended for children prior to the middle of first grade. AimsWeb assessment offers both nonsense word fluency and reading passage fluency measurements. The word identification measure gives a score of correct words per minute. A consideration or the research on fluency resulted in the selection of reading passage fluency as the measure used to examine the impact of Skill Builder lessons on reading fluency.

School Culture

Wagner (2006) defines school culture as the “shared experiences both in school and out of school that create a sense of community, family, and team membership. People in a healthy organization must have agreement on how to do things and what is worth doing (p.41).” In a healthy school climate, educational leaders and teachers reach consensus on curriculum scope and sequence and instructional elements. Because differentiated instruction across grade levels requires reorganization of curriculum and an increase instructional planning for methods different from heterogeneous lessons, it is important to know the impact on school climate and if the school culture supports the effort required.

The literature on differentiation often discusses the difficulties teachers and school leaders experience when new school groupings and instructional practices are implemented. Tobin (2008) examined the difficulties that teachers encounter as they shift instruction to a differentiated approach. Tobin organizes the conundrums into two categories: foundational and instructional. The foundational problem is characterized by the need to focus on teaching for
comprehension while still addressing the many reading skills students need to become fluent readers. Tobin dismissed the issue of the opposition of universal design, instruction that benefits the largest number of learners without the need for additional modification, and differentiated instruction because universal design in literacy anticipates individual differences at the outset. Another issue raised is the assessment of growth verses comparative assessment. Tobin (2008, p. 162) states “exemplary literacy teachers evaluate student work and award grades based on effort and improvement not just achievement.” This seems most problematic as this requires a reevaluation of the entire grade level system. If students are to be evaluated on successes and growth and instruction is geared to improve weakness, children need the appropriate time to move through the curriculum. This is the problem with retention, promotion, report cards, summative assessment, and standardized testing. School leaders often experience the dilemma of meeting with a parent of a child that is making gains, learning and putting forth effort, only to have to tell them that the child needs to be retained. Perhaps the student is performing at a 1.5 level but the school year is currently at 1.9. This is a real conundrum because of the institutional configuration of grade levels in schools.

Tobin (2008) discusses the instructional issues by examining three categories: (1) robust literacy vs. activities, (2) grouping vs. whole class instruction and (3) validating vs. literal feedback. The most important discussion in relation to this study is the instructional practices of grouping. Tobin advocates two types of grouping, ability grouping and interest grouping. Ability grouping is organized by reading levels and/or skill needs. This grouping needs to be flexible based on student acquisition of skills. Teachers using differentiated instruction do not expect whole group demonstrations to be sufficient for all learners.
The predictable dilemmas that teachers face in adopting differentiated instructional strategies need to be supported by staff development and institutional practices. The impact on school culture due to the adoption of these practices is the impetus for the qualitative phase of this study.

Another investigation which is pertinent to the cultural impact of grouping examines student perspectives. Schumm, Moody and Vaughn (2000) presented two related studies dealing with the fundamental instructional question of how to group students for instruction. The first study examined the relationship between teacher practices for grouping and student reading outcomes. The second study examined student perceptions of grouping practices for reading instruction and has relevance to the qualitative phase of this study as it relates to school culture and climate. In a school environment that did not differentiate instruction based on learners needs, students completed the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey which uses a Likert scale to rate feelings about reading and related activities at school and at home. The Piers-Harris Self Concept Scale was used to obtain student ratings of self-concept. Student reading achievement and attitude and self-concept were compared. The average and high achieving students made moderate academic progress in decoding and comprehension, the students with reading and learning disabilities demonstrated minimal gains. The students with reading disabilities self-concepts also stagnated, while their attitudes toward reading declined. The authors made several recommendations. First, there is a need for ongoing staff development to provide a better understanding of methods for grouping and differentiating instruction. Second, if teachers are to implement flexible reading grouping and reading intervention for struggling learners, they must be provided resources, materials, and additional personnel. Finally, ongoing research is needed
to understand and evaluate instructional practices and the impact on student self-esteem and school culture.

Condron (2008) also studied the effect of skill grouping on reading achievement of elementary school students. The study compared children in low, medium, and high skill groups to children in non-grouped classrooms. This study is especially interesting because it compares the children in skill groups to non-grouped children that would be at the same level if these students were grouped. Therefore, children in the low skill group are compared to children in a non-grouped class that would be assigned to a low group. This matching of children adds to the usefulness of this study. The researcher used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), a nationally representative sample, and the ECLS-K longitudinal kindergarten to third grade public use data. Reading scores were measured using the Item Response Theory (IRT). These scores represent five areas of learning corresponding to the progression of reading skills: letter recognition, beginning sounds, ending sounds, sight word recognition and text comprehension. The researchers used regression to compare scores and the results indicated the importance of heterogeneous grouping within classrooms.

Condron (2008) posed the questions: How do elementary school teachers meet the demand of providing instruction to a classroom of children whose skills and rates of learning vary? How are teachers to keep the fast learner interested and challenged and the slower learner from being left behind if instruction is aimed at the average student? New practices will require new research and a change in school culture. The researcher described educational triage, an interesting new practice. In this plan, children that are almost making enough progress to score successful on mandated NCLB assessments are given more instructional attention. This practice
seems to imply a school culture that places a high degree of importance on test scores but not necessarily the success of all students.

Social impact and institutional culture were also the subjects of research by Alexander, Entwisle, Pallas and Stluka (1994). The data used in this study is from the Beginning School Study (BSS), a longitudinal study of the academic and social development of children. The BSS collected data from parents, students, and teachers as well as from school records. The dependent variables, student achievement and parent and teacher expectations, were coded and compared to the independent variable, the placement of students in reading groups. This study identified problems with the practice of ability grouping. The main concern was that the groupings early in first grade were static, with 80% of students remaining in the same group throughout the school-year, which has long term impact on student achievement. A higher group placement is associated with higher reading grades and better comprehension scores. The research findings did not indicate that reading group placement had a significant effect on social aspects of childhood development, nor was a significant effect noted for students’ academic self concepts. However, the institutional effects were significant. The evidence is clear that both parents and teachers rate children in high reading groups as more competent and likely to do better in the future than they do children in low reading groups. This research is somewhat dated but the results are still valid today for practices that label children, assign them to a reading group and then do not provide instruction at levels to help students grow. Ability grouping should be fluid, based on growth and for only specific skills for part of the school day.

Cox (2008) also discussed trends in education and sited strategies from Carol Ann Tomlinson’s book *Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners.*
Cox describes differentiated instruction as teaching with student variance in mind. It was advised to begin instruction at individual student reading levels, rather than adopting the standardized approach to teaching that seems to presume that all learners of a given age or grade are essentially alike. A culture that is responsive to learner needs and interests is prescribed. School leadership should ensure that opportunities exist for individual, small group and large group instruction that maximize the capacity for each student to grow as much and as quickly as he or she can. Flexible grouping is recommended and student readiness, interest and learning style need to be considered. Tiered activities are recommended to meet student readiness levels. Tiered activities are varied in terms of complexity, abstractness, and open-endedness. Anchor activities are recommended to extend the curriculum. The author does not discuss the important concept that instructional decisions must stem from effective and ongoing assessment of learners. A school culture that embraces Tomlinson’s ideas of content, process, and product differentiation would be helpful to classroom teachers. The content consists of the facts, concepts, generalization of principles, attitudes and skills related to a subject and the materials used to present the content. The process is the activities that a learner uses to make sense of the content and the product is the items that a student used to demonstrate understanding of the content. Considering that these areas of instruction can be differentiated, the key to successful differentiation is a school culture that emphasizes student need, teacher training and planning for instruction.

Hoyle and Slater (2001) provide an interesting discussion on school culture in their writings about a loving school environment. The authors call for a loving environment that fosters cooperation and community rather than individualism and competition. Hoyle and Slater provide observational guidelines to determine if a school culture is centered on love and
happiness. Because Skill Builder lessons frequent regrouping, all teachers became responsible for all students’ learning. This study seeks to determine if the cooperation experienced by teachers changed the community to a more caring culture. Nel Nodding’s (2005) exploration of school culture also examines the nature of caring relationships and the necessity for teachers to establish and nurture caring relationships with children. These relations provide the foundation for all learning that the teacher and her students accomplish together.

School culture reflects what the members of a faculty and their students care about and the practices that they are willing to invest time and energy into implementing and sustaining. The culture can be changed by directly addressing attitudes and ideas and by implementing curriculum and instructional changes. This study will investigate the significance of differentiated skill lessons on reading fluency. But regardless of the level of significance, the investigation of the impact on school culture from trying the differentiated instructional practices is warranted. The willingness of school leaders and teachers to try new methods is an important aspect of a school culture. The educational leaders that examine the impact on school culture that instructional changes instigate is better equipped to support and guide teachers and students.

Summary

This chapter presented a review of the literature for the categories related to the study: differentiation, phonics, fluency and school culture. Each category included a definition to clarify the topic and how it relates to the research. Considering the understandings of literature presented, the next chapter of the study relates these topics to the methodology of the study.
Chapter III

METHODS

Introduction

The following chapter specifies the design of the study. Each topic is divided into two sections; the first addresses the quantitative design and is followed by a description of the qualitative design. The topics discussed are sample, population, instruments, process, and data analysis.

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to investigate the effect of Skill Builders, differentiated phonics lessons, on reading fluency and to examine the effect of these lessons on student and teacher perceptions of school culture. The intent of the study was to obtain descriptive quantitative data on the effectiveness of the skill lessons on reading achievement as measured by reading and letter-sound fluency. This data was expanded using qualitative research interviews with individual students and teachers to explore perceptions about the skill lessons as a catalyst for change in school culture. The recording and discussion of teachers’ experiences of the changes in school culture was the guide for the qualitative investigation. The understandings gained from the qualitative data enhanced quantitative findings and were used to determine applicability of the across grade-level skills lessons.

The quantitative design of the study for second grade was a nonequivalent, pre-test – post-test, control-group design. The pre-test – post-test measured the increase in fluency rates for passage reading. The design for the kindergarten and first grade students was a post-test only
design because these early readers have pre-test scores that reflect no previous exposure to instruction. The study compared mean letter naming, letter-sound and passage reading scores between the control group and the experimental group that participated in skill builder lessons. The study measured explicit objectives as the basis for determining a program’s potential instructional merit. The goal was to determine if Skill Builder lessons improve students’ reading fluency as compared to the instructional program without Skill Builders lessons. The quasi-experimental design compared the mean fluency scores of students participating in Skill Builder lessons in the spring semester of 2010 to a comparable control group of students which received essentially the same reading instruction, but did not participate in Skill Builder lessons.

The qualitative phase design is a naturalistic inquiry with the goal of examining teacher perceptions of the impact of the lessons on school culture and student perceptions about their learning. The children were elementary students in a school district in north Mississippi which is largely rural, but adjacent to and influenced by a regional research university.

Similar to many efforts to improve students’ reading abilities and school leaders’ work toward instructional improvement, the impetus of Skill Builders was an examination of children’s reading achievement scores and the search for the underlying deficit in reading skills. Using AimsWeb measures combined with teacher observations, a deficit in reading fluency was detected. A possible underlying problem in decoding was identified. Children’s reading fluency was adversely effected by slow decoding. This difficulty with decoding was traced back to a problem with phonics skills. It was speculated that if teachers helped children improve phonics skills and these improved skills were applied to fluently decoding connected text, children would read more fluently and therefore, have better comprehension. The experimental instructional strategy needed to quickly improve all students’ phonics knowledge with a method to deliver
instruction of specific skills to specific learners based on need. Phonics skills were divided into sequenced and discrete skills. A list of the skills was created beginning with letter identification and consonant sounds advancing through vowel combinations. Assessments and observations were used to determine where in this continuum of skills to begin each child. With the list of skills and recommendations for students, class groups were formed and teachers were assigned a specific skill to teach. These lessons were called Skill Builders.

Children were assigned to a group to learn and practice a specific phonics skill. As the skill is mastered, the children moved on to the next skill. Through this learning process, children moved from teacher to teacher, mastering skills, and getting to know more classmates and more teachers. The grouping was fluid and based only on phonics skills. During the remainder of the school day children remained with the heterogeneously organized standard elementary classroom and self-contained teacher. Reading instruction in the classroom continued to be targeted to students’ abilities and interest. Teachers used a combination of a basal reader and guided reading leveled texts.

Skill Builder lessons were designed in the fall of 2009 and lessons began in November with a three week trial period. In January 2010, the three-day per-week 40 minute lessons began and continued throughout the spring semester.

The design of the Skill Builder lessons was intended to appeal to the learning styles of children that are often marginalized in the classroom. The lessons were creative, hands-on, active, and limit pencil and paper activities and traditional testing. Skill Builder lessons provided children and teachers the opportunity to interact with wider and varying school groups. Because of all this interaction across classrooms and grade levels, a cultural change was sparked in the school. Questions began to emerge: are the Skill Builder lessons working to improve phonics
and reading fluency, what is happening to the school culture because of Skill Builder lessons, can implementing a program that engages children and teachers in changing groups cause teachers to have more empathy for one another and children outside of their classrooms, how does this focus on improving all the children’s skills impact teacher attitudes. A desire to understand the change in school culture and student learning encouraged this investigation.

The understandings gained from the combination of the quantitative and qualitative data helped to interpret the applicability of the across grade-level skills lessons. Educational leaders are best informed by considering the value of programs from both the quantitative view of what works to achieve content and skill growth and from the participants, teachers and students, perspectives of school culture including student engagement, involvement and interest in learning. This mixed methods study provided educational leaders the opportunity to consider the impact of Skill Builder lessons across grade-levels from a holistic perspective that considered the academic gains and the individual school community members feelings and attitudes which combined to influence school culture.

Quantitative Sample

The population for the study was elementary students in north Mississippi. The convenience sample includes all the general education students enrolled in the school in August of the school-year 2008-2009, the control group, and 2009-2010, the experimental group, and completed the spring semesters respectively. The data for both groups was gathered between April 15 and May 15 of the school-year. The data was scores from the AimsWeb assessments in letter-sound fluency and reading fluency. These were one-minute timed individual assessments. The student names were removed from the data to protect the identity of children. Protocols required of researchers working with school age children were followed.
The sample consisted of primary grade students, kindergarten, first and second grade children, in a school district of 2,425 students. The sample was 70% Caucasian and 30% African-American with less than one percent of the children of other races. Sixty-two percent of the students were socio-economically disadvantaged based on the income qualifications for free and reduced school meals. Classroom groups were heterogeneously organized and all are between 18 and 20 students, with the exception of special needs classes. Table One describes the number of students by grade and race.

Table 1

*Student Sample Table Comparing Control Year to Test Year*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>2008-2009</th>
<th>2009-2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten total</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average class size</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First grade total</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average class size</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second grade total</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average class size</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reading instruction for the students was based on a balanced approach designed to incorporate the five components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Instruction was organized to incorporate guided reading techniques and a basal program. The school had an extensive bookroom to provide students with guided reading materials based on developmental reading levels.

In addition to the consistency of student numbers and instructional practices, there were no personnel changes during the two school years and there were no novice teachers either year. The administrative leadership in the school remained constant for the two school years. Because of the stability of the reading programs, teachers, and school leadership, it was possible to compare mean fluency scores for the two groups of students at each grade-level. Essentially, the difference between the two groups of children was the exposure to Skill Builder lessons.

The Qualitative Sample

The purposeful sample for the qualitative phase of the study was partially driven by the results of the quantitative data analysis. For instance, because the data indicated that the Skill Builder lessons resulted in a significant increase in reading fluency for second grade African-American children, it was be important to interview some of these students for the potential to identify the facets of Skill Builder lessons that were most beneficial to these children. These illuminative samples were selected based on which cases would be most instructive for the proposed study. The teacher sample was an intensity sample. Patton (2002) advised that the researcher select participants that make evident the qualities of success and failure. These teachers were selected based on the information and insights which they may share.

Because the goal of all elementary school leaders, based on No Child Left Behind, is for all children to be reading at grade-level by third grade, it is important to explore possible
enhancements to reading instruction. Skill Builder lessons are a potential advancement to reading instruction. The across-grade level grouping is not a typical elementary school practice and the results of this differentiated practice should be of interest to elementary school leaders. The qualitative findings provided school leaders information about student and teacher perceptions of differentiated grouping and skill lessons. Based on the study results, the Skill Builder lessons could be adapted or replicated to other schools at all grade levels and subject areas. For example, Skill Builder lessons could be adapted to second, third, and forth grade students and could target comprehension skills or mathematics specific skills. Because of the adaptability of the study, both in grade level and skill content, the results of this study are generalizable and adaptable to many schools.

**Quantitative Instrument**

The AimsWeb Reading Curriculum Based Measure (RCBM) was used to measure students’ correct letter-sounds per minute and oral reading fluency correct words per minute. The AimsWeb RCBM has a reliability coefficient of .91. Hintze and Silberglitt (2005) found the AimsWeb RCBM to be accurate and efficient in predictive validity to high stakes achievement testing. The kindergarten students were assessed individually using the timed one minute letter-sound naming tool. Children were presented with a list of letters and instructed to tell the sound each letter represents. Students were prompted to move to the next letter after a three second wait time and correct letter-sounds were counted. The first and second grade students were assessed individually by orally reading three, one minute timed passages appropriate for the respective grade level. Correct words per minute were counted for each passage and the median score of three passages was recorded. Twenty-two teacher assistants were trained by two school reading interventionists and administrators to administer the AimsWeb RCBM. The teacher assistants
were assigned to assess students not personally know to them. The assessment was given three times per year in the fall, winter, and spring. For the purpose of this study, the spring scores were used to compare group means. The testing required one week for each grade level and scores were entered into the AimsWeb software program.

**Qualitative Instrument**

The researcher is the instrument for qualitative investigation. Interest in this study grew out of a desire to continually improve reading instruction and increase the accessibility of learning while targeting specific needs of students. My philosophy of reading instruction is a comprehensive and balanced approach. Ruetzel and Cooter (2004, p. 12) describe this approach. “Comprehensive reading programs often use basal readers … but also include daily encounters with fiction and nonfiction trade books. In comprehensive reading classrooms one typically sees oral reading by teachers and children alike, direct skill instruction, and practice in guided oral reading groups.”

I began this study with a variety of school teaching and leadership experiences and extensive graduate education. I have held school administrative positions for seven-years and I was the principal of the elementary school which was the site for this study. In some situations, this close relationship could create researcher bias; however, the intention was to determine the impact of Skill Builder lessons and I was neither an advocate nor an opponent of Skill Builder lessons. My interest was the success of student learning and the potential usefulness of Skill Builder lessons.

I was very familiar with the frameworks and competencies required for primary age children because I taught kindergarten and first grade children for ten years prior to moving to a leadership role. As an instructional leader, the success of children learning to read was my mission. Because this is the most important aspect of my school leadership, I have actively
focused my studies in educational leadership, as much as permitted by the degree programs, in the area of reading instruction. I have a vested interest in the success of students and therefore, approached this research with a stance of neutrality to ensure that the data is as accurate and complete as possible. The goal of my trustworthy and authentic representations of the qualitative data was to inform practice for the improvement of reading instruction.

**Study Design**

The quasi-experimental design of the study compared mean fluency scores of the students in the 2009–2010 kindergarten and first grades and the reading fluency scores and growth scores of second grade students that participated in Skill Builders lessons to the scores of the 2008–2009 students that did not participate in Skill Builders lessons. AimsWeb fluency data was collected in April and May in 2009 with the intended use of ranking students from highest to lowest to prescribe interventions and enrichment. It was noted that many of the students identified by low ranking scores have difficulty with phonics skills. This need to improve students’ phonics skills was the impetus for the development of Skill Builders. Skill Builders lessons were designed in the fall of 2009 and were presented on a trial basis in November 2009. The lessons and time allocated to lessons were adjusted and the intervention began on a regular basis in January 2010. Students that moved into the school district during the year were not included in the study but attended Skill Builder lessons.

During the 2010 – 2011 school year, findings from the first phase of the study were expanded with follow-up interviews with individual students and teachers. The rationale for the enhancing qualitative research was to examine the impact of the lessons on school culture and student perceptions about their learning when children and teachers had the opportunity to
interact with wider and varying school groups. Students and teachers were interviewed using three basic questions:

1. What is the impact of Skill Builder lessons on your/students’ skills with phonics?
2. What do you like least and most about Skill Builder lesson time?
3. Do Skill Builder lessons change the school culture, particularly student/teacher interactions? (Interviews with children will include discussion prompts to illicit conversation such as: Tell me about the new friends you made. Tell me about the teachers you met. What were the other classrooms like?)

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and validated by the interviewee. The participants were provided a transcript to examine and had the opportunity to change, remove or further explain any comments. The understandings gained from the combination of the quantitative and qualitative data helped interpret the applicability of the across grade-level skills lessons.

**Procedure**

Approval from the dissertation committee and the Institutional Review Board was be sought. The Institutional Review Board approved the study as exempt. Approval was granted by the school district superintendent.

AimsWeb test scores were be entered into the AimsWeb database program. The data output from AimsWeb consisted of a listing of students ranked highest to lowest for each assessment and provided an average score for each student and each assessment. Only the average score was used for the study. Students that moved into the school district during the school-year were temporarily removed from the data file. Student and teacher names were removed from the presentation and discussion of data to ensure confidentiality and the protection of subjects.
The mean fluency scores for the 2008-2009 students were compared to the 2009-2010 scores to determine if a significant difference in scores exists. The mean growth scores for second grade fluency from 2008-2009 was compared to the gains in 2009-2010.

**Hypothesis**

Hypothesis One: For kindergarten children, there is no significant difference in mean scores of letter-sound fluency by types of phonics lessons.

Hypothesis Two: For first grade children, there is no significant difference in mean scores of reading fluency by types of phonics lessons.

Hypothesis Three: For second grade children, there is no significant difference in mean scores of reading fluency by types of phonics lessons.

In each of the hypothesis, the types of phonics lesson are (a) differentiated phonics (Skill Builder) lessons and (b) non-differentiated whole class lessons.

**Statistical Test and Data Analysis**

In each of the hypotheses, the dependent variable was the reading fluency score and the main independent variable was type of phonics lessons. The statistical test was a t-test for independent means using a probability value of .05. The statistical test was repeated for each of the three hypotheses.

The qualitative data analysis began with a re-reading of interview transcripts and notes to glean a general sense and over-all impression of themes. The data was then organized using coding to identify major themes and interesting topics. These themes and topics were used to describe the findings and interpret the impact of Skill Builder lessons on school culture.

The findings from the quantitative phase and the qualitative phase were combined to
compose a complete evaluation of the objectives as the basis for determining the instructional merit of the Skill Builder lessons.

Conclusion

This chapter specified the design of the study. The topics discussed were sample, instruments, process, and data analysis. Chapter IV will discuss the results of the data and Chapter V will be a discussion of the findings.
Chapter IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The following chapter reports the findings of the study. The findings are divided into two sections: the first addresses the quantitative results and the second is descriptions of the categories and emerging themes from the qualitative investigation.

Quantitative Results

The study compared the mean fluency scores for letter-sound naming and passage reading scores between the control group that did not have Skill Builder lessons and the experimental group that participated in Skill Builder lessons. Skill Builder lessons were organized by specific sequenced skill. Children were assigned to the differentiated groups based on instructional need. Need was determined by classroom teachers from assessment of letter-sound and reading fluency probes and observation during guided reading lessons. At the conclusion of the Skill Builder lessons at the end of the semester, AimsWeb Reading Curriculum Based Measure (RCBM) probes were administered to participants by trained para-professionals. Each measure was timed for one minute. Correct letter-sounds and words were counted and scores were calculated. The data was examined using an independent samples test. SPSS was used to calculate if a statistically significant difference in mean scores was evident at an alpha level of .05. Table Two, Comparison of Mean Fluency Scores, reports the mean scores by grade level and AimsWeb measure.
Table 2

Comparison of Mean Fluency Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>AimsWeb Test</th>
<th>Without Skill Builder</th>
<th>With Skill Builder</th>
<th>2009 Mean Score</th>
<th>2010 Mean Score</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Letter-Sound Fluency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22.6569</td>
<td>35.3299</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sounds Correct per Minute</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Grade</td>
<td>Reading Fluency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>58.2570</td>
<td>59.0977</td>
<td>.757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Words Correct per Minute</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Grade</td>
<td>Reading Fluency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>96.91</td>
<td>107.34</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Words Correct per Minute</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Kindergarten students.**

The first null hypothesis was rejected. For kindergarten children, there was a significant difference in mean letter-sound fluency by types of phonics lessons. The study results indicated that there is a statistically significant difference between the letter-sound fluency scores for kindergarten children participating in Skill Builder lessons and students that did not participate in Skill Builder lessons. The Skill Builder students (N=194) mean score for Sounds Correct Per Minute (SCPM) was 35.3299. For the children that did not participate in Skill Builder lessons (N=204) the mean score of SPCM was 22.6569. The independent samples t-test results were $t = 9.476$ and $p = .000$. The children that participated in Skill Builder lessons were able to decode about twelve more sounds in a one-minute assessment.

**First grade students.**

The second hypothesis: For first grade children, there was no significant difference in mean scored of reading fluency by types of phonics lessons, was true. The words correct per
minute (WCPM) for children participating in Skill Builder lessons (N=215) was 59.0977 and for the children not participating (N=214) the mean score of WCPM was 58.2570. This indicated an improvement in reading fluency for Skill Builder students of .8407 but not at a statistically significant level. The independent samples t-test results were \( t = .309 \) and \( p = .757 \). During the course of Skill Builder lessons the children’s letter -sound fluency gained 28.90 SCPM. At the onset of Skill Builder lessons the first grade students’ mean score for SCPM was 24.90 and at the spring AimsWeb assessment the SCPM mean scores for the same children was 53.80 SCPM. This indicated growth occurred in children’s ability to identify letter sounds. However, the growth in SCPM did not transfer to WCPM in connected text reading fluency.

**Second grade students.**

The third hypothesis was: For second grade children, there was no significant difference in mean reading fluency by types of phonics lessons. This hypothesis was found to be false. The study results indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the reading fluency scores and words correct per minute (WCPM) for second grade children participating in Skill Builder lessons (N=181) and students that did not participate in skill Builder Lessons (N=174). The WCPM for children participating in Skill Builder lessons was 107.34 and for the children not participating the mean score of WCPM was 96.91. The independent samples t-test results were \( t = 3.528 \) and \( p < .000 \).

Additionally, an examination of pre-test and post-test scores for second grade children also indicated a statistically significant growth in fluency scores for second grade children that participated in skill builder lessons. The mean growth score of WCPM for Skill Builder lesson participants was 19.1 additional words correct and for children that did not participate in Skill Builder lessons the WCPM growth was 11.4. The results from the Univariate Analysis of
Variance (ANCOVA) supported the effect of Skill Builder lessons on student fluency when controlling for pre-test scores, \( F(1,352) = 27.244, p < 0.05 \). Table Three presents the second grade children’s WCPM scores and growth differences.

Table 3

*Table of Second Grade Mean Pre-test, Post-test and Growth Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>83.8</td>
<td>85.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>95.2</td>
<td>104.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Qualitative Results**

The goal of the qualitative phase of the study was to examine teacher and student perceptions of the impact of Skill Builder lessons on school culture and student learning. To make this examination of the cultural impact, it was first necessary to examine personal background experiences and desires for the school. An experience of the process of epoche as described by Ihde (1977) was required. The interviews were conducted with an awareness of personal assumptions about the school’s culture and an abeyance of longings for a loving and caring culture. Since it was impossible to eliminate these prejudices, a suspension of judgment and a careful examination of the evidence was the research objective. Completely removing all personal bias was not possible and there was a desire for the research results to support positive cultural impact. Therefore, it was pleasing to discover evidence that supported the impact of Skill Builder lessons on positive school cultural.
This examination began with a thorough listening to interviews, accurate transcriptions, and multiple re-readings of the participants’ stories. After recording, transcribing and studying the interviews, a table identifying key areas of experience was created. Each of these elements was tabulated to determine the frequency and intensity of the themes as experienced by the interviewees. Central to the cultural impact, was the effect of Skill Builder lessons on relationship building between school stakeholders. It became evident in the interview process that Skill Builder lessons had an impact on teacher to teacher, teacher to student, teacher to parent, and student to student communication, which created opportunities for new or changed relationships. The differentiation of lessons had an influence on teacher lesson planning, student success, and student confidence. The limitation of lesson topics for sequenced phonics skills had the result of improving teachers’ skills with delivering phonics lessons. A goal of Skill Builder lesson presentation was to appeal to active learners, this caused teachers to engage in creative lesson planning and students to describe skill builder lessons as games. Another theme that emerged was the interviewees reported difficulties with time management and movement between classrooms. The next sections discuss these themes in detail.

**Effect on Interpersonal Relationships**

The predominant cultural impact of skill builders’ lessons, was the effect on relationship development between the school community members. Teachers and children described instances of increased communication that lead to enhanced relationships. The impact can be categorized into four groups; teacher to student, teacher to teacher, teacher to parent, and student to student. Through an examination of the relationships and participant comments, a change in the school culture was perceived.
Teacher to student interactions.

A teacher in the workroom was overheard stating, “The thing I like about skill builders is that I meet lots of little kids.” This illustrated the opportunities Skill Builder lessons created for teachers to interact with a wider group of students than in the typical self-contained elementary school classroom configuration. This had a positive effect on the students and teachers. A first grade teacher explained, “It was beneficial to children to have different teachers helping them.” Another teacher enjoyed “having new faces and getting to know new students.” A second grade teacher loved having different children coming into her classroom. She said, “The children just loved it and it was a joy to see them coming. The children looked forward to it, they were ready to go, and it kept me motivated too.” Another teacher liked having the mix of kindergarten, first and second grade children. He explained “I liked having the kindergarten coming because I knew they were advanced learners, I liked watching them interact with the second graders.” Another teacher described a similar situation in which she intentionally paired kindergarteners with older children. She described an activity that required the students to work together to search for words in a magazine that contained the targeted phonics sound. The kindergartner helped the second grader. She was surprised that the older child did not take offense even though he was significantly larger and obviously further behind academically. The same teacher found it was very beneficial outside the classroom setting. If a child was misbehaving in the hallway, she could correct that child and they would respond better because the child knew her from skill builder lessons. She explained, “I felt more of a connection with a lot of kids that I would not have gotten to know without Skill Builders.” An additional connection described by one teacher was the chance to meet co-workers children. “I got to meet six or seven of them in skill builder lessons.” This helped connect him to the teacher and her family. Skill Builder
lessons worked to make the children everybody’s children rather than one particular teacher’s assigned homeroom students.

In addition to getting to know many more children, there was an opportunity for teachers to learn from their students. Teachers reported using their homeroom students’ experiences to inform their own instruction. The children would return to the homeroom teacher with stories about their time in another classroom. A teacher reported, “I would quiz them and they would share with me. I wanted to know what their skill builder teachers were doing as far as strategy. There was definitely an ongoing conversation there.” Another teacher described a similar experience. “I would have kids coming back talking. They would want to tell me what they did in another room. We played this game or we did this activity. They were excited about it and I could draw on their experiences.”

Besides the homeroom teacher benefiting from reports of other lessons, some students benefited from their time in Skill Builder groups by seeking help from their homeroom teacher. A teacher reported, “The children wanted me to work with them on their skill so they could move to the next skill. They didn’t want to get stuck.”

Students also discussed the opportunity to meet new teachers through Skill Builder lessons. A first grade girl described what she liked about Skill Builder time was that “The teachers were nice. It wasn’t scary changing teachers, it was exciting.” Another child explained that she knew the teachers liked skill builder lessons because “They never got mad, even when children were not good listeners.” A second grade boy advised that “Teachers should like skill builder lessons because we learned a lot.” While another second grade boy confirmed, “It made us smarter.” A second grade boy explained that he met his teacher in first grade when he went to
her classroom for Skill Builder time. He reported, “It made the beginning of school easier because I already knew my teacher.”

Positive teacher to student interactions were essential to the success of Skill Builder lessons and had an impact of school culture as teachers and children got to know each other and teachers began to care more about other teachers’ children. The interactions between teachers also influenced school cultural development.

**Teacher to teacher interactions.**

Skill Builder lessons created a need and desire for teachers to interact with one another. Teachers reported an increased effort to seek out other teachers with the goal of discovering information about children and to create hands-on lessons that worked for students. The weekly movement of children from one skill group to another was the motivation to increase communication between teachers. A first grade teacher reported:

> You were forced to communicate with teachers that you otherwise may not have had a need to communicate with. You had to go talk to another homeroom teacher about a particular student. Maybe not behaviors, but something to streamline the lessons, like what motivates the child.

A second grade teacher explained, “I did go talk about some children. The ones that were struggling, I would ask are they having this problem with you too or is just because it is me or is it a general problem?” Another teacher liked seeking out other teachers to tell them they were doing a good job with a child. Just to tell them what a joy they were to teach.” A first grade teacher described her communication efforts to be prepared for the next group of children:

> I would seek out teachers. I would go and talk to the teachers of the kids I was going to have in skill builders. If I didn’t know the kids, I went and found their teacher before
I had them for skill builders, before new groups started. Just to cover some background basics, what they knew.

Another first grade teacher reported several trips to visit kindergarten teachers and explained, “These conversations would not have happened if not for Skill Builders.”

In addition to conversations about children, communication between teachers was increased as Skill Builder lessons were developed. Teachers reported discussing teaching strategies that could be integrated into one another’s Skill Builder lessons. A first grade teacher described the opportunity:

I would find myself in the hall and a fellow teacher would say, “Look at this I’m going to use this in Skill Builders, you should try it.” We were sharing ideas much more. It was natural for sharing a lot more.

Furthermore, children reported increased interactions between teachers. When asked if her teacher liked skill builder lessons, a second grader described how her teacher took the class around and dropped children off at Skill Builder lessons. Her teacher smiled and looked happy. “She liked it because she took us around and got to see teachers she hadn’t seen in a while. She got to say hello.”

To summarize, Skill Builder lessons were largely a positive force in teacher to teacher interactions. However, one teacher related the following:

The teachers that were really on board and enjoyed Skill Builders talked about it and shared the positive parts of it and talked about each others’ kids. Then there were teachers that didn’t want to be doing Skill Builders, they were talking about it in a negative aspect.
However, the teacher did not evaluate this negativity as divisive, and stated only that “Some people just are not happy.” For the most part, interactions were positive between teachers and this was also true for teacher to parent interactions.

**Teacher to parent interactions.**

The best advocates to parents for Skill Builder lessons were the children. A first grader was asked what she told her mother about Skill Builder lessons. Her response was “I told her I loved Skill Builders.” Another child reported telling his mom that “He had to be to school on time so he could get to Skill Builder lessons.” In fact, the school receptionist observed that on Skill Builder days the number of tardy children decreased.

All the teachers interviewed reported increased parent contact as a result of Skill Builder lessons. Parents were notified of the plan to implement Skill Builder lessons in a monthly news letter:

> Beginning next Monday, we will have daily Skill Builder lessons. We have selected phonics skills from the Mississippi Curriculum Frameworks and organized children into groups based on individual instructional needs. These groups are very fluid and will be adjusted on a weekly basis. Children will move to a new group as soon as skills in one group are mastered. Every certified teacher will have a group to teach. Skill Builder time is thirty minutes long and begins right after the morning pledge. This notification informed parents of the organization of Skill Builder lessons and the goal of meeting children’s needs.

Questions and comments about Skill Builders were directed to teachers in a variety of settings. A first grade teacher reported, “I would have the opportunity to explain what we were doing and the importance of it. They really seemed excited, you never know how parents are
going to react, but when you explained the goal, the whole purpose of Skill Builders, what we were trying to achieve, they were very supportive.” Another teacher explained,

I connected more with my own kid’s parents because of Skill Builders. They had lots of questions in regards to where their kids were going next and maybe what would be coming. They wanted me to work more with them and that skill so they could move on.

Parents had the opportunity to learn more about the school staff through the interaction of students and teachers. A kindergarten teacher reported meeting parents and they would comment, “Oh, you have my child for Skill Builders.” Another teacher reported seeing children with their parents in public. “They will see me and say, ‘I had you for Skill Builders; you were my Skill Builder teacher.’ and I would wonder who is this child?” Another teacher told of an interaction when a parent approached him at the grocery story, introduced herself and then stated “You had my child in Skill Builders.” Parents commented to teachers that their children were excited about school, that they “just love Skill Builders.” Another parent expressed to her son’s teacher, “I love knowing that my boys are going and working on a particular skill that they need.”

Positive interactions between parents and teachers are an indication that the school program has an impact in the wider community. Another important relationship that was impacted by Skill Builder lessons is the relationship between students.

**Student to student interactions.**

Through Skill Builder lessons, children were introduced to many children outside of their homeroom. Children had the opportunity to interact with not only children in their grade but children of different ages and different grades as well.
Students reported that they made new friends. A second grade girl told about meeting three friends that she started playing with at recess and are now in her homeroom class. Another child described meeting new friends and then having more friends on the playground.

The differentiated skills based on students’ instructional needs resulted in different ages and grade levels being together for skill builder lessons. One teacher reported:

I liked having kindergartners coming in because I knew they were advanced. I enjoyed watching those kids interact with the second graders. It actually made the second graders feel better. I remember a second grader who loved being there because he was learning and he felt like he fit in.

A first grade teacher explained that “It was interesting seeing kindergarteners, first and second graders interact in the classroom setting together. You have five year-olds and eight year-olds working together and often the younger was helping out the older child.” The teacher described an interaction that was interesting because two very different children worked successfully together. She explained, “It was surprising because the second grader often took offense to a lot of things. Maybe it worked because even though the kindergartener was academically ahead he (the second grader) was physically much bigger. It happened, that cooperation, several times.”

**Teacher Lesson Planning and Delivery**

In addition to the interactions that were enhanced because of Skill Builder lessons, teachers’ lesson planning and delivery was impacted by Skill Builders. Teachers had to reflect on their ability to deliver phonics lessons. The lessons were required to be interactive, hands on, and without pencil and paper activities. Teachers reported a wide spectrum of attitudes toward planning lessons for Skill Builders. For some teachers planning was easy and fun and for others it was difficult and stressful. A first grade teacher reported, “It wasn’t hard for me. It was fun to
think up different activities.” Another teacher lamented, “It was difficult and I was nervous.” A second grade teacher reported breaking out in a nervous rash and having to do research to learn how to teach her lesson. Another teacher explained:

When I went through the education program, I didn’t get a phonics background. I learned to read with *Dick and Jane* and we just practiced reading those books. I don’t believe I got a phonemic awareness or phonics background.

Another teacher explained that growing up she had a speech impediment, so “I had this negative feeling as far as being able to pronounce words. When I heard about Skill Builders, I got very concerned.” Whether the teacher was confident and comfortable or nervous, all teachers reported increased preparation time and effort.

Teachers reported seeking help with lesson planning. This included internet research and getting advice from other teachers. A second grade teacher referenced web sites that offered some ideas to keep children engaged in a specific skill for forty minutes. A popular choice was *Reading A to Z* that provided lesson planning ideas and phonics books that could be downloaded. A first grade teacher called on a friend that teaches kindergarten for ideas on activities and organization.

After recovering from the initial nervousness over planning, teachers reported getting more comfortable and then expanding on their lessons to include more learning activities. A first grade teacher explained, “I got better at it with each new Skill Builder group, I could teach an /l/ blend lesson now and be video recorded for someone else to use.” A second grade teacher explained that the planning process made her more aware of the needs of her homeroom children:
I saw that I needed to do more on each child’s level. By second grade they should have the phonics, but if they didn’t, I went back and looked for patterns of the words, the diagraphs and blends, and tried to help the children. It made me more aware.

Teachers reported that planning for Skill Builders made them more aware of planning to keep children engaged. The students reported these engaging lessons were fun.

Children thought the lessons were games. In every interview, the response to “What did you like about Skill Builders?” was about the lesson format. Children responded:

- They did fun games.
- I liked how we got to do games to learn.
- I liked that we played games and we had fun.
- We said vowels and we made a pot and when you turned the spoon around you made words.
- We played Bingo and we played hot potato and you had to guess the word the person had.
- We played games like musical chairs.
- We had to turn around and use vocabulary words and guess before the other team got it.
- One teacher put shaving cream on the desk and we had to write words in it.
- We played Smack the Snake game (s blend lesson), play-dough word building and Old Maid.

Children also understood that the fun and games was all about learning. A first grade boy explained the best thing about Skill Builder lessons. He said “Learning, we played games. We
learned a lot of stuff and when we came back to our teachers (homeroom) we were a little bit smarter.”

**Student Success**

In addition to the quantitative results, teachers and children had opinions about the student academic success from Skill Builder lessons. Teachers described the differentiated lessons as a “better fit”. A kindergarten teacher explained, “I think it was beneficial to them to have different teachers helping them, having fresh ideas from different people. Also, being taught on the level that they were on with hands on activities was good for them.” Another teacher concurred, “I felt very confident that they were going to a classroom and a teacher that was going to teach them a skill that they really needed to focus on.” Most of the children moved to the next skill builder group after one week. Several teachers estimated more than 95% advanced to the next group. Although the lessons were arranged in order by difficulty, students did not realize that the skills were sequential. A first grade teacher explained, “I don’t know that the children realized that they were moving up. I think they just thought that they were moving to a new teacher.” A kindergarten teacher explained that she called moving “graduating” but even if a child was not placed correctly and had to regress in the sequence it didn’t matter. “They just wanted to know that they were going to another teacher.” This unintentional misinterpretation by the children served to remove all competition and the related stress from the Skill Builder lessons. The teacher only had to request a lesson that would helped the child to review, the child was placed accordingly and the children reported that they were learning. A first grader explained, “It helped me learn more about ABC’s, more of the sounds, and I think it helped me a lot.” Another student liked Skill Builders “because they taught you lots of words.”
A second grader’s estimation was, “I learned about 40 or 30 times more in Skill Builders for the same amount of time (in the homeroom).

Teachers and children reported some difficulty with time management and movement of children between classrooms. A first grade teacher explained, “At the beginning it was a little rocky, everybody trying to figure out where they go, transporting them through the hallways. But it did get better when we went through and tweaked it.” Another teacher agreed, “It was a little disorganized at first. There was so much involved in the planning stages. It did get easier.” Children reported that at first the movement to new classrooms made them nervous and then it became exciting. One child complained about noise in the hallway and another said “I would want the pushing to stop.” Another suggested that we “put arrows to help us get where we want to go.” In addition to the physical management of moving about the school, time management was a topic that surfaced in the interviews.

Time management was more an issue for the children than the teachers. Several children complained that they did not have much time. One suggested fifty minute lessons. Another student said, “We only have a few minutes then we have to go back to our rooms.” The more common complaint was not having enough time to get morning work done. A second grader lamented, “The only part I don’t like is I never get all my work done.” Another second grader suggested moving Skill Builder lessons to the afternoon. The only teacher comment related to time management was, “Sometimes it was hard to get back on track with the day (when the children returned from Skill Builder lessons).”

In summary, the quantitative results were positive with significant fluency improvement for the kindergarten and second grade children. Multiple themes emerged from the
phenomenological analysis. The discussion of the quantitative data and a synthesis of the qualitative results follow in chapter five.
Chapter V

DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the study results and draws conclusions about the success of Skill Builder lessons in improving students’ ability to fluently decode letter sounds and connected text. The discussion makes connections between the quantitative and qualitative results and the process of Skill Builder lessons. Conclusions are drawn about teacher and student perceptions of the impact of Skill Builder lessons on the school culture. To examine the results of Skill Builder lessons, it is helpful to look at the lesson sequence as presented in Table Four. The sequence of the lessons were modeled after the Project Read (Enfield, 1976) organization which presents sounds from the most frequently used to the least frequently used. This table represents a partial sequence of the Skill Builder Progress Report and gives the reader a feel for the progression of lesson complexity. The entire report is in the appendix.

Table 4

Skill Builder Lesson Sequence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Lesson Type</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A-1</td>
<td>Letter Recognition</td>
<td>m,b,s,t,f,a,c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-1</td>
<td>Letter Sounds</td>
<td>/m/ /b/ /s/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-1</td>
<td>Long Vowel Pattern</td>
<td>CVCe</td>
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<td>G-1</td>
<td>Digraphs – initial and final</td>
<td>ch.th.sh.wh</td>
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<tr>
<td>I -6</td>
<td>Vowel Pattern</td>
<td>ew, ue, eu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q -1</td>
<td>Schwa Sound</td>
<td>a, le</td>
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</table>
Each child had a Skill Builder Progress Report that followed them to the Skill Builder lessons and back to the homeroom teacher. However, rather than start each child at the beginning and move through the entire sequence, children were placed in lessons dictated by their needs and level of competency, not by age or grade level. The assumption that all kindergarten children need to work through all lessons was replaced with assignment to lessons based on teacher assessment of skill acquisition and readiness. The placement was verified by the Skill Builder teachers and adjustments to student grouping were made after every sixth lesson. Children were not forced to waste valuable instructional time either repeating lessons for phonics skills they had already mastered or being subjected to lessons that were above their current instructional needs and therefore not able to understand or master the concepts. As phonics skills were mastered and children returned to their homerooms, they had the opportunity to apply these decoding skills to word recognition in connected text (Eldredge, 2005). This ability resulted in more fluent readers, as were the results for second grade children.

The quantitative results indicate that Skill Builder lessons improved kindergarten learning of phonics at a statistically significant level as measured by AimWeb letter-sound identification, SCPM. The children were able to decode more rapidly indicating a better mastery of letter-sound relationships. The appropriate skill groups for many kindergarten children based on teacher reading observations and classroom assessment data were the consonant/vowel/consonant (CVC) groups. These students were able to decode individual sounds and apply these to blending words with a CVC pattern, for example: cap, hen, sit, top and fun. As these children used the skills gained during Skill Builder lessons with their homeroom teacher in reading lesson, this could possibly translate to improved reading fluency and to
increased comprehension (Armbruster, 2001; Butterfield et al., 2001; Chard et al., 2008; Eldredge, 2005).

The AimsWeb reading fluency results were also statistically significant for second grade children applying phonics to decoding connected text as measured by WCPM. Children that read fluently become better readers that have increased vocabulary and better reading comprehension (Algozzine et al., 2008; Ehri 2003; Rasinski 2000). The more fluently a child reads, the more reading practice they experience in any given instructional time allotted to reading. Algozzine et al. (2008) describe the “trajectory of failure” (p. 417) for children that do not read fluently as the gap between them and their peers widens. For example, a child that reads one hundred words per minute gets twice the reading practice as a child that reads fifty words per minute. Every school day the fluent reader gets more practice and becomes a better reader (Rasinski, 2000). The importance of a solid phonics background and rapid ability to decode text compounds as children read more text. The second grade student that is lacking in these phonics skills may not get the opportunity to catch up without specific phonics interventions. The data indicated that Skill Builder lessons had an impact on the second grade children’s fluency development and these positive results are attributed the differentiated lesson format. Most phonics programs present a fixed sequence of lessons scheduled from the beginning to the end of the school year (NRP, 2000). The advantage of Skill Builder lessons was that the lessons were systematically sequenced based on the complexity and applicability of sounds to decoding text and the lessons went further than the typical phonics lessons in second grade. The second grade student that was ready, based on assessment data, could start later in the Skill Builder lesson sequence, for example with I-6 vowel patterns “ew”, “ue”, and “eu” and practice words like few, blue and feud while simultaneously learning new vocabulary to apply the skill.
Second grade students’ reading fluency improved after Skill Builder lessons because students were better able to rapidly identify sounds and apply this skill to reading fluency assessments. Interviews of second grade teachers revealed that teachers at this level had to review and research more to plan phonics lessons. This was because typically phonics lessons are about two years, from about the second nine weeks of kindergarten through the first nine weeks of second grade. Teachers needed additional skills to teach the lessons and students needed more time for learning. This indicates that time spent with the more advanced phonics skills is limited for second graders and needs to be expanded to improve children’s phonics and reading fluency skills. Skill Builder lessons picked up these skills for students where phonics lessons in the classroom were ending or diminishing. This would be at the instructional point of vowel patterns like “ou”, “oo”, “au”, “ough”, and r-controlled vowels continuing through silent consonants and schwa sounds. Additionally, second grade children that were struggling with earlier skills had the opportunity to re-learn and review the more basic skills and then apply the skills in reading connected text. Both these opportunities for learning resulted in improved fluency scores.

The same application of phonics skills to reading fluency should have applied to first grade students’ reading abilities. The first grade students’ reading fluency as measured by WCPM increased but not significantly. Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006) offer a possible explanation.

While WCPM has been found to be a stable performance score, some variance can be expected due to several uncontrollable factors. These consists of a student’s familiarity or interest in the content of the passage, a lack of precision in the timing of the passage, or
mistakes made in calculating the final score due to unnoticed student errors. Both human error and measurement error are involved in every assessment. (p. 640)

In addition to the possibility of measurement error, there is also the possibility that because phonics is still a large part of first grade instruction and even though Skill Builder lessons were successful they may have supplanted classroom instruction rather than augmented or extended instruction. First grade teachers reported feeling relieved that specific phonics skills were targeted to children’s needs during Skill Builder lessons and that this eased the efforts needed in the homeroom classroom during guided reading lessons. In implementing a supplemental intervention like Skill Builder lessons, educational leaders and teachers should be cautioned to continue the level and rigor of instruction in the homeroom. If the phonics lessons are intended to supplant the homeroom requirements, then teachers could begin specific fluency exercises to increase student reading rates and measurement outcomes. Heubach and Stahl (2005) reported that “the transition between initial decoding and automaticity may come only with practice” (p.27). They recommended direct instruction of fluency with the reading of a wide variety of text and repeated readings.

First grade children’s reading fluency improved but not as rapidly as the second grade students; however, teachers were relieved of the necessity to differentiate phonics lessons to the same intensity without Skill Builder lessons.

The success of Skill Builder lessons can also be attributed to student and teacher motivation. Phonics instruction is often considered to be boring drill and a practice with daily doses of worksheets. The NRP’s Executive Summary on Phonics Instruction (2000), suggested that “future research on phonics instruction should investigate how best to motivate children in classrooms to learn the letter-sound associations and to apply that knowledge to reading and
writing (p.97).” Skill Builder lessons provided this motivation. The design of the Skill Builder lessons, which included requirements for hands-on activities and prohibited worksheets and paper-pencil practice, was engaging and motivating to the children. Without exception, the children described Skill Builder lessons as “games”. This view of the lessons by students is a credit to the planning that teachers accomplished. Barth (2002) defines school culture “as the way a school does things.” Skill Builder lesson planning changed the way teachers approached lesson planning. This change had an impact on the school’s culture. Teachers gave lesson planning for phonics high priority and the result was creative lessons that children enjoyed. Skill Builder lessons followed the suggestions of research to make phonics interesting and not boring. Lessons were playful and fun, interactive, and not evaluative (Yopp, 1992, Starrett, 2006). The students’ enjoyment of lessons and the desire to move to another Skill Builder teacher was a motivational factor that caused children to attend to the lessons and master skills. The few students that were moved back in the sequence of lessons were not stigmatized with failure because the children did not grasp the vertical sequence of lessons. Skill Builder lessons motivated children and was also motivating to staff.

The school-wide involvement of every certified teacher in the building was a motivational factor for staff. Every teacher became part of every child’s mastery of one component of learning to read. This connection throughout the school caused teachers that needed better skills to re-educate themselves in phonics. Teachers were accountable not to test scores or to administrators, but to each other and student learning. As children returned to their homeroom classroom and reading instruction continued with phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension, the phonics skills that were mastered in Skill Builders lessons became tools in children’s reading strategies. It became a matter of professional pride to ensure that the children
in each teacher’s Skill Builder group received the instruction that they needed to be successful.
The success of the children became a shared experience for the teachers.

Wagner’s (2006) defines school culture as the “shared experiences both in school and out of school that create a sense of community, family and team membership” (p.41). The engagement and interest of parents played an important role in the success of Skill Builder lessons. As children moved to new Skill Builder groups parents came to know more teachers. Parents’ communication with teachers about Skill Builder lessons or their child’s experience with a teacher during Skill Builder lesson increased communication between parents and the school community. Parents were better informed about the staff and used these introductions to more teachers that came from Skill Builder lessons to help make decisions about the placement of their children. Parents requested teachers for their children for the coming school-year based on the positive interactions that Skill Builder lessons provided. Comments from parents like “My child enjoyed this teacher in Skill Builder lessons, please put her in that classroom for next school year.” became a part of the planning for the new school year. Students’ discussion about Skill Builders with parents was positive force in the growth of school and community relationships.

The school culture was healthy prior to Skill Builder lessons as exemplified by the stakeholders’ willingness to work together, solve problems and confront challenges (Deal, 1998). Teachers and school leaders spent time discussing how to improve instruction, particularly how to improve reading. The impetus of Skill Builders was an examination of children’s reading achievement scores and the search for underlying deficits in prerequisite skills. The improvement of phonics skills was identified by teachers, interventionists, and school administrators. Throughout this participatory leadership environment, the focus was always on
student success. The identification of a need for differentiated phonics lesson came from teacher awareness of student needs. The willingness to implement the lessons was evidence of teacher concern for students. Skill Builder lessons worked because everyone wanted it to work. The teachers that needed to improve their skills with delivery of phonics lessons put forth the effort to learn and implement new instructional strategies. The administrative staff worked to organize and continually reorganize the student assignments. Children maneuvered the school building and cooperated during the movement to new classrooms. Skill Builder lessons presented opportunities to improve on a positive environment. Terrance Deal (1998) describes the attributes of a positive culture that include purpose and collegiality. These are descriptions of the school culture during Skill Builder lessons. There was a sense of purpose where teachers poured their hearts into teaching and an environment of teacher collegiality was evident as teachers worked hard together for instructional improvement and children’s success.

In a healthy school culture, school leadership and teachers must reach consensus on curriculum scope and sequence and instructional elements. Some interviewed teachers reported that a few teachers complained about Skill Builder lessons. Wilhelm (2009) advises that administrators “hold potentially uncomfortable, private, face to face conversations with reluctant staff. (p.26).” Working through the development and implementation of Skill Builder lessons presented this opportunity for conversations. Addressing this negativity directly through face to face discussions allowed the teachers to express their points of view and to gain an understanding of the goal of the differentiated phonics lessons. Although the teachers that complained about Skill Builder lessons still may have harbored a negative attitude, they did understand how the lessons would be beneficial and were willing participants. Every teacher wanted his or her children to be successful and if reluctantly participating in instructional
innovations like Skill Builders might help children, then even the more skeptical teachers were willing to give Skill Builder lessons a chance because Skill Builder lessons provided an opportunity to meet many children’s instructional needs. This opportunity became a strong positive force in teacher willingness to participate. Working to engage all teachers in a favorable way with the Skill Builder lessons also provided an opportunity to build relationships.

The opportunities to communicate and build relationships with other teachers, parents and many more children were an essential component of Skill Builders. Hoyle and Slater (2001, pg 794) explain, “we must create schools that lay the foundations for community, that give our children experiences that will stimulate their desire to be connected to other human beings in a common enterprise.” Skill Builder lessons became the “common enterprise” which contributed substantially to student learning. The Skill Builder structure organized children to teach them where they were and worked to demonstrate to children that the school community cares about them. Children came to school with enthusiasm because the adults worked to tailor lessons to their needs and to make the lessons child centered, and fun. The differentiated lessons helped children to feel success, and avoid embarrassment and to find a comfortable place to learn as evidenced by the second grader and kindergartener working together successfully.

In addition to the increased interaction among teachers, students and parents, the process of interviewing teachers about Skill Builder lessons provided an opportunity to examine teacher personal development and attitudes about instruction. For example, a connection that did not previously exist was made during an interview when a teacher described her entry into education after leaving a business career. She described her desire to provide a better education for her child than she received and the opportunity to spend more time parenting. Consequently, she left a lucrative business career to enter education. This paralleled my own goals and decisions about
becoming a teacher and provided new common ground. Commonalties were also discovered when a first grade teacher described her experience during Skill Builder lessons while earning National Board Certification. The shared experiences of the National Board process provided an opportunity for discussion that served to improve understanding of this teacher’s motivation.

When the goal of the research study was explained to participants, their reflection on the process of Skill Builder lessons and the interviews provided a venue for teachers to make suggestions for improved instruction. Several teachers suggested the sharing of lessons through cataloging and loaning of materials in the school bookroom. The excitement of the teachers inspired many ideas for instructional delivery through the differentiated skill grouping. Teachers presented ideas about topics for other Skill Builder lesson topics such as vocabulary development and comprehension strategies. These ideas exemplified the teachers’ willingness to implement structural change.

Terry Wilhelm (2009) prescribed a two pronged effort to provide for students. He compared this to the running shoes for a race to help children. The left shoe is the structural change that requires a school-wide commitment to implement strategies. In this study, Skill Builder lessons and grouping for differentiation were the structural changes that required teacher commitment. The right shoe is the cultural shift. Teachers have to believe that their responsibility to ensure that all children learn and that learning must be engaging for children, teachers and parents. This is the cultural impact that Skill Builder lessons encouraged in the participants. This cultural shift provided an opportunity for the school setting to become or more loving and caring environment.

Nel Noddings (2005) described a sequence of events that leads to a school that cares and a culture that promotes loving students. First, we listen and cooperate with students. Second, we
learn about their needs and working habits. Then knowing the children and what they need, we are inspired to increase our own competence. In a small way, through something as basic as differentiated phonics instruction, teachers got to know many children, one another, and parents. Children had many opportunities to be successful and observe many caring adults working to make school fun through child centered lessons. While working to improve reading achievement, the process of creating, planning, and delivering Skill Builder lessons had a positive impact on the school culture. The experience of Skill Builder lessons made our school a better place to learn and to love one another.
REFERENCES
References


APPENDIX A
Appendix A
Permission to Conduct Research

March 4, 2011

Ms. Margaret Boyd
1177 Hayne Street
Memphis, TN 38119

Dr. Douglas Davis
Leadership and Counselor Education
University, MS 38677

Dear Ms. Boyd and Dr. Davis:

This is to inform you that your application to conduct research with human participants, The Effect of Differentiated Phonics Lessons on Fluency and School Culture (Protocol 11-175), has been approved as Exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(1).

Please remember that all of The University of Mississippi’s human participant research activities, regardless of whether the research is subject to federal regulations, must be guided by the ethical principles in The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research.

It is especially important for you to keep these points in mind:

- You must protect the rights and welfare of human research participants.

- Any changes to your approved protocol must be reviewed and approved before initiating those changes.

- You must report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others.

If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at (662) 915-7452.

Sincerely,

Diane W. Lindsey
Coordinator, Institutional Review Board

A Great American Public University
www.olemiss.edu
APPENDIX B
Appendix B
Approval from Superintendent

LAFAYETTE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT
OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT
(662) 234-3271
Fax: (662) 236-3019

The University Of Mississippi
Institutional Review Board
100 Barr Hall
University, MS 38677

Dear Madam or Sir,

Margaret Boyd has permission to conduct her study, The Effect of Differentiated Phonics Lessons on Fluency and School Climate. She may have access to student test scores, writing samples, and may interview students and teachers with written consent.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Mike Foster
Superintendent

100 COMMODORE DR. • OXFORD, MISSISSIPPI 38655
APPENDIX C
Appendix C

SKILL BUILDER PROGRESS REPORT

STUDENT: ________________________ HOMEROOM TEACHER: ________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPETENCY 1 – C</th>
<th>SKILL(S)</th>
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</tr>
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<td>Concepts of Print / Language Skills</td>
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<td>Letter Recognition p, n, i, h, r, l</td>
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<td>Letter Recognition d, g, o, k, w, j</td>
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<td>Letter Sounds / c, p, n /</td>
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<td>Letter Sounds / i, h, r, k /</td>
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<td>B – 5</td>
<td>Letter Sounds / l, d, g, o /</td>
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<td>Letter Sounds / j, v, q, u /</td>
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<td>Letter Sounds / e, w, x, y, z /</td>
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<td>Blending Sounds in CVC words</td>
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<td>Short Vowel Sounds CVC – à</td>
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<td>Short Vowel Sounds CVC – ĩ</td>
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<td>C – 4*</td>
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<td>Final Consonant Blends – nt, st, sk</td>
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<td>Final Consonant Blends – nd, Id</td>
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<td>Digraphs – medial &amp; final tch, ck</td>
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<td>G – 3</td>
<td>Digraphs – final ll, ss, ff</td>
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<td>I - 3* Long Vowel Sound – ò oa, ow, oe</td>
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<td>I - 4* Long Vowel Sound – ī igh, ie</td>
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<td>I - 5* Vowel Sounds of y – long ē &amp; long ī</td>
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<td>J - 1 R-controlled / ar /, / or /</td>
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<td>J - 2 R-controlled / er /, / ĭr /, / ur /</td>
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<td>K - 2 Diphthongs – oi, oy</td>
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<td>O - 1 Long Vowel ē – ei, eigh (weigh)</td>
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<td>O - 2 Long Vowel ē – ie, ey, ei (thief, key, neither)</td>
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<td>P - 1 Silent Consonants – kn, mb, gn, wh, wr</td>
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<td>Q - 1 Schwa Sound – ā (across), le (people)</td>
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<td>R - 2 ch – / k / (chorus), sch – / sk / (school)</td>
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<tr>
<td>W - 1 Vocabulary</td>
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VITA

Margaret Mary Quinlan Boyd was born in Providence, Rhode Island on October 29, 1956. Her educational degrees include: a Bachelor of Arts degree in Humanities from San Francisco State University in May 1979, a Master of Arts in Teaching from The University of Memphis in December 1994, and both a Specialist Degree in May 2005 and a Doctor of Philosophy in August 2011 in Educational Leadership from The University of Mississippi.

Ms. Boyd began her career in the field of education by teaching seven to twelve year-old children at the Cendrillon Montessori School in Memphis, Tennessee. She taught kindergarten for the Holly Springs Separate School District in Holly Springs, Mississippi. She also taught for the Pontotoc County Schools and the New Albany Public Schools. She served as an assistant principal at New Albany Elementary School from 2002 to 2004 and as principal at Lafayette Elementary School in Oxford, Mississippi from 2004 to 2011. While in Oxford, she served as a board member to the Lafayette Endowment for Education and a cooperating clinical instructor for the University of Mississippi students in elementary education and leadership.

Ms. Boyd’s main educational interest is language arts curriculum and instruction for beginning readers and writers. This led to National Board for Professional Teachers Certification as an Early Child Generalist in 2000. She was a member of the Mississippi Department of Education Pre-Kindergarten curriculum writing team. She is trained in Guided Reading – First reading Instruction, Project Read – Phonology and Written Expression, and the Mississippi State University Writing Project.