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Literacy Strategies for Increasing a Kindergartener’s Letter Identification and Letter Sound Recognition: A Self-Study

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Literacy Strategies for Increasing a Kindergartener’s Letter Identification and Letter Sound Recognition: A Self-Study

By

Melissa Schultz

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of
The College at Brockport, State University of New York in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education
Abstract

In this research study I explored best early childhood literacy practices and approaches to use to aid in early childhood students’ acquisition of early literacy skills. This study was conducted as a self-study to answer the question what are the literacy strategies and best practices that are effective for teaching alphabet knowledge? My study was conducted using a qualitative, narrative based approach through the daily journaling of my observations, feelings and wonderings. My study was an improvement-aimed study designed to improve my ability to support my students who struggle with the letter identification and letter sound acquisition. Daily observations were recorded and weekly reflections were completed over five weeks on my instructional approaches and a trial and error approach was used with the instructional strategies that I introduced to my students for the purpose of finding numerous best early childhood literacy practices, approaches, and strategies that were effective in the acquisition of early literacy skills.
# Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction ................................................................................................... 1  
  Problem Statement ........................................................................................................ 1  
  Significance of the Problem .......................................................................................... 2  
  Purpose .......................................................................................................................... 3  
  Rationale ....................................................................................................................... 5  
  Methodology ................................................................................................................ 5  
Chapter Two: Literature Review ......................................................................................... 7  
  Alphabet Knowledge (AK) Instruction ............................................................................ 7  
  Phonics Instruction ....................................................................................................... 9  
  Development of Alphabet Knowledge and At-Risk Students ..................................... 10  
Chapter Three: Methods and Procedures ......................................................................... 13  
  Introduction .................................................................................................................. 13  
  Questions ..................................................................................................................... 13  
  Context of the Study .................................................................................................... 13  
  Participants and Positionality of the Researcher ....................................................... 14  
  Methods of Data Collection ....................................................................................... 15  
  Procedures ................................................................................................................... 16  
  Criteria for Trustworthiness ....................................................................................... 17  
  Limitations of the Study ............................................................................................. 18  
Chapter Four: Findings and Results ................................................................................. 19  
  October 20, 2014 – Celebration Ribbons and the Alphabet Chart ............................. 19  
  Reflection ................................................................................................................... 21  
  October 27, 2014 – The Letters in Our Names .......................................................... 23  
  Reflection ................................................................................................................... 25  
  November 3, 2014 – Letter Sorting and Some Review ............................................. 26  
  Reflection ................................................................................................................... 28  
  November 10, 2014 – Alphabet Chart Cookie Trays .................................................. 29  
  Reflection ................................................................................................................... 31  
  November 17, 2014 – Letter Sound Matching ............................................................. 33  
  Reflection ................................................................................................................... 35
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five: Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for My Teaching</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Student Learning</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Future Research</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Thoughts</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A - <em>Letter/Sound Assessment</em></td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B - <em>The Letters in Our Name</em></td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C - The Letters in Our Name</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D - Magnetic Letter Sort</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One: Introduction

Students enter Kindergarten with differing abilities. Some students are able to write their names and read simple sight words on the first day of school, while other students may not even be able to recite the alphabet. With the implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards, expectations for student learning outcomes are even higher. Kindergarten is no longer the place where students learn letters and letter sounds; it is now a place where students learn the foundations for reading right from the beginning of the year. In order for students to meet the anticipated grade-level expectations for the year, it is expected that students will come to kindergarten with letter and letter sound knowledge, or alphabet knowledge.

In my school district, students come in during the summer before school starts to participate in Kindergarten screening. During this screening, student’s letter knowledge, letter sound knowledge, ability to recognize their name, as well as a number of math skills are assessed. To meet beginning of the year benchmarks in our district, a student must know at least 12 letters and 4 letter sounds. Ideally, students will come in knowing most of their letters and at least half of their letter sounds. Each group of students we screen brings a different skill set to our grade-level, and this year was no different.

Problem Statement

In previous years, we have had most of our kindergarten students, district-wide, meet or exceed these benchmarks during screening. If a student failed to meet the benchmarks, most had caught up by the end of the first 10-week marking period. This school year, the results of the Kindergarten screening illustrated this group of students possessed lower and limited skill levels
than incoming kindergarteners from previous years. Even those students who had previously attended a preschool program, such as Head Start of Pre-Kindergarten, failed to meet the prescribed benchmarks. As the kindergarten team – three general education classroom teachers and I as the consultant special education teacher, we expressed deep concern over these results. As the school year started and we began to informally assess our students, this concern grew deeper and deeper. We spent a lot of time discussing ideas and strategies that we could implement throughout the day to provide our students with as many opportunities as possible to build their alphabet knowledge. In order for our students to make the gains that were necessary to become successful readers and writers throughout the school year, it was crucial that the foundational skills of learning letter names and letter sounds were already in their schema.

As we settled into the routine and structure of our classroom throughout the first few weeks of school, many of our students made great gains in their alphabet knowledge. We noticed these students picking up the letter names and even some of the letter sounds throughout our large group and small group reading instruction. However, while there were those students who were making gains, there were still quite a few students who were not.

**Significance of the Problem**

Recent studies suggest that a student’s alphabet knowledge in kindergarten is a predictor of their future literacy success. According to Piasta & Wagner (2010), a child’s knowledge of letter names and sounds is the best predictor of reading and spelling abilities. Students in preschool and kindergarten who struggle with letter names and sounds are also likely to struggle with learning to read. When students struggle with letter name and letter sound acquisition, they fall behind their peers leading to gaps in spelling, reading and comprehension skills.
A study conducted by Molfese et al. (2011) states that children who are proficient in identifying letters – naming upper and lower case letters, recognizing beginning and ending words sounds – when they enter kindergarten show stronger skills at the end of kindergarten and in first grade in phonological processing and word reading skills compared to their peers who are not proficient in identifying letters when they enter kindergarten. Not only did Molfese et al. (2011) find this relationship between these early literacy skills, they also determined that there are correlations between a young child’s writing skills and their knowledge of letter identification and letter sound association.

The relationship between a student’s letter name and letter sound knowledge, especially at the beginning of kindergarten, plays a significant role in that student’s future success in reading and writing. My study is important because it may provide information for teachers regarding literacy strategies to implement with students who are struggling with learning letter names and letter sounds to increase the students’ alphabet knowledge skills. Without my conducting this type of research, teachers may not be aware of the significance of the correlation between a student’s letter acquisition skills and their future literacy success. My study will provide them with effective literacy strategies to use with their struggling students.

Purpose

The purpose of my study is to help me gain insight and understanding into the ways in which I can help my students, who have yet to meet district prescribed benchmarks, acquire letter names and letter sounds knowledge. I will research several studies that explore the different approaches used in teaching letter names and letter sounds. Then, based on my research, I will implement literacy strategies into my teaching that are appropriate for the students that I work with. I firmly believe that in order for students to be successful throughout their schooling, they need a solid
foundation in literacy. While kindergarten used to be that place to build that foundation, it is now critical for students to attend a prekindergarten program prior to beginning formal schooling. When a student doesn’t have prior letter identification and letter sound association experiences and knowledge, or is still struggling with the foundational skills of letter name and letter sound knowledge, it is vital that we provide as many quality opportunities throughout the beginning of kindergarten to strengthen and/or build that foundation.

It is my hope that through my self-study, I will be more informed as a teacher of the best early childhood literacy practices and approaches to use to aid in early childhood students’ acquisition of early literacy skills. Furthermore, my research will allow me I to build a tool kit of literacy strategies that I can use throughout my teaching career. My self-study will not only help me find strategies that I can use in my teaching, but find strategies that I can share with my team that they may be able to use in working with their students who are struggling with letter identification and letter sound knowledge. Furthermore, the insight gained from my self-study will inform the thinking of present and future educators regarding the best practices and approaches to use to aid in early childhood students’ acquisition of early literacy skills.

Throughout my self-study, I will be documenting my teaching practices and observations of student responses to those practices in a research journal. I will also continue to research effective literacy strategies for teaching letter name and letter sounds that I can implement into my teaching. As a result of my self-study and the research I conduct, I hope to answer the following question:

1. What are the literacy strategies and best practices that are effective for teaching alphabet knowledge?
Rationale

In my role as consultant special education teacher and graduate student, beginning to work on my Capstone Project, student preparedness in letter identification and letter sound recognition when entering kindergarten raised many red flags. I knew that I wanted to make this the focus of my Capstone project, and I wanted to look specifically at the strategies and techniques that I use in my small groups to build my kindergarteners’ letter identification knowledge and letter sound fluency that is so critical to their success not only in our classroom, but throughout their entire school career.

Methodology

My study was designed to be a qualitative self-study. Current research informs us that self-study is an effective method of informing and improving our teaching practice, as well as assisting in our growth and development professionally. My study followed the self-study protocol as described by Anastasia Samaras in her book *Self Study Teacher Research: Improving Your Practice Through Collaborative Inquiry* (2010). I observed while teaching in a small rural school district in Western New York. I had been a long-term substitute in the district before being hired as the Consultant Special Education teacher for Kindergarten and first grade at the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year. Throughout my teaching, I have worked with many students who have struggled with letter identification and letter sound knowledge. This school year however, there were far more students struggling with those skills than in previous years.

There are five defining characteristics of a self-study: (1) self-initiated and focused, (2) improvement-aimed, (3) interactive, (4) multiple, primarily qualitative methods, and (5) exemplar-based validation (Samaras, 2011). Each of these characteristics was included in my
research. The self-study that I conducted was self-initiated, based on an area of need that I saw in my classroom and was focused on my development as a teacher of early literacy skills. My findings throughout my research will allow me to improve my competency and capabilities and deepen my understanding of literacy development as a teacher who supports all students in their letter knowledge instruction. My study was conducted using a qualitative, narrative based approach through the daily journaling of my observations, feelings and wonderings. My study was an improvement-aimed study because it was designed to improve my ability to support my students who struggle with the letter identification and letter sound acquisition. I recorded my observations daily and then reflected weekly on my instructional approaches and used a trial and error approach with the instructional strategies that I introduced to my students for the purpose of finding numerous strategies that were helpful to my students.

My study took place over a five week time period. Through my on-going reflection and journaling during this five week time period, I was able to enhance and broaden my understanding of the most effective strategies and techniques that I could use to help my students who struggle with letter identification and letter sound acquisition. It is said that “critical reflection is not only a way of approaching teaching – it is a way of life. The more teachers explore, the more they discover. The more they question, the more they access new realms of possibility” (Doyran, 2013). The more self-aware I am able to become regarding my teaching practices and pedagogy when trying to address the diverse needs of my students will lead to more reflective, efficient teaching.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

As a Consultant Special Education teacher, it is my responsibility to continuously search for strategies and techniques that support my students who are struggling with letter identification and letter sound acquisition. Finding and using strategies to support my students was the goal of this self-study. In order to inform my self-study, I reviewed literature related to the different approaches to alphabet knowledge instruction as well as phonics instruction. I also looked at the development of alphabet knowledge in students at-risk for future academic difficulties and how best to provide instruction to those students.

Alphabet Knowledge (AK) Instruction

In their article “Enhanced Alphabet Knowledge Instruction: Exploring a Change of Frequency, Focus, and Distributed Cycles of Review,” Cindy Jones and D. Ray Reutzel explored Alphabet Knowledge (AK) instruction in 13 kindergarten classroom in a number of at-risk urban schools. Before embarking on their own study, Jones and Reutzel (2012) explored the research surrounding the design of AK instruction. In reviewing the research, five factors or advantages that influence a student’s learning of letter names and sounds were identified. These five advantages include own-name advantage, alphabet order advantage, letter frequency advantage, letter-name pronunciation advantage, and consonant phoneme acquisition order advantage (Jones & Reutzel, 2012, p.453). In the first year of the qualitative study, nine of the kindergarten classrooms (237 students) used Enhanced Alphabet Knowledge (EAK) instruction which included letter-a-day pacing, distributed review cycles (teachers have the ability to allocate more or less instruction to the individual letters based on difficulty), and lessons that
efficiently teach students AK. The other four classrooms (92 students) continued following the standard cycle of a letter-a-week approach to AK instruction (Jones & Reutzel, 2012, p. 456).

Jones and Reutzel (2012) set out to demonstrate that when the frequency with which students’ exposure and practice with letters increased, greater focus was placed on troublesome letters, and lessons were taught explicitly through distributed review cycles, there would be greater success in learning alphabet letters. The results of the two year study of these four diverse, at-risk schools indicated that with EAK instruction, teachers observed an increase in students’ achievement (Jones & Reutzel, 2012, p. 460).

Similar to the study performed by Jones and Reutzel (2012), Justice, Pence, Bowles, and Wiggins (2006) also conducted a two year qualitative study in which they examined the order in which children learn alphabet letters. In the study done by Justice et al., they selected 16 preschool classrooms serving primarily at-risk children with diverse backgrounds. Eight of the classrooms were located in the rural and Appalachian region of Virginia, while the other eight classrooms were located in the mid-central industrial and light farming region of Virginia (Justice, Pence, Bowles, and Wiggins, 2006, p. 379). Justice et al. used four of the five advantages to conduct their research that Jones and Reutzel (2012) used in their study. These four advantages, although named differently, include own-name advantage, letter-order hypothesis, letter-name pronunciation effect, and consonant-order hypothesis. Unlike Jones and Reutzel (2012), the aim of the study conducted by Justice et al. (2006) was not to investigate the impact of specific approaches to alphabet instruction, but to explore the factors that influence the order the letters of the alphabet are learned. When looking at each of the hypotheses, children were 1.5 times as likely to know letters in their first name as letters not in their first name and
children were 1.02 times more likely to know a letter one position earlier in the alphabet than the letters in their first name (Justice et al., 2006, p. 377-378).

**Phonics Instruction**

Letter identification and letter sound knowledge is the foundation to reading and writing development and is one of the most significant early indicators of reading and writing success. Alphabet knowledge begins with the introduction of the twenty-six upper and lower case letters through naming, recognition, and formation. Teaching alphabetic knowledge associates a letter with a known symbol, or in some cases, taught in association with a picture and a keyword that begins with the letter (Tompkins, 2010). During the emergent literacy years, the alphabetic knowledge concepts are best taught using games and activities that students are actively engaged in such as matching and sorting. These activities provide students with the ability to learn these new concepts in a nonthreatening manner.

During daily guided reading times, students are able to receive skills specific instruction in the areas where they may be struggling. During our guided reading times, phonics skills must be explicitly modeled to students and they must have multiple opportunities to practice those skills in the supported guided reading setting (Klein, 2012). For students to be successful readers they need to be taught these phonics skills; they need to have the knowledge and understanding of sounds, rhymes, syllables, and phonemes. Klein (2012) states that “once letter symbols are introduced, students should be able to manipulate the sounds within words by using their knowledge of sound/symbol relationships.”

As students master their alphabet knowledge, they can begin to build their phonemic awareness – the understanding of the ways that sounds function in words. Through early reading
instruction, readers are taught to segment sounds, blend sounds, and identify words that begin or end with similar sounds. Students are then asked to create new words by substituting, adding, and/or deleting sounds in words. The goal of phonemic awareness is to teach children to associate sounds with individual letters. A systematic phonics instruction approach will bring about the greatest improvements in reading ability, especially for those students struggling with letter identification and letter sound recognition at the beginning of kindergarten (Klein, 2012).

Development of Alphabet Knowledge and At-Risk Students

The term “at-risk” is widely used to describe children and youth within many different group settings. This term can refer to a child’s academics, family environment, or community. In an academic setting, it refers to a student or group of students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically (Moore, 2006). There have been many studies conducted which explore the profiles of emergent literacy skills among preschool and prekindergarten children who are at-risk of future academic difficulties

In a study conducted by Sonia Cabell, Laura Justice, Timothy Konold, and Anita McGinity (2011), patterns of variability in the emergent literacy skills of 492 preschoolers enrolled in 93 publicly-funded programs who were at risk for academic difficulties was explored. Cabell et al. define emergent literacy skills as the precursors to skilled and fluent reading and include oral language skills (syntax and vocabulary) and code-related skills (print concepts, alphabet knowledge, emergent writing, and phonological awareness). Cabell et al. used cluster analysis to identify patterns of emergent literacy skills of children based on their performance on direct assessment of their oral language and code-related skills. The cluster analysis revealed five clusters of children. Cluster 1 included children with the most desirable profile characterized by strong oral language and code-related performance. Children in this cluster
could recognize, on average, 16 upper-case letters and could write many letters in their names and included statistically more Caucasian participants. Cluster 2 included children characterized by average oral language and high average code-related skills. Children in this cluster could identify about 20 letters and could write many, if not all, of the letters in their names and contained a larger percentage of African American participants. Cluster 3 included children with average performance across all emergent literacy measures. Children in this cluster identified about four letters and wrote their names with letter-like forms or a combination of letter forms and correct letters and contained statistically more Caucasian participants. Cluster 4 included children displaying relatively weak oral language skills and broad code-related weaknesses. Children in this cluster could recognize about three upper-case letters and wrote their names with scribbles or letter-like forms. The final cluster, Cluster 5, included children of the least desirable profile displaying the lowest levels of oral language and code-related skills. These students identified between three and four letters and wrote their names with scribbles and contained greater numbers of Hispanic children (Cabell et al., 2011). The results of this study demonstrated that a child’s emergent literacy development is not marked by random variability, but that a child’s strengths and weaknesses reflect consistent profiles of performance. These profiles were affected by environmental influences as well as school experiences (Cabell et al., 2011).

Studies which illustrated children who are experiencing emergent literacy deficits in their preschool and prekindergarten years may be at-risk for future academic difficulties; therefore, early identification is vital to encourage and support long-term academic success (Lonigan, 2006). Without this early intervention, the children who have difficulty with alphabet knowledge and who continue to experience problems with decoding often miss the opportunity
to develop the fluency required to become a skilled reader, experience decreased motivation to read, and miss out on opportunities to acquire vocabulary and other content knowledge (Lonigan, 2006).

Dana Hilbert and Sarah Eis (2014) conducted a study exploring the characteristics and findings of an early literacy intervention program which was implemented to assist the development of the critical emergent literacy skills among 154 pre-kindergarten students identified at low-income and at-risk for delays in literacy skill development. Hilbert and Eis’ (2014) utilized a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design which included an experimental group of preschool children from a low-income background who participated in an intervention program targeting print knowledge, vocabulary, and phonological awareness and a control group of preschoolers who did not receive any intervention. The results of this study indicated that a child’s literacy development can be positively impacted with early intervention in the pre-kindergarten classroom. Specifically, this study promoted the effectiveness of the $\textit{Read It Again Pre-K!}$ (RIA) as an effective Tier II intervention for children at-risk for future reading difficulties.
Chapter Three: Methods and Procedures

Introduction

My study was designed to explore letter name and letter sound instruction at the kindergarten level. This chapter will discuss the participants, procedures, and data collection methods I plan to use. It will also explain the methods for analysis of data and any limitations that this study may have.

Questions

The question that I hope to answer based on the methods and procedures implemented throughout this self-study are:

1. What are literacy strategies and best practices that are effective for teaching alphabet knowledge?

Context of the Study

I conducted this study in my kindergarten classroom in a rural elementary school in Western New York. According to the 2010-2011 New York State Report Card, there are a total of 379 Pre-K – grade 6 students in the school. The demographic make-up of the school includes 86 percent White, 9 percent Hispanic or Latino, 4 percent Multiracial, and 1 percent American Indian or Alaska Native. Forty-one percent of the students in the school are eligible for free or reduced price lunches. The most recent census information indicates that the median household income for the school district was $49,821 and the median income for a family was $50,952.

In the kindergarten classroom I push into, there are 14 students: five girls and nine boys. Three students in our classroom have IEP’s and receive consultant teacher services. In addition
to the general education classroom teacher and myself as the special education teacher, there are
two other aides in our classroom – a one-to-one aide and a classroom aide. The students in our
classroom each came to kindergarten with diverse backgrounds and familiarities from their
formal schooling experience to their family environment. However, they all shared the energy
and excitement to learn. No matter what we were doing, they were putting forth their best effort,
eager to learn as much as they could.

Participants and Positionality of the Researcher

This study was conducted following the self-study method; therefore, I was the only
participant. Although I interacted with my students and reflected on those interactions, no data
identifying the students in my classroom was used in this study. Because I am the only
participant, clearly explaining my positionality is extremely important.

I am a 29 year old Caucasian female who has lived in Western New York my entire life. I currently live and teach in a small rural farming community with a population of about 2,300. My father worked in the school district I attended, and my mother was a stay-at-home mom who took care of me and my two siblings as well as a number of other children. I completed my undergraduate work at a private Christian college in Rochester, New York. I received my Bachelor of Science degree in Childhood Inclusive Education in 2008. After graduating, I received my initial teaching certification in Childhood Education and Students with Disabilities grades 1 – 6. After substituting for about a year, I left education and went to work in Human Services as a caseworker for public housing. After an almost 5 year break, I decided that teaching is what I was meant to do. I applied for an extension on my certifications, quit my public housing job, started substitute teaching, and returned to further my learning at the College of Brockport, State University of New York to pursue my Master of Science degree in Literacy
Education birth – grade 12. Since getting back in the education field, I have extended my certifications to include Early Childhood Education and Students with Disabilities Birth – grade 2. I completed a long-term substitute Kindergarten assignment in the inclusive classroom before being hired as the Consultant Special Education teacher for kindergarten and first grade.

In my position as Consultant Special Education teacher, my focus is working with the students in kindergarten and first grade who receive additional services based on their Individualized Education Program (IEP). I am responsible for knowing which areas we must target based on students’ IEP goals, and therefore structure my daily instruction based on students’ needs accordingly. It was out of this focused, individualized instruction that I was able to find the topic for this project.

**Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

Throughout my self-study, I used a research journal to document the activities completed in guided reading groups every Monday. In each entry, I focused specifically on my instruction and how I incorporated different literacy strategies into the guided reading lessons. Each journal entry included a description of each lesson, interactions that I had with students throughout the lesson, how the lessons were differentiated to meet the needs of each group of students, the specific literacy strategies that I incorporated into the lessons as well as any strategies that I were used to manage student behaviors. In addition to documenting my instruction during guided reading groups, I also documented any literacy strategies that were incorporated into whole group instruction and center work.

In addition to the documentation of my instruction, I also used my research journal as a place to collect data and then as an area to reflect on my experiences, focusing on how I felt during the lesson, what was and what was not working, and the changes that I would implement.
in future guided reading groups. In his article *The Research Journal: A Tool for Promoting and Understanding Researcher Development*, Simon Borg (2001, p.160) says that a research journal is not just a place to record events, but it is a forum for reflection where ideas are generated and explored and discoveries are made in and through writing. Borg (2001) also states that research can be emotional and that the research journal can aid the researcher in identifying and expressing these emotions as well as reacting to them.

**Procedures**

My data collection took place over the course of five weeks. In the kindergarten class I teach in, I plan for three guided reading groups each day. In each guided reading lesson, we worked with the leveled guided reading book that corresponds with our reading program and then, for the remainder of the lesson, we worked on building letter identification and letter sound recognition. Throughout my lesson, I kept a notebook at my table to document specific things that my students were saying as well as the questions that I was asking my students. These notes that I took during instruction were beneficial in completing my research journal.

Each day during my planning period, I documented my guided reading lessons in my research journal. Each entry included detailed summaries of my lesson. Included in each entry was any information that was relevant to the particular literacy strategy that I had implemented that week. In each entry, I also reflected on my teaching, focusing on what I felt went well and what I felt I needed to change. I used my research journal to guide my planning for the subsequent week. Based on my entries and if my students were benefiting from the instruction, I was able to incorporate new literacy strategies or modify the current literacy strategies that I had been using throughout the previous week.
Although I documented my guided reading groups each day for five weeks, for the purpose of my study, I will focus on the activities completed and student responses from guided reading groups on Mondays. Each Monday, the new letter from the reading curriculum is introduced to students, and our main focus during reading groups that day is on that letter and completing other activities to build letter naming and letter sound fluencies.

**Criteria for Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure the validity and reliability of my self-study, I documented my instruction over the course of five weeks and then specifically looked at my instruction. This extended duration allowed for the implementation of multiple literacy strategies ensuring that there was adequate time to determine which of those literacy strategies was most effective in helping those students who struggle with letter identification and letter sound recognition. The extended duration of this study enabled me to review my lesson notes and observations multiple times with opportunity for continued reflection to ensure accurate data.

As a teacher-researcher, it was critical for me to ensure that my teaching and interactions with my students were documented in an accurate, concise and unbiased manner. As I was collecting data, my goal was to ensure my research journal included detailed accounts of each of my guided reading lessons as well as reflections on my teaching and the implementation of literacy strategies that would be beneficial for those students struggling with letter identification and letter sound recognition.

According to Samaras (2010), a reliable and valid self-study includes an interactive component. Throughout the entire Capstone project process, I collaborated with my advisor, to discuss the progression of my study. Samaras (2010) also states that maintaining a transparent
research process is critical to a successful self-study. In order to ensure a transparent process, I was open, honest, and reflective about my work as I collaborated with my advisor.

**Limitations of the Study**

The self-study that I conducted had a number of limitations. One limitation was the possibility that, as sole participant of the study, my journal entries may not have enough details. While my intentions were to be extremely precise in my documentation, it is possible that, with the rapid pace of our guided reading lessons along with the unpredictable nature of working with students, some pieces of information could be missed. As a teacher-researcher, my goal is to conduct research that is valid and unbiased, but due to the nature of the teaching profession, there was a possibility that my feelings and opinions could play a part in my daily reflections.

Another limitation to my self-study was the fact that the students that I worked with had had two months of exposure to letter identification and letter sound recognition activities before my observations and reflections began. While many of the students I worked with are still below grade level benchmark and will greatly benefit from continued exposure to different literacy strategies, conducting this self-study earlier in the school year may have yielded different results.

Finally, due to the fact that the design of this research is a self-study, it could result in limited triangulation of my data. This study includes only personal accounts of lessons as well as reflections on those lessons. I am unable to use student work samples and student-teacher interactions to further analyze my teaching.
Chapter Four: Findings

The research surrounding letter identification and letter sound recognition provided a great deal of information about the foundation and rationale surrounding the many different points of view regarding the most effective way these skills are taught. My research provides a solid foundation for educators to make sound educational decisions for their students, but it does not provide educators with specific strategies or best practices for teaching letter identification and letter sound recognition. With the changing demographics within the classroom, different thinking has to occur regarding the strategies and best practices used to teach letter identification and letter sound recognition.

Various action research based studies have employed other strategies such as the use of alphabet books, using matching games for upper and lower case letter forms, or using mnemonics which has demonstrated a capability of maximizing on the learning potential of the student. The journal entries document my weekly interactions of how I implemented the action research based strategies to support my students who were struggling with letter identification and letter sound recognition. Each journal entry is followed by a brief reflection of how I used the various strategies during my instruction, how I modified those strategies when necessary to meet the needs of each of my student, what went well during the lesson, and what I would change when using those strategies in the future. I collected data over a five week time period from October 20, 2014 to November 21, 2014.

October 20, 2014 – Celebration Ribbons and the Alphabet Chart

It has been very clear over the past six weeks that we have many students who are struggling with their letter identification and letter sound recognition. In addition to the students
who have Consultant Teacher Services on their Individualized Education Program (IEP), the classroom teacher and I have grouped students who are able to identify less than half of the upper and lower case letters into three groups that I will be working with over the next six weeks. In order to best plan my teaching over the next six weeks, I began by giving each student a quick letter/sound assessment (Appendix A). Based on this assessment, four out of the six students that I will be working with were able to identify between three and eight letters while the other two students were able to identify between eight and twelve letters. I knew that I had my work cut out for me and not much time.

In addition to working intensely each week on letter identification and letter sound recognition with my students, I still had to follow the reading program our school had adopted. Groups would be twenty minutes in duration and meet daily during our guided reading/centers block. I designated Mondays as the day that my groups would exclusively work on these skills. I grouped my students into three different groups based on their reading levels. I had groups of one student, two students, and three students. My student who worked individually needed the most intensive instruction that is best provided in a one-on-one situation.

I started this morning’s lesson introducing our celebration ribbons. Each student has a ribbon with their name, where they will add the letters that they master to the “legs” of the ribbon. The celebration ribbons have the few letters that each student has already mastered and are hung by my guided reading table where they can easily be accessed as students master even more letters each week. As I was introducing these celebration ribbons, Student A commented “Wow!! I have never gotten a ribbon before. I can’t wait until it is full so I can show my Mommy!” Each student showed great excitement and enthusiasm in the ability to add letters to the ribbons each week.
After introducing the celebration ribbons, we began by reciting the alphabet using our alphabet linking chart that our reading program provides for us. This letter chart is one that the students are familiar with because we have a large version on the bulletin board near the carpet area and as letters are introduced each week, the corresponding picture that is used to introduce the sound is included on the chart. It is also the chart that will be used on a cookie tray to allow for use with magnetic letters in later lessons throughout the coming weeks. We begin with ‘A’, and follow the routine of pointing to the capital letter, lower case letter, and picture all while saying what we were pointing to, followed by making the letter sound. For example, “A, a, apple, /a/; B, b, ball /b/; C, c, cat /c/, etc.” This activity took a majority of our time together as we worked through each letter as a group. In some instances, I would say the letter, picture, and sound first, and the students would repeat it aloud with me. Before dismissing students back to their centers, I explained that a copy of our alphabet chart would be sent home in their take home folders along with directions for how to practice the letters and letter sounds. My students excitedly talked with each other as they went back to working at their centers about when they were going to practice and how excited their mom or dad would be to help them.

I finished guided reading by meeting with each of the other two groups and following the same lesson plan – introducing the celebration ribbons and working with the cookie tray alphabet chart.

**Reflection**

**What I did well**

I felt that overall, this lesson went very well. The students were extremely engaged in the activities and showed great excitement about becoming masters of their letters. I believe that starting this intensive five weeks with a celebration ribbon for each student really sparked their
enthusiasm and their “buy in” of the lesson. Although our actual letter identification and letter sound recognition instruction was limited for this session, I feel that our time was productive and provided a strong starting point for the remainder of instruction over the coming weeks.

What was challenging

The one aspect of this lesson that was a struggle was the time spent using the alphabet charts. Each student had their own chart and was moving through the alphabet at their own pace. Although my groups are small, it became difficult to monitor both students as well as help them with the letters they were struggling with. Although I was diligently trying to ensure that all of my students were naming the correct letters and letter sounds, some students moved swiftly and I did not hear everything they said.

Another challenge during this lesson for me was to keep within 20 minute time frame. I found, as I went through my lessons, my first two guided reading groups met with me for a longer time period and my last guided reading group was limited on the time we had to work together. Having a shorter time to work together during my last guided reading group resulted in rushing through the material. I felt as if the quality of my instruction with my last guided reading group was far below that of my first two guided reading groups.

What I would do differently

For the remainder of the week, instead of giving each student their own alphabet chart, we will complete this piece of instruction as a group. Working together through the alphabet will really give me the opportunity to hear the letters and sounds that each student is saying as well as get an even greater sense of where the focus for each group should be. It will also allow me to determine if the groupings that I currently have are appropriate or if there may be students who are better suited together based on the current letters and sounds they are able to identify.
In addition, I will begin to use a timer to manage my time with my students. It is extremely important that I am providing high quality instruction to all students during guided reading. Managing my time more effectively so that each student gets the about the same amount of instructional time will provide that high quality instruction as well as ensure that my observations used for my study valid and reliable.

**October 27, 2014 – The Letters in Our Names**

Last week was spent focusing on the alphabet chart and becoming familiar with the letters in the alphabet and the sounds that they make. Using the alphabet chart not only provided the students opportunities for exposure to letter names, but also provided the opportunities to work on those beginning concepts of print – reading left to right and return sweep. Many of my students are still struggling with recognizing their name and the letters within it. Julie McKown (2012), author of the blog *Little Literacy Learners*, is someone I subscribe to and receive updates as she writes new blog posts. While I was planning my activities for this week, I came across her blog post in which she discusses activities that she uses with her kinderkids to expose them to the letters in their names. As I was reading through her blog post, I found many of the ideas to be things that would appeal to my students. Among the many activities that I had already planned for the week, I chose one of Julie’s activities to use this morning during guided reading groups – reinforcing the letters in a child’s name.

Our guided reading groups started this morning by introducing the letter from our reading program. We completed our handwriting worksheet and our letter book before we began our letter work activities. Before school, I wrote each student’s name on an 8 ½ x 11 piece of paper. In addition to creating a work mat for each of my students, I also created two sets of letter tiles for each of my students – one uppercase set and one lowercase set (See Appendix C for this
resource in use). We spent time sorting the two sets of letters in their name by size – into upper case and lower case groups. Since my groups are small, we were able to work through each student’s name and say each letter and the sound it makes. After we spent time sorting the letters by size, I put the students name in order, making sure to use the upper case letter at the beginning and the lower case letters throughout. Once the names were spelled correctly using the letter tiles, we said the name, spelled the name, looked closely at the arrangement of the letters and then spelled it one last time. The letter tiles spelling the students’ names were then mixed up and the students had to work on rearranging the letter tiles to correctly spelling their names.

We ‘mixed and fixed’ names a few more times before completing a “Letter In My Name” sort (see Appendix D). Each student was provided with a pile of foam letter stickers. The students looked through the letters and sorted the letters that were in their name and the letters not in their name. Since most students still were unsure of all the letters that made up their name, they were able to use the work mat from the previous activity as a guide. While students were working on sorting, I asked students to identify random letters from the pile. If a student was unsure, we went back to the alphabet chart we introduced a few weeks prior and found the letter and said the letter name two times while pointing to the upper case and lower case letter, picture that was on the chart, and then the letter sound – ie. A, a, apple /a/. After completing the letter sort, we closed the lesson by looking at their letter tile work mat and spelling their name one last time. Students took their letter sort home and were asked to review the letters on their sort each night with an adult.
Reflection

What I did well

I was unsure of how this lesson was going to proceed as many of my students only know the first letter in their name. Despite this, my students were extremely engaged in the lesson. They were very proud to be working with their own name and practicing the letters in it. Having the mat with their name on it was beneficial for all of my students. The task of letter recognition through the manipulation of foam letters to spell students’ names allowed them to be confident in their work and really pushed some students through a task that would otherwise be extremely difficult for them.

What was challenging

Many of my students still rely on the nametag at their table spot to spell their name any time they have to write it. Some students even have to look at their name tag before finding their book box. Many of my students struggled with differentiating between where a capital letter should go and where the lower case letters should go. Although it was modeled in several different areas – their zipper pouches, the work mat, and the name wall – many students still were unable to use the correct cases while building their names. Multiple times throughout the lesson I had to stop students and ask them to look up at their work mat and make sure their work matched the name on their mat. This took a bit longer than I was anticipating due to the confusion between the upper case and lower case letters and where they should be used.

What I would do differently

Since my students struggled so much with differentiating between the upper and lower case letters, in future lessons, I would start with only the capital letter that their name begins with and then the remainder of the letters would be lower case. I feel that it was too much for my
students to have to work on spelling their name AND differentiating between upper and lower case. In the future, I would scaffold this lesson even more, so that I built a mini lesson on the upper and lower case letters as we were working with their names.

Although this lesson was only supposed to last one day, in reflecting on whether my students were successful in this task, I felt that I needed to provide them even more opportunities to practice the letters in their name. When I went home that evening, I created name puzzles for each of my students using sentence strips. I cut the student’s names between each letter with a different pattern so that the puzzles were self-correcting. I gave these name puzzles to my students the next day to work with throughout centers and then to use to practice at home. I think that this is something that I will incorporate into the lesson and possibly replace it with the work mat.

November 3, 2014 – Letter Sorting and Some Review

This week’s reading program unit is a review week for both letters and sight words. We started our lesson with a quick handwriting review for the letters we have learned in the last 6 weeks. Our report card testing requires students to be able to form the letters in the alphabet according to how the reading program teaches them. It was important for us to review these letters because many of my students continue to start their letters at the bottom instead of at the top. We also had quite a few students absent the last two days of the week last week. Many of those absent were the students I work with. While it may not seem like much, missing one or two days of school for students who are already behind makes it that much more difficult to bridge the gap. Because more than half of the students I work with missed instruction during the end of last week, after the quick handwriting review, we completed a more in depth review of the
letters we have learned so far. I then had my students use the work mats and ‘mix and fix’ the letters in their names. After a few rounds of ‘mix and fix,’ we switched gears to letter review.

This week was a great week for us because it was a review week in our reading program. Knowing that this was going to be a review week, I wanted to incorporate an idea from a professional development done by our literacy specialist at the beginning of the year. Our literacy specialist boasts a long history (10+ years) teaching in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten before accepting the position as literacy specialist in our district. Our literacy specialist spent an afternoon working with us on ways to use magnetic letters to teach the alphabet. Magnetic letters look different and feel different in the student’s hands. Allowing them different opportunities to ‘play’ with those letters helps students as they are learning to identify the different letters in the alphabet. With that as my foundation, I wanted to use this review week and spend it sorting magnetic letter tiles in as many ways as possible.

I began this section of my lesson explaining to my students that we were going to be working with the magnetic letters each day during guided reading groups this week. Since magnetic letters aren’t something that we have used since the first few weeks of school, we spent time reviewing the rules and expectations for using these letters. My students seemed excited to get to be able to “play” during our reading time.

After reviewing the rules and briefly talking about different ways we could sort our letters, I handed each student a sorting mat (Appendix E) with columns for letters with curves and letters without curves. Students were able to choose from a large pile of letters in the middle of the guided reading table. As they were sorting, I asked different students why they choose to put a letter in a certain column. I also asked students to try and identify the letters they were sorting. Many students were quickly able to identify some letters and had a more difficult time
with others. The letters that we have already learned through our reading program are the letters that my students use to make many words that they can write were the ones that a few students knew fairly well. In addition to the magnetic letters and the sorting mats, I had alphabet charts readily available for the students so that they could refer back to the chart if necessary to identify the letters.

We concluded our lesson by discussing the different ways that we could sort our letters. I told my students that I would leave the magnetic letters along with the sorting mats out throughout the week.

**Reflection**

**What I did well**

While I have not been teaching for that long, I really feel that this was one of the best lessons that I have taught so far. My students seemed engaged and motivated throughout the entire lesson, even when faced with challenges. I really feel that this activity really appealed to my students who are kinesthetic learners and benefit from the hands-on approach. This activity provided a different medium for them to practice their letter identification besides just pencil and paper or reading the words in a book. Seeing how successful this lesson was, I plan to incorporate more activities like this into as many areas of the curriculum as possible, whenever possible.

**What was challenging**

The most challenging aspect of this lesson had nothing to do with the actual lesson today. The piece that I found most challenging was watching my students struggle with those letters that we had worked on since the beginning of the school year. Throughout the entire lesson, even those students who were struggling to recall the letters that we had already learned were
working extremely hard. It was important for me to provide these students with positive feedback and praise whenever possible to keep them pushing on to complete the activity.

What I would do differently

In the future, I will break this lesson up and use it in two different ways. I believe that it would be beneficial for my students to start these letter sorts right at the beginning of the year. I have noticed that most, if not all, of my students are kinesthetic learners and this type of hands-on activity is beneficial for them to internalize that learning and be able to transfer and recall it during other activities. With that knowledge, I would complete the first section of this lesson using basic sorts – letters with curves and letters without curves as well as a sort by color of the letter. This section of the lesson would be completed at the beginning of the year. The second section would include the more specific sorts that focused on sorting specific letters. These might be sorts based on the letter we were learning during the week, for example, putting all of the letter A on one side of the sorting mat and putting all of the other letters (non-A’s) on the other side of the mat. This would also be an activity that I would send home with those students that would benefit from the extra practice as it is something that does not require too much adult support.

November 10, 2014 – Alphabet Chart Cookie Trays

At this point in our reading curriculum, we are now introducing two letters a week to the students. After completing our letter introduction and our handwriting practice, I introduced the students in my groups to an activity that we would be using for the remainder of the marking period. Our reading program provides us with an alphabet linking chart that corresponds to how each letter is introduced to the student each week and includes the picture the program uses to introduce the sound. Because this activity was not one that we had done in the past, I explained
to my students what my expectations were for student behavior and appropriate use of the materials.

In her book *...With Reading and Writing for All!: A Common Sense Approach to Reading and Writing for Teachers and Parents*, Louise McGrew says that we should “provide only the letters and sounds you have taught because you want to give yet another opportunity to practice and reinforce what the students are learning” (p. 67, 2010). I really felt that this was the best approach to take when introducing this activity to my students. Because we have only learned seven letter names and sounds, the activity would not feel overwhelming for those students who were struggling with identifying those letters that we had already learned.

After introducing the activity to my students, I modeled for them what they would do with each letter. I had a set of letters and an alphabet chart cookie tray for each student and a larger cookie sheet for me to use to model. I began with the letter Aa and told the students that they would start by picking up one letter and finding it’s place on the alphabet chart. I explained that once they found the correct spot on the alphabet chart, they would follow the same routine for each letter – pointing to the capital and saying the letter name, pointing to the lower case and saying the letter name, pointing to the picture word and saying the word, and then say the sound the letter makes. For example, I modeled for my students “A, a, apple, /a/.” Before moving on, I asked my students if they had any questions about what they were to do with each of the letters. Surprisingly, no one in any of my groups asked any questions. We completed two more letters together before the students completed the remainder of the letters independently. As students were working independently, I was monitoring and assisting them with the correct letter name and sound where needed. As students finished sorting their letters, they got their book boxes and quietly read at our reading table until everyone was finished. Once all students were finished, we
went around the table taking turns following the routine for each letter – letter name, letter name, picture word, sound. We finished by practicing the letters one more time reading them as a group.

As students were picking their letters up, I asked them to say the letter name and letter sound before they put the letter in their baggie. Each student was able to successfully say each letter name and sound with the help of their peers. Before sending them back to centers, I reminded my students that I would keep a set of the magnetic letters and an alphabet chart cookie tray out for them to practice during recess, centers, or other independent work time. The students excitedly went back to centers, chatting about when they might have an opportunity to practice before we met the next day for reading groups.

Reflection

What I did well

The one thing that I felt went really well during this activity was the management. Because each student was going to be working at their own pace, especially when we went from working as the group to independent work, it was important to have a quiet activity for the students to be working on while they waited. This kept all of the students in the group focused and working, even when they were all done.

Another thing that I felt went well during this lesson was the use of the Gradual Release model. I started the lesson by modeling for the students and having them watch what I was doing. We worked together to sort and say two more letters and then students were released to finish sorting and saying the letters that were left over. I felt that students were confident in what they were supposed to be doing because they saw it modeled and then got to practice together.
before having to complete the activity on their own. It was also really encouraging to see my students helping their peers during the clean-up of the activity as well.

**What was challenging**

The most challenging aspect of this lesson was working with my second group. Although I explicitly taught each group the expectations for behavior and appropriate use of the materials, this group really struggled with using the materials appropriately. Two of the students needed multiple reminders to refocus and use the materials correctly. Unfortunately, I had to take the alphabet chart cookie tray away and we completed the activity using only the magnetic letters. I did remind them that this was something we were going to go back to at different times throughout the week and when we were able to do this activity again, they were focused and worked hard to complete the activity.

Another challenge during this activity was getting everything done in the twenty minute timeframe that I have to meet with each of my groups. This was a lesson that I wanted to model and practice with them before sending them to work on their own. It was also important to have my students be accountable as they put away their materials and take the time to identify the letters and sounds we were practicing. Two of my groups went over our time by a few minute, but because my third group had two students absent, I was able to make up time in working one-on-one with the student in my last group. This will be something to consider as we use this activity in the future.

**What I would do differently**

One way I would change this lesson would be to start with an even smaller number of letters to work with for the first time. Although we had only learned seven letters before beginning this activity, I think that using only four or five would have been ideal for the
introductory lesson. Once my students were familiar with the activity and the expectations, adding those remaining letters into the activity would be appropriate. In the future, I plan to introduce the activity using four or five letters that most of the students are familiar with. This will cut down on the time it takes to complete this lesson and limit the help needed to identify unknown letters. During later lessons, when not as much modeling and scaffolding is necessary, we can take the time to practice the more challenging letters.

Another piece that I might change would be to introduce the alphabet chart cookie trays to my students earlier in the year. I would introduce them with a simpler activity that just required the students to match the magnetic letter to the letter on the cookie tray and then identify the letter. I feel that if my students previously had some time to ‘play’ with the magnetic letters and cookie trays prior to our short 20 minute guided reading time, we may not have experienced the challenges we had with my second group of students. We may have been able to spend more time practicing the letter names and sounds instead of focusing on inappropriate behaviors.

November 17, 2014 – Letter Sound Matching

This week our guided reading lesson started different from previous weeks. Because next week is Thanksgiving, and we have some assemblies and school-wide events this week, and we would not be meeting for guided reading every day, our kindergarten team decided that we would not follow our reading curriculum for the week. This provided us with the opportunity to hone in on the areas which our students needed the extra practice. For my guided reading groups, we started with a quick review using the alphabet chart cookie sheets we began working with last week. We spent about five minutes reviewing all the letters that our reading program has focused on over the last eight weeks. The students sorted the letters to their correct position
on the cookie tray and then went through each letter saying the letter name, picture that goes with the letter, and then the letter sound. Since first introducing this activity to my students last week, they have increased their fluency and speed with which they are able to complete the sort.

After reviewing using the cookie trays, I introduced our letter sound matching activity. For the last few weeks, we have been working learning about animals and their habitats. My students seemed to really be enjoying learning about these animals, so I incorporated animals into our sound match for this week. While planning for guided reading groups this week, I created two different sorting mats – one that had the upper case letters written in random order and one that had the lower case letters written in random order. I gathered pictures of the different animals that had different beginning sounds. I printed these pictures in color so that students could easily distinguish what the animal was.

Before my students began matching the animals to the letter that corresponds with the first sound in the word, I modeled for them what the expectations would be for this activity. All of the animal pictures were in a brown paper bag. I explained to the students that they should pull only one picture out at a time. After I pulled a picture from the paper bag, I said the name of the animal and then the first sound in the word (ie. zebra, /z/). I then found the letter z and placed the picture card on the letter. After I modeled one, I had each of my students take turns pulling another card from the bag and as a group we said the name on the picture card and the first sound in the word. After we had practiced several together, we put the picture cards back into the bag and I let the students know they would be working together to complete the sorting mat by taking turns pulling picture cards from the bag. As the students worked through the picture cards in the bag, some things that I heard them say included – “Wow, I am really getting
good at this!” “Alligator….oh that starts like /a/ like Addison(pseudonym)” “Look how fast we are! My mom is going to be so proud.”

As the students finished sorting the cards in the bag, we then took turns saying the beginning sounds as we put the picture cards back into the bag for the next group. A few of my students asked if they could take this activity home to show their parents. During my planning time, I made copies for each student. I put the picture cards, both copies of the letter sorting mats, and a brown paper bag in a large Ziploc baggie along with directions for the game. I am excited to hear what parents say about how much their student is learning as well as to see how practicing at home improves their letter identification and letter sound recognition.

Reflection

What I did well

It was really encouraging to see the improvement in my students’ ability to fluently identify the letters and letter sounds that we have been working on this school year. I feel that keeping this activity open for my students to work on throughout the week really contributed to this improvement.

The piece of this lesson that I felt was most successful was the scaffolding that took place as I introduced the letter sound matching activity. Allowing my students to see exactly what was expected of them as they completed the activity contributed to their successful completion as we moved into independent practice. I feel that it was also beneficial for those students who may have still been struggling with the sounds that some of the letters made. They had the opportunity to hear a few of the sounds before having to produce them on their own. When those students pulled a card that we had already worked with, they matched the picture card to
the correct beginning sound with more confidence than when matching a picture card we had not
worked with.

**What was challenging**

Although I have been using a timer with my groups to keep us on track and to ensure that
I get to each of my groups, it seemed as though there was not enough time during guided reading
today to get to everything that I had planned with each group. One of my groups was able to
complete everything planned, but the other two groups only just got started on the letter sound
matching activity before the timer went off and it was time to switch groups. In planning for this
lesson, I thought that modifying the number of sounds we matched would allow for ample time
to complete the activity. My students worked at different paces and this led to differences in
which group finished the activity and which groups did not.

**What I would do differently**

In order to ensure that all of my students are working with the letters that they are having
the most difficulty with, I may regroup my students for this activity and differentiate the activity
based on those group’s needs. Regrouping my students based on their needs will ensure that
each student is getting the most out of our instructional time as possible.

In addition to regrouping my students based on need, I will modify the number of letter
sounds that we work with over the course of one lesson. This may be a lesson that spans a few
days. It is also an activity that, after having a few days of guided practice, will be left out for
students to practice on their own.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I provided summaries of the lessons taught during guided reading each
Monday for five weeks. I reflected on each lesson about what went well, what was challenging,
and what I might do differently in the future.
Chapter 5: Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Through this self-study, I wanted to learn what the best practices and literacy strategies were for teaching letter identification and letter sound recognition. As I conducted my study, I was able to determine the literacy strategies and best practices that are effective for teaching alphabet knowledge, and learned a great deal from my employing them with regard to impacting student literacy learning.

In this chapter, I presented the answers to my research question and discuss the evidence that has led me to the conclusions. I also discussed ways I see myself and my students benefiting from the results of my research. I finish the chapter by discussing my recommendations for future research.

Conclusions

Throughout my research surrounding letter identification and letter sound recognition, I found a great deal of information in regards to the foundation and rational for the many different viewpoints regarding the most effective way these skills are taught. The research provided me with a solid foundation to begin making sound educational decisions for my students. While this research provided the solid foundation, it did not provide specific strategies that I could implement into my guided reading groups for teaching letter identification and letter sound recognition. Because of this, I turned to various action research studies to identify some strategies and best practices that I would implement into my guided reading groups over the course of the five weeks that this study took place.

Throughout my study, I found it extremely beneficial to keep a reflection journal with anecdotal records. These records helped me to focus my instruction, making adjustments for
differentiation and individualization. Reflecting on each group allowed me to see how explicit my instruction needed to be and drove student achievement throughout this study. In my reflections, I was able to note gains that each of my students made each week. Unfortunately, because this is a self-study, and no student information is used, I was unable to include that specific information in my research. Overall, this student data proved to be beneficial in driving the instruction for my students. It allowed skills that my students were struggling with to be taught in greater depth, as I truly focused on the best practices and strategies I could find to boost letter identification and letter sound recognition. My study also demonstrated how scaffolded instruction and the use of the gradual release of responsibility model fosters increased student learning and independence (Maynes, Julien-Schultz, & Dunn, 2010).

The strategies that I found to be most effective in teaching letter identification and letter sound recognition included working with the letters in each of the student’s names and the alphabet chart cookie tray activities. It was during these weeks that my students seemed the most engaged and motivated to be working on their letters and sounds. My students were eager to use these strategies, not only during guided reading, but during other independent work time throughout the week. It was during these weeks that I saw the most growth in some of my students that had shown little to no growth thus far. Not only did these strategies produce results within the weeks after their introduction, but they have been activities that have carried over throughout the school year and have been go-to’s for reinforcing those letters and letter sounds when needed.

Implications for My Teaching

In conducting my self-study, I was able to benefit from the concepts, ideas, strategies, best practices, and findings in my research and in the action research I implemented in my
guided reading groups. I was able to implement a number of different best practices and literacy strategies that have helped my students who were still below grade-level benchmark at the end of the first quarter for letter identification and letter sound recognition. I was able to find some literacy strategies that I will implement earlier in my teaching next year that may prevent some students from falling behind for such an extended period of time. Most importantly, I was able to find some best practices and literacy strategies that I could implement immediately within my guided reading groups and continue to use throughout the school year that will aid my students in letter identification and letter sound recognition.

**Implications for Student Learning**

Even though I completed a self-study and my students were not the direct subject of this study, I still believe they were able to benefit from my participation in this research. The best practices and literacy strategies that I used throughout this study which focused on letter identification and letter sound recognition engaged my students, motivated them to practice these skills at home, developed their letter identification and letter sound recognition, and laid the foundation for their future success in reading. While I was looking specifically at my teaching, my students directly benefited from more focused, differentiated teaching that was designed to close the gap and help them reach grade-level benchmark in letter identification and letter sound recognition.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

In considering future research surrounding this topic, I believe that a longer study that started right at the beginning of the school year would prove to be more beneficial in drawing conclusions about the best practices and literacy strategies that can be used in teaching letter
identification and letter sound recognition to kindergartener’s, specifically those kindergartner’s that begin the school year below grade-level benchmark and know few to no letters or letter sounds. While I was able to work with those students who were still below grade-level benchmark at the end of the first marking period, starting this study at the beginning of the school year would have really allowed me to see which best practices and literacy strategies significantly lead to the greatest growth in my students. In addition to beginning at the start of the school year, following the study for a longer period of time – the first 10 weeks of school – would be beneficial in allowing me to implement even more literacy strategies with my students.

I will continue to use these best practices and literacy strategies in my small group guided reading with my students who are still working at mastering letter identification and letter sound recognition. Additional research that I will conduct will expand on these best practices and literacy strategies and explore moving from letter identification and letter sound recognition to emergent reading with those students who may not know all of their letters and letter sounds.

**Final Thoughts**

The best practices and literacy strategies that I implemented based on this research were beneficial for both my teaching as well as my students’ literacy success in our current classroom and beyond. Focusing on these skills in the small group guided reading setting allows for teachers to differentiate the instruction and meet the needs of the specific students in their groups. Beginning letter identification and letter sound recognition instruction by focusing on the letters in a student’s name allows the students to take ownership of their learning and reinforces letter recognition regarding specific letters as arranged in their name and outside of their order within the alphabet. Letter identification and letter sound recognition are the building blocks for a student’s future reading success. Spending a few minutes each week on activities
that will build on those skills will be the focus some students need to catch up to their peers who came into school knowing some, if not all, of their letters and letter sounds.
References


Appendices

Appendix A - *Letter/Sound Assessment*

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<tr>
<th>Letter/Sound Check List for Pre A and A Levels</th>
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<td>Directions: Highlight the letters and/or sounds the student knows.</td>
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Appendix B - *The Letters in Our Name*

Appendix C - *The Letters in Our Name*
Appendix D - Magnetic Letter Sort