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Effective Teaching of Embedded Phonics Instruction in a Middle School Special

Education Resource Room

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in Literacy Education

Hamline University

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Introduction

Being a teacher is a lot like being an artist. It is messy, frustrating, beautiful, and unique. In teaching and in art, nothing ever comes out the same way twice and everyone puts their own spin on their creation. Artists grow and develop. They do not always know where they will end up in a few years. Teachers go through the same experience and my journey in teaching is no exception. There have been tears of sadness, frustration, joy and everything in between. Like an artist frustrated with a creation, there was a time I gave up and had to start over from square one. I have no idea what the future holds or where I will end up. My journey has changed paths many times. However, like every artist and teacher, I have a passion. My passion has always been reading.

Reading has many nuances and, as students get older, the nuances get deeper and more complex. As I have progressed through my career and taught at different levels, I have noticed that at the middle and high school levels, teaching phonics and word attack skills fall to the wayside as comprehension becomes the focus. But what happens when students are in sixth, seventh, eighth (from here on called middle school) or higher grades and they are reading two to three or more levels behind grade level? What happens when a student's phonics skills keep them from understanding what they are reading?

There is a lot of information out there about teaching elementary schoolers and early readers phonics skills (Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, 2019; International Literacy Association, 2018; Jeynes, 2008; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, 2004; Suggate, 2010). I have found that at the middle school level there is a lack of

age-appropriate phonics curriculum to support striving readers. As a special education teacher who requires this type of curriculum to support students with reading disabilities, the frustration mounts. In my district there is a lack of access to a phonics curriculum needed to teach middle school students struggling to learn how to read. This led me to my capstone project question: *What is the most effective way to integrate phonics instruction into reading lessons in a middle school, resource room special education classroom?* My goal became researching and creating a unit as a starting point for embedded phonics instruction in a middle school special education classroom.

This chapter will cover my history as a teacher and how it led me to my capstone question, including the mess that became my life two years into teaching and the beauty that came after. I will talk about why this topic is so important and the context for my work. There will also be an overview of what is coming later in my capstone.

How Did I Get Here?

Never in a million years did I think I would be teaching middle school, but that is what I am doing and I love it. However, before going forward, I must go back to see how I got to this place of happiness. As a kid I used to play with my mom's old school books and "teach" my sister how to read and do math. When I was in high school I started taking classes in child development and volunteering in elementary and middle school classrooms. When I graduated high school, I was set on being an elementary education teacher. It was my mom who prompted me to think about becoming a special education teacher. Previously, that thought had never crossed my mind.

A year into college I really had to think about what I wanted my major to be. Was elementary education the way to go? Should I go into special education? How do I pick?

Over one winter break, I ended up volunteering in the classroom of a middle school special education teacher who taught reading, Karen Huberty. It was here I fell in love with the idea of teaching students to read while also supporting students who struggled more than the typical child. When I returned to college I immediately declared my major as special education with a focus in Specific Learning Disabilities and Developmental/Cognitive Disabilities.

The First Years

Fast forward three years, and I successfully graduated and got my first teaching job! I was a special education resource teacher teaching kindergarten to fifth grade. I could not have been more excited. However, the excitement wore off quickly. The reality of the job was worse than I ever imagined. I was teaching something different every hour of the day. I would teach fifth grade reading, followed by kindergarten social skills, and then second grade math. I struggled with the lack of consistency. On top of that, I was trying to figure out how to teach a student who should have been in a center-based special education classroom.

A center-based special education classroom is where students spend 60% or more of their day in a special education classroom (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d., *Special education*). Here students have the support of more teachers or paraprofessionals as they build skills. The long-term goal is to transition to a lower percentage of time in special education classes. As a new teacher I did not know how to juggle all teaching roles and did not feel supported.

In undergrad I took one class on teaching elementary math and some foundations of reading classes, but that was over the course of four years. At my new job I did not

have a mentor teacher or access to professional development to help me understand the district's curriculum even though I was supposed to be modifying the district's curriculum for my use. Along with that, I was trying to juggle behaviors, paperwork, and the transition of an administrator as the principal was retiring at the end of the school year. I knew I could not judge teaching based on one year even though I wanted to. I kept thinking, "Next year will be better. Right?"

Year two led me to be trained in Leveled Literacy Intervention, also known as LLI (Fountas & Pinnell, 2021). This intervention was very structured in teaching students reading and writing skills. LLI is designed to be a short-term intervention. Lessons follow a two-day rotating schedule. Day 1 includes rereading the book from the previous day, a phonics/word work lesson, reading a new book, and discussing the book. Day 2 includes rereading the book from the previous day, a review of the phonic/word work lesson from the previous day, writing about a book, reading a new book, and discussing the new book. Throughout the intervention, the lessons work in books that should be easy for the students and books that are at the student's instructional level. There were pieces of the intervention that frustrated me. This included the strict amount of time spent in each section of the lesson, even though students might not be understanding and the constant push to move kids along faster even if they were not ready for it. However, I felt more joy in teaching reading than I ever had before. Students were making great progress; they were starting to love reading. I had a parent say to me, "He started reading a text message over my shoulder and he has never been able to do that before. I didn't know he could read." The deep satisfaction and elatedness I felt in that moment was like nothing I had ever experienced in teaching before.

While there were a lot of highs from that year of teaching, there were a lot of lows too. As I continued growing in my understanding of teaching using LLI, I noticed students who were in fifth grade pulled back from reading. I realized the books used in the intervention were made for second grade readers, not for students who were in fifth grade struggling to read. This was the first time I noticed there were not a lot of age-appropriate lessons out there for students in upper elementary or higher grades who were still learning to read.

I continued to struggle with balancing all the areas of teaching I was required to do, more than I was willing to admit at the time. I had parents who were unhappy with the school and families who were struggling with issues happening outside of school that the parents took out on me. I again had a student who should have been in a higher special education setting than the student was receiving and there was nothing I could do about it. My mental health suffered as I felt like a failure of a teacher and continued to feel as though I had a lack of support in the school. We had a new principal, I still was not confident in my ability to teach reading outside of LLI, and professional development was changing because the district was changing their general education curriculum. There were many sad, angry, and frustrating tears in those two years.

As my third year approached, I was moving schools. Again the thought came into my mind, “Things are going to be better this year. Right?” The closer I got to the school year, the more emails I was getting about high behavior students coming in the kindergarten. A week before workshop week, I got an email saying I would be working with mostly kindergarten students. I knew in that moment I could not do it. I could not go through another school year feeling like a failure. I was so emotionally and physically

drained and burnt out. I cried all the time. My life felt like a disaster. So I did the only thing I could think of. I quit.

Two Years of Transition

After quitting, I immediately felt relief so I knew it was the right decision, but I had no idea what I wanted to do. I was not about to go back to teaching; at least not right away. I did not know if I even wanted to be a teacher. I spent four years getting my teaching degree, and thought there was no way it was useful toward anything else. However, the more I looked, the more I realized there were jobs out there that required a teaching degree but were not teaching, I just did not have enough experience in education for the jobs I was looking at. Plus, who was going to hire me? Two years into teaching and I quit at the last second. Not exactly a stellar mark on a job application. I had to work though, as I had bills to pay. I ended up settling on being a Minnesota Reading Corps tutor for a year while trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life.

Reading Corps is a government funded program that supports early elementary readers to improve their reading skills. As a Reading Corps tutor, I was given a scripted lesson to teach students and materials from which to teach from. I chose to work with kindergarteners because it seemed like the most mentally engaging choice and it worked the most with early literacy skills such as letter-sounds, blending, segmenting, vocabulary and basic comprehension skills. These were all areas I was familiar with having taught for two years at the elementary level. Even though I was not sure I wanted to be a teacher ever again, I was still interested in foundational reading skills.

The progress the kindergarteners made in reading was astounding. Students who initially could not identify letter sounds, could read basic Consonant Vowel Consonant

words - that is words that were three letters long and consistent of a consonant, followed by a vowel, ending with another consonant, for example, cat - and were able to read sentences with basic sight words. They became more confident and engaged in class. It was beautiful. The problem was, as a scripted lesson, it took away the art of teaching. While it was nice to not have to plan lessons and know exactly what was coming next each day, I missed the subtle nuances of teaching. I missed being able to change lessons because I felt they were not perfect, or having a discussion with a student about a topic that was not part of the script. After considering going back to school to be a physical therapist or maybe a pilot, I decided maybe I was not done with teaching after all. Maybe what I wanted to do was be a reading interventionist! I knew I could not do that with only a special education degree. I ended up applying to Hamline University to get my reading license to help pursue my goal of becoming a reading interventionist.

After a year of Reading Corps and starting graduate school, I knew I needed a job that would provide me with more money and health insurance benefits. I became a paraprofessional at the school where I had been a Reading Corps tutor. To say I was nervous was an understatement. I left special education for a reason and now I was dipping my toes back in the water. It ended up being a great year because I did not have to do paperwork or interact with parents but got to help kids. When the special education teacher I worked with found out I was a former special education teacher she kept saying, "Are you sure you don't want to be a special education teacher? You are great at working with kids and I can tell you are a great teacher." It was nice to hear these words after feeling like a failure so many times, but I was adamant I would never go back to teaching special education. As the school year came to a close, I started looking for jobs as a

reading interventionist around Minneapolis and Saint Paul. I was still going to school to get my reading license and would not be done until the end of fall semester, but I was determined to try anyway. I struck out many times and was again left thinking, “What’s next for me?”

Finding Solid Ground

I was sitting in the parking lot of my gym when I got a call from Karen Huberty. Previously I had volunteered in Karen’s room when she was a special education reading teacher and had been volunteering in her room during my time as a Reading Corps tutor. She was one of the reasons I fell in love with teaching reading in the first place. As I was sitting in my car I remember her excitement vividly. She just got a job as a 6th grade general education reading and writing teacher. Her job as a 6th grade special education reading teacher was open. Would I please apply so I could co-teach reading with her during the day? She would be there to support me, she would give me everything she had used to teach reading, she could be my guide and help with paperwork. Please, please, please.

My immediate reaction was, of course, no. No way was I ever going to be a special education teacher again, let alone a *middle school* special education teacher. However, I told her I would think about it. After contemplating for a long time I decided I had to. I did not have a job lined up for the fall, I was still going to school until the end of fall semester and had bills to pay. I had to have a job. I knew when I applied there was an extremely high chance I would get the job. I had known Karen for years, my mom worked at the school, I knew tons of teachers there, and it was the same school I had gone

to as a middle schooler. I was a good fit. And, just as I thought, I was offered the job the next morning.

It's been five years since I was offered the job at my current school and I have not regretted one moment of applying and accepting my job. The ground beneath my feet feels solid. My first year was messy, as I expected. Middle school is extremely different from teaching elementary school. However, your schedule is set by class hours and everyone teaches one or two subjects. In my case it is reading and writing. The first year was a transition of learning how to teach middle schoolers and understanding their brains. I also finished classes for my reading license and was officially a licensed reading teacher. Year two is when I found my footing in co-teaching and was able to feel more like a co-teacher instead of a passive support in class. Year three is when I really started to notice that we did not have a real curriculum for teaching reading and writing to students who are significantly behind grade level. It was also the year of COVID. This past year, year four, is when my special education team and I focused on teaching comprehension skills with a set formula and began forming our own curriculum as a team, which continues to be something we focus on in year five.

One thing we talked about this year was how, when students get to middle school, teachers are not given a curriculum with which to continue to teach phonic skills. Especially not in a small group special education classroom with students who struggle to read the words on the page. In general education classes, we teach Greek and Latin roots but that does not translate well into a classroom where kids are still trying to sound out words like "boot", while the general education students are working with words like "infinitesimal". In talking to the eighth grade special education reading and writing

teacher, I have discovered that all Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals in high school are related to comprehension. In high school they do not explicitly teach students how to read. They teach them how to comprehend. This means if students are struggling with letter sounds, phonics, or other word-reading skills, they are not explicitly taught. The focus is entirely on how to comprehend what you are reading.

As someone who loves reading and wants to instill that love in my students, I have a difficult time wrapping my head around this concept. How can we leave our students in eighth grade, who are reading at a second grade reading level, behind? That essentially says, “Don’t worry about it, you just need to know how to understand what you are reading.” All areas of reading are so intertwined that when one suffers, so do all the others. I want to support my middle school students' phonics skills. This is what led me to think: *What is the most effective way to integrate phonics instruction into reading lessons in a middle school, resource room special education classroom?*

This year I will be teaching a group of seventh grade students who I had in sixth grade. This is the first time I have looped with a class. It provides me with a unique opportunity, as I now know my students’ skills, needs, and personalities ahead of time. This will inform my thinking and planning as I progress through my capstone and unit design. It will also help me think about incoming sixth grade students and any other students I get to loop with in the future.

Professional Context

Why is teaching phonics at the middle school level so important? From birth to third or fourth grade students are learning how to read; in third grade there is a transition from learning to read to reading to learn (Biancarosa, 2012). But what happens when

students stay in the transition from learning to read to reading to learn? These students struggle to gain the skills to learn how to read well. While it is true students continue to learn to read throughout their lives as they encounter longer words, more complex syntax, and words from other languages, there is a group of students who are stuck or making less progress than would be anticipated for their age and grade level.

According to the Minnesota Report Card database published by the Minnesota Department of Education, in 2019 only 29.8% of middle school students who receive special education services in Minnesota were proficient on their Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) reading tests; in the spring of 2021 it was even less at 25.8% (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d., *Minnesota report card*). While MCAs are a measure of students' combined reading skills, including reading and reading comprehension, it's telling that only 25-30% of our students receiving special education services are able to read well enough to be proficient on the exam. The percentage of middle school students who receive special education services who did not meet standards in 2019 was 52.7% and in the spring of 2021 it was 57.5%. That is more than half the students in Minnesota with an IEP. This is a huge cause for concern.

With so many struggling readers, educators need to know what they can do to help. There is an abundance of information about teaching middle schoolers how to comprehend. The general education curriculum at my school is focused on comprehension and critical literacy. However, it lacks support for middle school special education teachers trying to implement phonics instruction for striving readers. Do I believe there is information and curriculum out there that supports this? Absolutely. Have I found one that I want to implement in my classroom? No. Not yet. I will be furthering

my research into phonics instruction at the middle school level and planning a unit to be used in a middle school special education reading classroom.

Summary

Like any good artist, or in this case, teacher, my history is messy and the final product is unfinished, but I have come a long way since the beginning. As I think about my capstone project, I see a way to support myself and other middle school special education teachers to help our students grow as readers. I will research ways to support middle school students' phonics instruction. I will also look at how phonics fits into comprehensive reading instruction that includes phonics, reading comprehension, and writing. My goal is to find effective ways to teach phonics to older students without those students feeling like they are too old to learn it.

In Chapter Two, I will review literature to support my capstone project. First will be a discussion of what phonics instruction is, including its history, and what theories have been used in teaching phonics. Next, I will discuss necessary frameworks for teaching phonics and reading in school and discuss its relation to standards in Minnesota. Following that, literature will be reviewed about phonics instruction at each school level - elementary school, middle school, and high school. Finally, I will discuss what special education is, the categories of special education in Minnesota, and talk about the relationship between phonics instruction and students who receive special education services.

Chapter Three will go into detail about my capstone project. My intended audience will be discussed as well as the intended setting and how the project can be

used. Evidence will be given from frameworks that guided my thinking, to support my project.

Chapter Four will conclude my capstone with a reflection on my capstone writing and project.. What did I learn? What was the research that went into my capstone? I will review implications and limitations that came up as I went along and discuss how the project can be used or changed in the future. I will also touch on the importance of this project to literacy as a whole and how I can use this for myself in the future.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Introduction

Chapter Two examines the research behind the question: *What is the most effective way to integrate phonics instruction into reading lessons in a middle school, resource room special education classroom?* The review begins by looking at the history of phonics instruction. This includes a definition of phonics, the constant change in types of phonics instruction being taught, and where phonics instruction stands today. Without looking at the history of phonics instruction, the focus of instruction today would not be clear. It is also necessary to know what phonics is in order to clearly understand how it is taught. Following this, an exploration into phonics instruction today and what today's students need based on studied history is presented. A specific look at how phonics instruction relates to Minnesota state standards is necessary to fully grasp the impact of phonics instruction in middle school resource special education classrooms.

Next, a review of literature looking into phonics instruction at each school level-- elementary school, middle school, and high school-- is completed. Getting a sound picture of how phonics instruction has been taught at each level and how it has impacted students will give insight into how it connects to instruction at the middle school level. Finally, a dive into the phonics instruction, special education categories, dyslexia, and English Language Learning and how they are connected is given. The impact of phonics instruction in each area as well as how each area intersects is presented. To fully understand the research question, some knowledge of special education and what that entails is necessary.

History of Phonics Instruction

Phonics has been a part of reading instruction for many years, though it has changed in style and grown in scope and understanding. Phonics has roots all the way back to the Greek and Roman Era (Eman, 1968) and continues to be a form of reading instruction today. To get a true picture of the history of phonics instruction, it is necessary to understand what phonics is. Without this understanding, its application throughout history means little.

What is Phonics?

There are a variety of ways to define phonics. Some are very basic and others are more complex. The simplest way to define phonics is a study of sound and letter relationships (International Literacy Association, 2018). Sounds and letters make up words, and students need to understand these relationships to be able to read. The Institute for Multi-Sensory Education (2019), has a similar definition of phonics: the relationship between graphemes and phonemes (Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, 2019). Though they are similar, the Institute's definition includes the word grapheme to describe letters and phonemes to describe sounds. Phonemes are "the smallest units" of sound in words (National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 2-1). The National Reading Panel continues by saying graphemes are the written symbols that represent the sounds; this can be one letter or multiple letters. For example, the word 'shut' has 3 sounds, or phonemes: /ʃ/-/ə/-/t/. However, it is represented by 4 graphemes: s,h,u,t. The s and h represent one sound: /ʃ/. So, the International Literacy Association's (2018) definition of phonics is very similar to the Institute for Multi-Sensory Education's (2019) definition. These

commonalities show consistency across education, which is important when teaching literacy.

Another definition of phonics comes from the National Reading Panel (2000). Here the definition of phonics is using letter-sound relationships to learn how to read or spell. While this definition is similar to the two definitions stated previously, it brings in the act of using phonics to support reading and spelling. One could argue that phonics is then used for literacy as a whole.

Likely the most complex definition of phonics comes from Fox (1986), where he states that phonics is “teaching a system of notation” (p. 678). This means students learn the 44 sounds that make up the English language, learn about the 26 letters of what was originally the Roman alphabet, and then also learn 100 groups of letters used to make up words (Fox, 1986). Though there are 44 phonemes in the English language (National Reading Panel, 2000), the symbols that make up these phonemes do not directly relate to the 26 letters of the alphabet (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

When taking all the above definitions into consideration, a complex definition of phonics could be the study of the relationship between the 26 graphemes and 44 phonemes in literacy (Fox, 1968; Institute of Multi-Sensory Education, 2019; National Reading Panel, 2000). Since not everyone is a literacy professional, a more basic and universal definition of phonics would be the relationship between letters and sounds used to understand and create words when reading and writing (Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, 2019; International Literacy Association, 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000).

The History of Phonics Instruction

Greek and Roman Era. Phonics has a long history of swinging from being the end-all, be-all of reading instruction and then hardly being found in teaching. It has roots all the way back to the Greek and Roman Era (Eman, 1968), and continues all the way to today. When reflecting back on the days of the Greeks and the Romans, Eman continues by saying people were taught to learn to write using the alphabet-spelling approach. Eman concludes by saying people were taught the names of letters and presented with new words; as they were presented with these words, they were taught how to spell them. While this does not include the sounds that go along with words, this was one of the first phonics instruction types in history.

English Conformity. Skipping ahead to the discovery of what is present day America, it is important to note that the English language has been used as a way to conform non-English speakers to the ways of the white, male-dominated society (Scotton Williams, 1983). When the English came to America, they sought to make the Native American people conform to the White standard of living through the system of education, and part of this was using the English language. Scotton Williams (1983) noted rewards and punishments were given out to students based on their adherence to English cultural values and language. English is the most commonly taught language in schools in the United States.

American Revolution. Fast forward to the American Revolution, and phonics instruction is used not only as a way to teach reading, but as a way to standardize speech and language in the new American Era (Eman, 1968). Here, phonics was presented in terms of letter-sound relationships, similar to the more traditional sense of phonics seen

today. This instruction was a way to show the nation's dedication to communication in the new democracy (Eman, 1968).

Phonics vs. Whole Language. As time went on, the swing between the ways to teach phonics instruction began its perpetual motion. In 1885, Word Method was the way to teach phonics for 45 years (Eman, 1986). Word Method was where students were taught to recognize whole words so they could read similar words instead of learning unrelated letter-sounds (Eman, 1986). Following this relatively short stint in the Word Method Era, a swing back toward letter-sound phonics began. While earlier phonics instruction methods were more focused on drilling children on the sound of individual letters, this era of phonics focused more on groups of letters traditionally called word families (Eman, 1968). For example, words that end with '-at', such as 'cat', 'fat', and 'bat' would fall in the '-at' word family. Students were drilled to learn the word families before more words and sentences were introduced to them (Eman, 1968).

Once again society's view on teaching reading switched. This time it was the 1920s and the focus was back toward whole word instruction. Following this, there was less teaching of letter-sound phonics instruction, and more teaching of reading whole sentences and comprehension of what was being read. Sure, letter-sound phonics was good for teaching students to recognize and pronounce words, but when compared to peers who had not had that kind of phonic teaching, they were tested and found to have less comprehension of what they had read and were less fluent in reading (Eman, 1968).

After this round of whole word and sentence reading instruction, the pendulum swung again toward more traditional phonics instruction. After the whole sentence reading instruction, there became more debate in the type of phonic instruction used to

teach students. Previously there was Word Method or whole sentence instruction and letter-sound phonics instruction. Now there was a development toward different types of letter-sound phonics. The original drilling of letter-sound relationships, where individual words were looked at as sounds then blended and segmented, became known as synthetic phonics (Eman, 1968; National Reading Panel, 2000). Now, there was a new way to view phonics that was similar to Word Method. This new method of phonics was called analytic phonics, where students were taught to take apart words and look for patterns that could then be applied to new words (Eman, 1968; International Literacy Association, 2018). To give examples of this, the International Literacy Association (2018), noted in synthetic phonics students are taught that /k/-/æ/-/t/ is cat, while in analytic phonics students are taught /r/-/æn/ is ran which can also help with /k/-/æn/, /f/-/æn/, /p/-/æn/, and /m/-/æn/.

This continued through to the start of something called Whole Language which gained ground starting in the 1970s and 1980s. The focus shifted to an understanding that the purpose of reading is to comprehend, and comprehension is not necessarily an innate outcome of reading (Pearson, 2004). In Whole Language, reading is taught through reading words in context and using meaning to figure out what a word is (National Reading Panel, 2000). In past years, basal readers, or books with very basic words that were easily sounded out and read, were used in synthetic or analytic phonics instruction (Pearson, 2004). In the 1990s there was a shift in basal readers to support the growing movement of Whole Language (Pearson, 2004). The focus became supporting comprehension, and reading skills moved into the background. Comprehension questions went from being solely about story line to questions about students' response to stories

they were reading (Pearson, 2004). This is also when classroom libraries became popular as teachers and marketing companies tried to formulate a set of books with similar themes to help support students comprehension and understanding of a topic (Pearson, 2004). However, Whole Language was not supported by all and much research has been conducted into whether Whole Language or traditional phonics instruction is better for students. Over the course of the years, there has been heated debate over which one works best for students and out of that discourse has come something called balanced or comprehensive literacy.

Proponents from the middle of the Whole Language versus phonics debate state that while comprehension in reading is important, some students do not just pick up the alphabetic principle that makes up the English language (Pearson, 2004). On the flip side, if reading instruction is solely focused on decoding and ignoring other aspects of reading such as comprehension, not every child will become a skilled reader (National Reading Panel, 2000). Arguments for balanced literacy state the goal is to give “authentic texts and tasks” while emphasizing all areas of literacy, but also calls for explicit “phonics, word identification, comprehension, spelling, and writing instruction” (Pearson, 2004, p. 243). Bear, et al. (2012) support this by saying being literate depends on fluently and accurately reading words, but also understanding what the words mean so attention can be given to the overall meaning of the text. This type of reading instruction is prevalent in schools today.

History of Phonics Instruction: A Summary

Outside of teaching literacy, phonics can be difficult to understand. One definition of phonics is: The relationship between letters and sounds used to understand and create

words when reading, writing and speaking in English (Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, 2019; International Literacy Association, 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000). This definition pulls the history of phonics in the United States into an easily understood concept. The meaning of phonics instruction has changed throughout the years as instruction in reading has swung from some semblance of teaching phonics as we do today, to teaching it through some version of Whole Language, and back. Today, teaching literacy in a comprehensive reading program is thought to be the best way to teach reading skills (National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, 2004). The next section will delve into what students need in phonics instruction in order to be successful in phonics instruction and a comprehensive reading program as a whole. This includes a framework for teaching, lesson necessities, and a look at Minnesota State Standards.

Phonics Instruction: What do Students Need?

Teachers spend the most time with students in a classroom during the day, allowing them to get to know students on a deep level. However, for teachers it is important to make sure their lessons are backed up with research of what works best for students. When looking at the research question, *What is the most effective way to integrate phonics instruction into reading lessons in a middle school, resource room special education classroom?*, research becomes the basis for understanding what is most effective. There are three big areas to consider when looking at how to teach phonics to middle school students: a framework for teaching, lesson necessities, and state standards. These three bring to light the necessary components of reading instruction.

Framework for Teaching

As stated previously, balanced literacy is an effective way to support students in learning to read (Bear et al., 2012; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, 2004) and is echoed in Copeland and Keefe's (2018) statement saying, "phonics instruction must be integrated within a complex literacy program," (p. 269). It is also noted by Bowers (2020), that balanced literacy is a combination of systematic phonics instruction and a focus on reading for meaning typically found in Whole Language. This supports both students' need for phonics instruction and their comprehension of what they are reading (Bear et al., 2012; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, 2004). In order to frame teaching in balanced literacy, the first step is knowing what balanced literacy is.

What is Balanced Literacy? In short, balanced literacy is a framework of teaching that incorporates both skills instruction found in phonics-based teaching and a more holistic approach found in Whole Language teaching (Pressley, et al., 2002). Pressley, et al. (2002) break balanced literacy into three parts: skills instruction, explicit comprehension strategy instruction, and holistic instruction. Skills instruction is phonics instruction, while explicit strategy and holistic instruction are "reading authentic literature" and "composing in response to text" (Pressley, et al., 2002, p. 1). Pressley, et al. (2002), go on to say balanced literacy instruction includes teaching in phonemic awareness, word recognition, vocabulary teaching, comprehension, self-monitoring, relating what students' know to new information, and writing. This means when teaching reading to students, there should be instruction in multiple areas that combine into a literacy lesson.

Framework. The general framework for teaching reading may vary across the United States but one framework used for reading instruction is guided reading. While guided reading may look different in how it is used to teach, it follows some general principles, which make up the framework for teaching reading.

A typical literacy lesson starts with the re-reading of a familiar text (Tancock, 1994). A familiar text might be a book a student read the day before or has been read to in the past. Following this brief re-reading, a dive into a guided reading lesson follows. To start, students are guided through a pre-reading process. Here a book is introduced by the teacher (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017; Tancock, 1994). In this section of the lesson the teacher tries to get students thinking about the text by asking questions about what they think will happen, looking at pictures and diagrams in the book, and highlighting keywords that will be read (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017; Tancock, 1994).

Next comes the reading phase of the lesson. During this time there are a variety of ways teachers can have students read. Fountas & Pinnell (2017) state in this phase reading is silent as students are reading to themselves at their own pace; the teacher might have students read out loud individually but there is not any whole group reading. Tancock (1994), has students read aloud during the reading portion of the lesson so students can be supported by the teacher instead of silently reading. Depending on the student's needs, a teacher might decide to give more or less support to a student as they are reading.

After the reading section of the lesson is a post-reading conversation (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017; Tancock, 1994). Here, Fountas and Pinnell and Tancock differ in their approach. In Fountas and Pinnell's (2017) framework, post-reading is for returning to the

text to teach a strategy for comprehension and may involve some re-reading. In Tancock's (1994) framework, post-reading is for returning to pre-reading questions, evaluating whether or not predictions were correct, and continuing to build understanding of the story. While they are similar, Fountas and Pinnell's strategy is more focused on teaching skills than Tancock's.

The final step in the Fountas and Pinnell (2017) framework, and the second to last step in the Tancock (1994) framework, is word study and writing. It should be noted that in some places Fountas and Pinnell put word work before reading the book and use the book as a support for understanding the newly taught concept. In Fountas and Pinnell's framework, the goal of word study is to "develop a flexible range of strategies for solving words" (p. 15). Fountas and Pinnell, note this may be word sorts or working with magnetic letters. In Tancock's (1994) framework, word work is left only to word sorts where students sort words according to similar features. In the writing section of the post-reading lesson, Fountas and Pinnell (2017), have students write about their reading in paragraph form, sketch ideas, make charts, or write a summary. Tancock (1994) has students write a sentence with teacher support, cut it apart, reform the sentence and discuss other ways the sentence could make sense.

The final step in Tancock's (1994) framework is where the teacher reads a book or passage aloud that is harder than what the student could read on their own. The goal is to expose students to an expanded vocabulary and text structures while supporting their comprehension. The teacher chooses a book that is engaging, interesting to listen to, and allows for students to connect to the story. The story does not necessarily have a similar theme or topic as the other stories, it is just to expose students to higher levels of text

(Tancock, 1994). This final step is what Tancock calls “book sharing” (p. 135) as the teacher is sharing a book with the students.

Putting it all together, the framework for a literacy lesson includes the following: re-reading a familiar text, pre-reading a text, reading the text, word study, and writing. In some cases word study might come before pre-reading (Fountas and Pinnell, 2017) and in some cases you might read a book to the students after writing (Tancock, 1994). With this in mind, it is important to look into what is necessary to include in lessons within this framework for teaching reading.

Lesson Necessities

Students who are learning to read need to have some predictability in how they are taught (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017; Tancock, 1994). This is where a framework is beneficial. As students progress through the school year, using the same framework allows students to know what is coming next and be able to have some ownership over the lesson if there is a substitute teacher. Within the framework, lessons should have some overlapping principles that are followed and allow for continuous predictability.

First, when looking for reading material, teachers should find authentic texts and texts that are a whole story or give a whole picture instead of bits and pieces (Tancock, 1994). According to the Sommers-Arthur (n.d.), authentic texts are those written for the “real world”. This means they are written to inform the reader on a topic, explain a new topic to the reader, entertain the reader, guide the reader’s thinking, document a topic for the reader to review, or persuade the reader on a certain idea (Sommers-Arthur, n.d.). Sommers-Arthur notes this can be any kind of printed text but could also be video or audio.

The next lesson necessity is to focus on students' strengths and build upon those skills (Tancock, 1994). Motivation plays a factor in reading instruction (Pressley, et al., 2002). Motivation increases engagement (Pressley, et al., 2002) and can then be assumed to increase student success in reading. A few ways to do this, according to Pressley, et al. (2002), are to scaffold student learning and encourage autonomy or independent thinking. According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.), scaffolding is, "a system or framework of support provided by an instructor to help a student reach the next level of learning." That means while teaching, a teacher supports students using what the student knows and builds on that learning with new thinking and ideas, providing support and teaching along the way. Motivating students by encouraging them to be independent thinkers, while also supporting them along the way is a goal of teaching.

Another necessity when planning a lesson is being able to access students' background knowledge and experiences with a topic (Tancock, 1994). When broken down into its two parts - background and knowledge - it becomes easier to understand what background knowledge is. Background is the information needed to understand a situation (Merriam-Webster, n.d.); while knowledge is "being aware of something" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Put together, a definition of background knowledge is using information you know in order to understand a situation. In reading this could mean the knowledge needed to understand what you are reading. Assessing whether the student has the background knowledge or experience to understand the text becomes important. Typically questions and minor teaching around background knowledge are done before reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017; Tancock, 1994).

Some researchers might bring forth other lesson necessities, such as how much time to spend on each section of the lesson or which parts to include every day. This brief overview of necessities provides a basic groundwork for some important inclusions that may be beneficial for students.

Minnesota State Standards

When planning reading instruction, it is important to teach toward state standards. These standards are the basis for student achievement, are what teachers and students work toward, and are assessed using state and district testing. Since the location of this project is Minnesota, state standards from Minnesota are important to address.

Minnesota State Standards are broken up into a variety of categories including the following: reading benchmarks (Kindergarten - 5th grade and 6th-12th grade), writing benchmarks (K-5 and 6-12), speaking, viewing, listening, and media literacy benchmarks (K-5 and 6-12), and language benchmarks (K-5 and 6-12) (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). There are also benchmarks related to reading and writing in social studies, science, and technical subjects (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). While all areas are important to student learning, the research question is: *What is the most effective way to integrate phonics instruction into reading lessons in a middle school, resource room special education classroom?* The focus will be on reading and writing as phonics fits into both of those categories.

Reading Benchmarks. The Minnesota Reading Benchmarks are split into the following subsections and subcategories (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011):

- Literature (Kindergarten-5th grade and 6th-12th grade)
 - Key Ideas and Details

- Craft and Structure
- Integration of Knowledge and Ideas
- Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity
- Informational Text (K-5 and 6-12)
 - Key Ideas and Details
 - Craft and Structure
 - Integration of Knowledge and Ideas
 - Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity
- Foundational Skills (K-5)
 - Print Concepts (K-1 only)
 - Phonological Awareness (K-1 only)
 - Phonics and Word Recognition
 - Fluency

When processing the research question, *What is the most effective way to integrate phonics instruction into reading lessons in a middle school, resource room special education classroom?*, it is important to understand the skills that come before and after phonics instruction, how they tie into a comprehensive reading program, and what skills are needed to support middle school students. It should be noted, in Minnesota, phonics and word recognition are only standards from kindergarten to 5th grade (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). Since middle school in Minnesota ranges from 5th to 8th grade depending on the school a student attends, for the majority of the middle years school teachers are not required to teach phonics outright.

Foundational Skills. Students need to know foundational reading skills to find early success. Foundational Skills are standards for kindergarten through 2nd grade (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). Within these, in kindergarten and 1st grade, students need to learn how books are organized, which way to read books, that there are spaces between words, know upper and lowercase letters, and know sentence features (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). To help support phonics instruction, students in early reading need to understand how to rhyme, blend and segment words, be able to count syllables, substitute letters in words to make new words, and understand long and short vowel sounds (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011).

In kindergarten through 5th grade, teachers are tasked with moving students' phonics skills from knowing "one-to-one letter-sound correspondences" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 23), long and short vowel sounds, how to spell five words, and high-frequency words needed for kindergarten, to using letter-sound correspondence knowledge, syllable patterns, roots, suffices, and prefixes to read unfamiliar words. In fluency, students are expected to go from reading early text with understanding to reading "grade-level text with purpose and understanding" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 24), reading with accuracy, expression and proper rate, and being able to "confirm or self-correct" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 24) words to support understanding. All of these skills are considered foundational to reading and understanding of books in Minnesota. These skills are not continued past 5th grade in Minnesota's state standards.

Literature and Informational Texts. The Literature and Information Texts subcategories in the Minnesota State Standards (2011), are similar in outcomes.

Literature relates to fiction reading and Informational Texts relates to nonfiction reading. To review, the research question is: *What is the most effective way to integrate phonics instruction into reading lessons in a middle school, resource room special education classroom?* Since middle school can run from 5th to 8th grade and students who receive special education services for reading in middle school can be reading from an early elementary reading level to close to middle school reading levels, a focus on elementary and up to 6th grade standards is provided for Literature and Informational Texts in Minnesota.

The goal from kindergarten to 6th grade, is to move students:

1. From needing adult support to ask and answer questions about text details including characters, setting, key events, and being able to state connections between events and the main idea in kindergarten to being able to using textual evidence to support analysis, identify themes, give a summary, and identifying plot or character changes, and to identifying the main idea based on details by 6th grade (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011).
2. From asking and answering questions about unknown words, recognizing types of texts, understanding what an author and illustrator are, and knowing the “front cover, back cover, and title page of a book” (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 18) in kindergarten to determining the meaning of a word or phrase, figuring out how sentences, paragraphs, chapters or scenes fit into a text’s structure, and identifying a point of view presented in a text by 6th grade (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011).

3. From stating how words and illustrations relate to each other, comparing and contrasting character experiences and texts at a basic level in kindergarten to comparing and contrasting ideas across multiple forms of media (paper, audio, video) and using it to understand a topic, comparing and contrasting genres, evaluating arguments presented in a text, and comparing and contrasting how author's present certain events in a story by 6th grade (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011).
4. From participating in group reading activities and appropriately selecting "texts for personal enjoyment, interest, and academic tasks" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p.15) in kindergarten to reading and comprehending multiple types of texts across fiction and nonfiction, and to "read widely to understand multiple perspectives with pluralistic viewpoints" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 51), and "self-select texts for personal enjoyment, interest, and academic tasks" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 55) by 6th grade.

As students progress further in their education they are expected to grow into making more advanced connections in reading, between readings, and to personal experiences (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). Also included for middle school instruction are standards around American Indians, standards to include works of American literature from earlier centuries, and standards to support the understanding of foundational documents from the beginning of the United States (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011).

Writing Benchmarks. Different from the reading standards, the Minnesota Writing Benchmarks are split only into subcategories. The subcategories are as follows (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011) :

- Text Types and Purposes (Kindergarten-5th grade and 6th-12th grade)
- Writing Process: Production and Distribution of Writing (K-5 and 6-12)
- Research to Build and Present Knowledge (K-5 and 6-12)
- Range of Writing (K-5 and 6-12)

As stated previously, phonics is the relationship between letters and sounds used to understand and create words when reading, writing, and speaking in English (Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, 2019; International Literacy Association, 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000). Since phonics is related to writing, writing standards are important to fully understand phonics and its place in literacy instruction. Again, the research question relates to phonics instruction for middle school students receiving special education services. For this project, a focus on writing from an early elementary to middle school level is presented. An overview of each subcategory is as follows:

1. Progress from using drawings and basic letters or words to convey ideas, provide an explanation, or tell a story with events in kindergarten, to writing a persuasive, explanatory, or creative paper using an introduction, details backed by fact when necessary, literary elements (setting, characters, plot, conflict), academic language and a conclusion by 6th grade (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011).
2. Move from adding details to writing with the suggestion of adults and peers, and from using digital tools to publish work in kindergarten, to writing clearly and coherently with organization and personal style, to using the writing process of

drafting, editing, revising and publishing and to using technology to write at least 3 pages by 6th grade (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011).

3. Advancing from “participating in shared research and writing projects” (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 27), and from remembering information and events or finding information to answer a question in kindergarten, to doing a research project by getting research from multiple sources, including getting evidence from fiction and nonfiction texts by 6th grade (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011).
4. Starting in 3rd grade and progressing through 12th grade, students should be able to sustain writing for multiple disciplines, and “independently select writing topics and formats for personal enjoyment, interest, and academic tasks” (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 30, p. 62, p. 65).

As students progress to 12th grade, they need to be able to write a persuasive, explanatory, or creative paper. In the paper they must use an introduction, analyze facts to support claims, give details backed by fact, use transitions, and use literary elements (setting, characters, plot, conflict). They must use academic language, figurative language, and have a conclusion (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). They also need to do a research project with self-generated questions or do research to solve a problem (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). Students should get research from multiple sources including getting evidence from fiction and nonfiction texts (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011).

What do Students Need? A Summary

Planning a unit and lessons within a unit is no easy task. Teachers need to use a framework to provide students with consistency and predictability, which will in turn allow students to focus on the lesson (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017; Tancock, 1994). In lesson planning, it is important to see what a student already knows and where they need to progress. Reviewing state standards allows teachers to see what students' strengths are as well as where students need to be in relation to their grade level. Standards are also helpful to see the steps needed in order for students to be successful readers and writers. The standards are scaffolded from foundational skills to harder skills as students get older. Along with standards, it is important to plan lessons around what students need. Start with students' strengths, review the standards for what the students are doing well, and build up to what the students' needs are (Tancock, 1994). Finally, teachers need to understand students' background knowledge and experiences in relation to what text is chosen to read and make sure the text is authentic (Tancock, 1994).

The next section looks into how phonics is taught at each schooling level. The different schooling levels presented in the next section include elementary school, middle school, and high school. Knowledge of how phonics instruction has been taught at each school level and how it impacts students allows for understanding of the importance of teaching phonics to students who receive special education services.

Research on Phonics Instruction at Each Schooling Level

Though the research question, *What is the most effective way to integrate phonics instruction into reading lessons in a middle school, resource room special education classroom?*, relates to instruction at the middle school level, it is important to know what

experts are saying about phonics instruction at other schooling levels. Students will go through all levels of schooling during their lifetime and those who struggle to learn to read may need phonics instruction at every level. Reviewing literature from all levels provides insight into connections across a student's school career and the successes or challenges that may be present when receiving phonics instruction.

Since reading instruction starts at a young age, it is natural to find a lot of research around phonics instruction at the elementary level. There are fewer studies done at the middle school level and the benefits of phonics instruction are less clear. Taken a step further to the high school level, there are even fewer studies done related to phonics instruction. Below are discussions around phonics instruction at each schooling level.

Preschool to Elementary School Level

Depending on where you live, preschool to elementary school can be from preschool to 6th grade. As students grow up they progress from language skills, to early literacy skills, to skilled reading (Suggate, 2010). As stated previously, phonics instruction includes instruction in the relationship between letters and sounds used to understand and create words when reading and writing (Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, 2019; International Literacy Association, 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000). Since phonics instruction is seen as a key piece of reading instruction, it is important to learn at an early age, along with phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension (Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, 2019; Jeynes, 2008; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, 2004; Suggate, 2010).

Pearson (2004), states a lot of young students do not simply catch on to understanding phonemic awareness and phonics through immersion, they need teachers

who are able to use explicit, systematic instruction with authentic literacy experiences. This is very much like the previously stated balanced approach to literacy instruction and fits in with the framework also presented above (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017; Pressley, et al., 2002; Tancock, 1994).

According to the National Reading Panel (2000),

Readers must be able to apply their alphabetic knowledge to decode unfamiliar words and to remember how to read words they have read before. When reading connected text, they must construct sentence meanings and retain them in memory as they move on to new sentences. At the same time, they must monitor their word recognition to make sure that the words activated in their minds fit with the meaning of the context. In addition, they must link new information to what they have already read, as well as to their background knowledge, and use this to anticipate forthcoming information. When one stops to take stock of all the processes that readers perform when they read and comprehend text, one is reminded how amazing the act of reading is and how much there is for beginners to learn. (p. 2-99)

In short, a lot of skills are needed to learn to read at a young age. Hence the amount of research found on early literacy skills.

So how does phonics instruction fit into elementary school teaching? Phonics instruction is used to teach students as they realize there is a “logical, predictable, and organized relationship between” letters and sounds (Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, 2019). The National Reading Panel (2000), found that teaching systematic phonics early produced students with better achievement in reading. It is also beneficial

for students who are struggling to learn to read in 2nd to 6th grade (National Reading Panel, 2000). This includes students from marginalized communities. Jeynes (2008), found that even if students from marginalized communities had not received much instruction in phonics during their early years of school; they still benefited from instruction in phonics instruction in 2nd through 6th grade. All of this points to the benefit of phonics for young and struggling readers in elementary school.

Middle School Level

Depending on where you live, middle school can be anywhere from 5th to 8th grade. Since the research question focuses on teaching phonics at the middle school level, knowing what research says about instruction at this level is of the utmost importance. There is some overlap with elementary level teaching since 5th and 6th grade can be considered elementary or middle school grades. As presented above phonics instruction has been supported at the elementary level by a variety of sources (Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, 2019; Jeynes, 2008; National Reading Panel, 2000). But what about other middle school years?

When looking at middle school, the benefits of phonics instruction are less clear. There is a back and forth narrative about teaching phonics in middle school. In Minnesota, phonics instruction is only explicitly laid out in standards from kindergarten through 5th grade (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). Though 5th grade can fall in the middle school category, phonics is not always taught beyond 5th grade. Opponents of teaching phonics instruction at the middle school level, feel it leads to little gains in comprehension; proponents found phonics instruction was important and effective for middle school students, but only if a student showed a need for it (Groff, 1980). Suggate

(2010), found in elementary years, phonics instruction had a greater impact on reading but in later years, focus on comprehension was much more effective. Groff (1980) also presented a viewpoint stating if students did not learn phonics before middle school, there was not much value in teaching it at the middle school level as students have had many years to learn it.

Multiple sources have stated that middle school phonics instruction is only beneficial for those who are struggling (Groff, 1980; Jeynes, 2008). When presented to middle school students, phonics instruction needs to be presented in an age-appropriate way (Groff, 1980) and be combined with other, balanced reading instruction (Laws, 2009). The National Reading Panel (2000), is noted to say that phonics instruction is “significantly more effective” (p. 2-133) to help at-risk students or students with disabilities in preventing reading difficulties. Again, it must be taught in tandem to other reading skills such as comprehension, because as Laws (2009) states, “phonics instruction helps older children spell and decode text better, although their understanding does not necessarily improve” (p. 9).

High School Level

If phonics instruction at the middle school was unclear, there are even fewer studies done related to phonics instruction at the high school level. As previously noted, in early grades phonics instruction has a high impact while in the later grades, comprehension appears to have a higher impact (Suggate, 2010). That being said, some high school students are reading to learn, and if they cannot read they are going to have a difficult time learning. From the middle school research, it was concluded that past elementary school phonics instruction should only be taught to students that need it

(Groff, 1980; Jeynes, 2008). By the time they get to high school, if a student cannot read well, phonics instruction becomes greatly important.

Though there is not a lot of research on high school level phonics instruction and the impact it has, one study found teaching phonics to high school level students can improve a student's self confidence and improve their reading skills (Edwards, 2008). In the high school setting, Edwards taught students a series of strategies they could use to sound out words; these strategies included "finding roots, affixes, small words within larger words, and context clues" (2008, p. 547). Edwards also noted that students with reading difficulties made more progress when taught phonics than those without difficulties (2008).

Research on Phonics Instruction at Each Schooling Level: A Summary

Due to state standards and the need to teach students to read starting at a young age, phonics instruction is used at the elementary level with heavy research - not limited to the research provided above. Phonics instruction is also used to remediate reading for students beginning to struggle with positive impact on reading success. At the middle school level, the use of phonics instruction is less clear on its overall benefits, but has been beneficial for students who are considered at-risk or who are struggling readers (Groff, 1980; Jeynes, 2008). At the high school level, phonics instruction is thought to be successful only when used for students who are behind in reading (Groff, 1980; Jeynes, 2008). Students who receive phonics instruction at the high school level improve their reading ability and their self-image (Edwards, 2008).

The next section dives deeper into special education and phonics instruction. Special education is a broad term that requires some understanding to fully comprehend

the research question. A look into some intersections related to students in middle school and students who receive special education services is presented.

Special Education, Dyslexia, English Language Learners, and Phonics Instruction - How Are They Connected?

With the history of phonics instruction, the research behind phonics instruction, and the research of phonics instruction at each school level completed, it is time to focus on the last part of the research question: *What is the most effective way to integrate phonics instruction into reading lessons in a middle school, resource room special education classroom?* Special education is a broad term that comes at the intersection of many identities. On top of the special education identity, some other identities include gifted and talented, marginalized, dyslexic, or English Language Learner (from here out called ELL). Previously in the review, Jeynes (2008), noted students from marginalized communities make gains with phonics instruction. But what is special education? How do these terms fit together when a student has both identities? How do they relate to phonics instruction?

Special Education

According to the United States Department of Education Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2017), sometimes called IDEA, special education is instruction that is especially designed to meet the needs of a student with a disability at no cost to the family of the student. This can take place in a classroom, in a home, in an institutional setting, or another setting (United States Department of Education, 2017). The Minnesota Department of Education (n. d., *Special education*) states, students receive a comprehensive evaluation from a public school that identifies a student's needs

and determines if they qualify and show a need for special education instruction. If so, the student then receives an Individualized Education Program, or IEP, that addresses areas of need and sets goals to be worked toward during a school year (Minnesota Department of Education, n. d., *Special education*)

Categories. The state of Minnesota identifies 13 categories of special education taken from IDEA and it's definitions. According to the Minnesota Department of Education (n.d., *Special education*), the categories and their definitions are as follows:

1. Severely Multiply Impaired (SMI) - Students who meet the criteria for two or more of the following: “deaf or hard of hearing, physically impaired, developmental cognitive disability (severe/profound), visually impaired, emotional or behavioral disorders, and autism spectrum disorders,” (Minnesota Department of Education, n. d., *Special education*).
2. Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) - “a neurodevelopmental disorder” that impacts how a person processes and interprets information (Minnesota Department of Education, n. d., *Special education*).
3. Blind-Visually Impaired (BVI) - a medically diagnosed label that comes with limited vision.
4. Deaf-Blind - combined hearing and visual impairments that cause “severe communication and other developmental and educational needs” that “cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness.” (Minnesota Department of Education, n. d., *Special education*).

5. Deaf and Hard of Hearing - students with any kind of hearing loss may be eligible for services in this category.
6. Developmental Cognitive Disabilities (DCD) - students' "intellectual functioning is significantly below average" and has "deficits in adaptive behavior" (Minnesota Department of Education, n. d., *Special education*). A student might be given a DCD Mild-Moderate or DCD Severe-Profound label depending on their cognitive ability.
7. Developmental Delay (DD) - only available until a student turns 7, this category is for students who are delayed in developmental skills at an early age but may not qualify for services in other areas otherwise.
8. Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD) - student who have a pattern of emotional or behavioral responses in one or more of the following: "withdrawal or anxiety, depression, problems with mood, or feelings of self-worth"; "disorder thought processes with unusual behavior patterns and atypical communication styles"; or "aggression, hyperactivity, or impulsivity" (Minnesota Department of Education, n. d., *Special education*). They also must show these responses across three different settings, be extremely different than typical age behavior, and have lasted for at least 6 months.
9. Other Health Disabilities (OHD) - This category hosts a variety of health conditions that includes: Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), medications, treatments, or therapies that impact a student's school day and repeated hospitalizations.

10. Physically Impaired (PI) - a “medically diagnosed, chronic, physical impairment” that was either present from birth or acquired that impacts “physical or academic functioning” (Minnesota Department of Education, n. d., *Special education*).
11. Specific Learning Disability (SLD) - “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language” (Minnesota Department of Education, n. d., *Special education*). This may impact a student's ability to “listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations” (Minnesota Department of Education, n. d., *Special education*). It may include “perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia” (Minnesota Department of Education, n. d., *Special education*).
12. Speech or Language Impairment (SLI) - difficulties with communication that may include stuttering, articulation difficulties, or voice or language impairment.
13. Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) - This category is limited to those that acquire a brain injury from “external physical force” (Minnesota Department of Education, n. d., *Special education*). It impacts a student’s education by impairing one or more of the following: “cognition; language; memory; attention; reasoning; abstract thinking; judgment; problem-solving; sensory, perceptual, and motor abilities; psychosocial behavior; physical functions; information processing; and speech” (Minnesota Department of Education, n. d., *Special education*).

Dyslexia

One area of intersection in identities is between students who receive special education services and students who are diagnosed with dyslexia. Johnston (2019), states

that dyslexia is a “neurobiological disorder” that impacts someone’s “phonological processing and memory” (p. 339). The Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity (2017), cites Sally Shaywitz, author of *Overcoming Dyslexia*, by saying dyslexia is difficulty reading in a person who has the intelligence to be a good reader. They go on to state it is neurobiological in basis (The Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity, 2017). On the Minnesota Department of Education (2021) website, dyslexia is defined to be a “specific learning disability that is neurological in origin.” There must be difficulties with accuracy and fluency with recognizing words and struggles with decoding and spelling ability (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021). An overarching definition of dyslexia would be a disorder in the brain that causes someone to have difficulty with reading, writing and memory related to word recognition, decoding, and spelling (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021; The Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity, 2017).

Relation to Special Education. When thinking about dyslexia, it might be assumed a student would automatically qualify for special education services if they received a diagnosis from a doctor. However, this is not the case. Both The Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity (2017) and Decoding Dyslexia Minnesota (n.d.) state schools must provide accommodations for students with dyslexia if they qualify for special education services or for an accommodation plan known as a 504 plan. This does not mean a student will automatically receive services for special education with a dyslexia diagnosis. A student still needs to receive a formal special education evaluation and show they have a disability that impacts their school performance (Minnesota Department of Education, n. d., *Special education*). It is possible for a student to have a diagnosis of dyslexia and not receive services through special education.

English Language Learners

Students who are considered English Language Learners (ELLs) and receive services to understand academic English better, are part of schools across the United States. In Minnesota, there are two steps to identifying if a student qualifies for services with an ELL teacher. The Minnesota Department of Education: Student Support Division (2017) states, a student's family must first identify a language other than English as their primary language when they are enrolling a student in school. Second they state a student is tested using an English language screener approved by the state to test a student's English proficiency (Minnesota Department of Education: Student Support Division, 2017). With those being the only qualifiers, it can be deduced that students could be new to the country and speak no English at all, or they can be born in the United States but speak another language other than English at home. This can mean a student speaks English at home, it just might not be their primary language.

Relation to Special Education. Just as with dyslexia, students who are ELLs may qualify for services through special education or they may not. Special procedures are in place to ensure that a student truly has a disability and is not just still learning English (Minnesota Department of Education: Student Support Division, 2017). To ensure a student truly has a disability that requires special education services, the student's family, ELL teacher, and classroom teacher(s) are all involved in the process (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d., *Special education*). Additionally, the student's educational history and their language skills are discussed and documented in the evaluation to ensure limited English proficiency and cultural factors are not the cause of the student's difficulties in the classroom (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.,

Special education). Finally, since standardized tests used to assess a student's academic skills are not normed to consider students who are ELLs, no formal scores are reported, a score descriptor is used instead (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d., *Special education*). For example a student might be in the very low range for reading comprehension but the average range for math calculation. Once all information is gathered, the team decides if a student truly has an educational disability that impacts their schooling and requires special education services.

Intersectionality of Phonics Instruction, Special Education, Dyslexia, and English Language Learners

Whether or not a student receives special education services, is an English Language Learner (ELL), or has a diagnosis of dyslexia, phonics instruction is explicitly laid out in standards from kindergarten through 5th grade in Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). For a student in these grades, phonics instruction will always be important. However, once students are past 5th grade, their teachers are no longer required to explicitly teach phonics as a separate set of standards. The research question relates to the intersectionality of students who are in middle school and students who receive special education services. Looking into research at the intersection of these two identities requires an investigation into research in phonics instruction in other areas related to the middle school and special education identities - namely dyslexia and ELL.

Phonics Instruction and Dyslexia. When teaching students who are dyslexic, Johnston (2019) found using multisensory teaching and learning strategies that were explicit and systematic, and that involved “listening, speaking, reading and writing” (p. 340) to be most effective. This was an echo of previous research done by the

International Dyslexia Association (2017), which stated the use of multisensory, explicit, and step-by-step instruction as beneficial for students who are dyslexic. Johnston (2019) also states some effective strategies for teaching students who are dyslexic included using explicit and systematic instruction to teach “letter-sound correspondence, the spelling of syllable patterns, and the spelling of morphemes” (p. 324). Interestingly enough, Johnston also uses features of Whole Language when instructing students with dyslexia. She suggests starting with familiar words, looking at parts of those words, and then identifying other words in a word family (Johnston, 2019).

The International Dyslexia Association (2017) suggests a structured literacy program to help students with dyslexia. This includes instruction in phonological awareness - the understanding that words are made up of sounds (Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, 2019; National Reading Panel, 2000), sound-symbol association - knowing that letters stand for sounds (International Dyslexia Association, 2017), syllable instruction, morphology - the study of the smallest unit of language meaning (International Dyslexia Association, 2017), syntax - rules for how sentences can be structured (International Dyslexia Association, 2017), and semantics - rules for how language fits together to create meaning (International Dyslexia Association, 2017).

Phonics Instruction and English Language Learners (ELL). Another name of an English Language Learner (ELL) is English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) (Juste, 2015). Anyone who speaks another language other than English could be considered a person who is ESOL. However, to qualify for ELL services in a school, a student must meet the requirements outlined by their respective state. In the case of Minnesota, students must meet two requirements: A student’s family must identify a

language other than English as their primary language when they are enrolling a student in school and the student must participate in an English language screener that has been approved by the state to test English proficiency (Minnesota Department of Education: Student Support Division, 2017). If the student scores below a certain level on the screener and has been identified as speaking another language than English, they can qualify for ELL services through school (Minnesota Department of Education: Student Support Division, 2017).

When it comes to phonics instruction and students who receive ELL services, Juste (2015) says phonics is a teaching method used to increase a student's ability to decode and recognize words. Juste goes on to say this is a successful way to help students with fluency, decoding, word recognition and overall reading. Additionally, Juste notes that students who are learning English as a second language cannot solely have phonics instruction. Juste also says, students who receive ELL services and are only taught phonics may not learn to understand vocabulary. In turn they may struggle to make real-world connections to what they are reading (Juste, 2015). This information relates back to teaching phonics embedded in a balanced literacy curriculum (Bear et al., 2012; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, 2004).

Phonics Instruction and Special Education. The research question states: *What is the most effective way to integrate phonics instruction into reading lessons in a middle school, resource room special education classroom?* In Chapter One it was discussed that a center-based special education classroom is where students spend 60% or more of their day in a special education classroom (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d., *Special education*). A student who spends less than 60% of their day in special education is

considered to be part of the resource room special education setting (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d., *Special education*). These students can be identified with a variety of education disabilities. This is typically 11 out of the 13 categories of special education: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Blind/Visually Impaired (BVI), Deaf or Hard of Hearing (DHOH), Developmental Cognitive Disability - Mild/Moderate (DCD), Developmental Delay (DD), Emotional/Behavioral Disorder (EBD), Other Health Disability (OHD), Physical Impairment (PI), Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Speech/Language Impairment (SLI), or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

There is a lot of research on students who receive special education services and their phonics instruction in reading. Williams (2017), states, “reading skills are fundamental to educational achievement, career readiness, and adult well-being,” (p. 5). Considering the amount of reading a person does in their day to day life, this is unsurprising. Street signs, recipes, books, instruction manuals, menus, cereal boxes, and more, all count as reading. Reading is an important life skill.

For students in the resource room category of special education, teaching phonics is helpful for those who struggle to read (Ciullo, et al.; 2019; Osborne, 2006; Williams, 2017). Williams (2017) found teaching phonics and sight words to struggling readers improved their reading. It was also noted that using a multisensory approach to teaching reading improved student decoding and fluency skills in middle school students with disabilities and had a positive impact on their overall reading ability (Williams, 2017). Osborne (2006) found being able to efficiently read was important to be able to comprehend what you are reading. When studying phonemic awareness and decoding skills versus teaching reading through its application during reading, it was found both

showed gains in students reading achievement and continued to impact students reading 2 years later (Osborne, 2006). Osborne (2006) also found systematic phonics instruction to have noteworthy positive effects for students with reading disabilities in kindergarten to 6th grade no matter their socioeconomic status. Ciullo, et al. (2019) found teaching students in 4th and 5th grade foundational reading skills, usually taught in the older grades, in tandem with comprehension skills had a positive impact on students with a learning disability. All three noted phonics instruction should be taught along with other reading skills like fluency and comprehension in a comprehensive reading program (Ciullo, et al.; 2019; Osborne, 2006; Williams, 2017).

Special Education, Dyslexia and English Language Learners: A Summary

There is intersectionality between being a student with an education disability and other areas such as socioeconomic status, dyslexia, and English language learning. When looking at the whole picture, research supports teaching phonics to students who need it, no matter what grade they are in, so long as it is part of a comprehensive reading program (Ciullo, et al.; 2019; National Reading Panel, 2000; Osborne, 2006; Pearson, 2004; Williams, 2017).

Putting It All Together

Knowing the history of phonics instruction is important to understanding the background of the research question: *What is the most effective way to integrate phonics instruction into reading lessons in a middle school, resource room special education classroom?* This history allows readers to understand what is needed for a unit framework, what is included in literacy lessons and how state standards inform instruction. Understanding the connection between different schooling levels of literacy

instruction and the research behind it's necessity is beneficial to see the importance of phonics instruction at the middle school level, specifically in relation to students who are in middle school and receive special education services. Finally, understanding what special education is and the intersectionality that comes along with it is the last step to fully grasping the research question and how all it's parts come together.

Chapter Three will go into detail about the capstone project. A full description of the project including frameworks used for planning and writing of the lessons is provided. This is followed by a rationale for the project, the setting and audience of the project, the timeline for completion, and how student learning will be assessed.

Chapter Four will conclude the capstone and will provide insight into the process of capstone writing. A look into what was learned and the research that went into the capstone will be overviewed. A review of positive implications and limitations encountered will be provided, as well as a discussion of how the project can be used or changed in the future. There will also be notes on the importance of this project to literacy as a whole and how it can be used in the future.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

Being tasked with improving the reading levels of middle school students with educational disabilities who are reading at a 2nd grade level is not an easy thing to do. These students may struggle with comprehending, decoding, or both. Reading impacts all other classes students take in school and thus is very important. As a teacher I kept finding there was not much information or resources that talked about teaching students in middle school how to decode. It was easy to find comprehension strategies to teach and to adapt for middle schoolers, but phonics instruction was another story. This led me to my research question: *What is the most effective way to integrate phonics instruction into reading lessons in a middle school, resource room special education classroom?* After researching my question, I concluded, as I expected, phonics instruction has to be embedded into the whole curriculum and not as a stand alone topic. With this in mind, my project took shape. In my project I created a unit that combines phonics, reading, writing, and comprehension into a comprehensive reading program.

Chapter Three will describe the comprehensive reading unit that embeds phonics instruction in it's lessons. This chapter includes a rationale for why phonics instruction is necessary, as well as reasons for why it must be part of a comprehensive reading program. It also uses the theories and frameworks from Chapter Two to support the development of this unit. Chapter Three discusses the setting and audience intended for this project, a timeline for implementation, and how learning is assessed.

Project Description

To support students with reading difficulties that receive special education services, a curriculum unit which includes phonics, reading, writing and comprehension pieces was created to support students in their reading progress. In Chapter Two it was noted phonics instruction is important, but it should be embedded in a balanced literacy curriculum (Bear, et al., 2012; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, 2004). This means students need, not only to be able to accurately and fluently read, but they must also learn to understand what they are reading. This also means students need to be able to write about what they are reading.

When developing the overarching plan for the reading unit, the *Understanding by Design*, also abbreviated as UbD, (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011) format was used to understand desired results and take steps to get there. There are three steps in the UbD template: Desired Results, Evidence and Assessment, and Learning Plan. In the Desired Results section, I talked about the essential questions and meaning I want students to take from the unit, the skills I wish students to acquire during the unit, and the Minnesota State Standards the unit covers. In the Evidence and Assessment section, I discuss the evidence I use to show progress and the assessments used to get there. Finally, the Learning Plan section breaks down the parts of the lessons I included.

Once the UbD was complete, the lessons were written. When writing lesson plans I used Fountas and Pinnell's (2017) and Tannock's (1994) frameworks to structure my lessons. The structure is as follows:

- Re-reading: Re-reading a selected passage from the day before to refresh students' minds on what was learned and work on fluency. This section will not

appear in the first lesson as students have not read a passage or article related to this unit on the very first day.

- Phonics: Students will be taught a new phonics strategy every week. The students will continue to work with that strategy throughout the week in different activities each day.
- Pre-Reading: Previewing the day's reading, working on vocabulary, and making predictions.
- Reading: A new article or section of the book will be read. Comprehension questions may appear during the reading.
- Post-Reading: Finish comprehension questions, talk through what happened, examine previously made predictions.
- Writing: Given a prompt, students will write a few sentences related to the prompt, while focusing on spelling and correct conventions. The phonics strategy taught that week will be reinforced through writing.

Before beginning the unit, students will go through a series of needs assessments.

These will look at students' ability to read, spell words, and comprehend what they are reading. For the reading assessment the students will go through my district's chosen informal reading assessment called the Benchmark Assessment System - III (BAS) by Fountas and Pinnell. In the BAS assessment, students are asked to read a short fiction or nonfiction story aloud. After reading they are asked comprehension questions to assess understanding of what they learned. During reading, the teacher keeps track of the student's accuracy and marks fluency on a scoring sheet. The overall score gives the teacher an idea of if the story is at a students independent, instructional, or frustration

reading level. Since the stories are broken up into reading levels, a teacher can reference a chart to see at about which grade level a student is reading. Students also go through a spelling assessment from *Words Their Way* (Bear, et al., 2012). I use Bear, et al.'s (2012) Primary Spelling Inventory assessment with the students (Appendix A). Here students are asked to spell 26 words ranging from consonant-vowel-consonant words working with initial and final consonant sounds to words with inflected endings such as “riding” and “clapping”. Once completed and scored, the spelling assessment in *Words Their Way* split's students into the following categories based on students' spelling abilities:

Letter-Name Alphabetic, Within Word Pattern, Syllables and Affixes, and Derivational Relations (Bear, et al., 2012). These categories help teachers understand where students are in their phonics spelling knowledge and what they still need to be taught. Based on the results of both assessments, I split students into ability groups for teaching.

Once students are in groups, the unit can begin. Lessons are taught using the previously stated structure: re-reading, phonics, pre-reading, reading, post-reading, and writing. Phonics instruction is based on students' assessed levels and what happens in the story. For example, if a group of students is struggling with long vowel sounds, students will work with common long ‘a’ vowel patterns during the lesson and will identify long ‘a’ sounds while re-reading the passage from the day before. These patterns might include a_e words, ai words, ay words, a words. Phonics lessons will be formatted to include words from the readings to help bring a cohesiveness to the lessons. The students will also answer comprehension questions with a group and then individually write about a given question, again relating to the story. Once students have completed their writing, they re-read their writing to identify words based on that week's phonics pattern.

At the end of each unit students go through the *Words Their Way* assessment again. Teacher observation and notes of student progress also help determine how students have progressed. Due to the intensity and time length of completing the BAS, students go through BAS testing once a trimester to determine progress..

During the unit, events might impact groups and student learning. One event might be the addition of students into groups. A student might qualify for special education services and join a group. A second event might be, a student could make a lot of progress, require assessment again, and move to another group. A final event could be a student may be struggling with concepts and require change to a different group closer to their level. Groups are meant to be fluid and based on student need. I will take this into consideration when teaching and planning groups. Since I used the same book for each group, students are able to change groups relatively easily without much impact on their understanding of the story. This was intentional as special education classrooms can require a lot of changes on short notice.

Rationale

By the time students are in middle school, which is 6th through 8th grade for this project, there are no longer standards for phonics instruction in Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). The focus becomes understanding a text and its features. This means students are no longer learning to read but reading to learn. In a special education classroom where students receive reading instruction, there are still students learning to read, making phonics instruction an important part of students' education.

The National Reading Panel (2000) stated phonics instruction is extremely beneficial in helping at-risk students or students with disabilities in preventing reading difficulties. Groff (1980) and Jeynes (2008) also note teaching phonics is important to students but only if a student is struggling with reading. Clearly, the need for phonics instruction in a middle school resource special education classroom is important to help improve students' reading skills.

Setting and Audience

The curriculum unit I created is made to be used in small groups in a middle school resource room special education classroom setting. A student who spends less than 60% of their day in special education is considered to be part of the resource room special education setting (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d., *Special education*). There are two classes who use this curriculum: the 6th and 7th grade classes. Both of these classes are considered small group instruction classes. All students in the classes are students who receive special education services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). They also have goals on their IEPs working to improve their reading skills.

Class size ranged from about 10 to 15 students with a paraprofessional in the room to support student learning through teacher direction. While students were in the classroom for reading instruction, some students had multiple difficulties, including but not limited to: behavior difficulties, emotional difficulties, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), physical impairment, and/or a speech/language impairment. These students may also be students who are homeless, speak multiple languages, and have mental health difficulties. Students of color were present in each class.

Timeline

The design of the curriculum took place from September to November of 2021. Following the design phase, a phase of editing and revising will happen from November to early December of 2021. During these two phases, the unit was reviewed by peer editors, a content expert, and the capstone advisor. The lessons also went through a preliminary reading with other special education professionals and some lessons were tried with small reading groups to ensure the lessons had feasible timeframes.

Since the project is a unit that can be implemented at any time, full implementation of the unit will start in January of 2022. The first week of implementation, January 3-7, 2022, will be assessing students to find areas of strength and need related to phonics. This will also be where students are grouped based on common needs to teach. The unit will take place from January 10 to February 4, 2022. Following this, students will again be assessed to see the progress they have made.

Assessing Learning

As stated previously, students will be assessed using Benchmark Assessment System - III (BAS) by Fountas and Pinnell and *Words Their Way* (Bear, et al., 2012). These will be used for grouping students. It should be noted that students also have specific ways their reading growth is measured on their IEPs. Fountas and Pinnell's Benchmark Assessment System - III (BAS) is my district's informal reading assessment. As a refresher, in the BAS assessment, students read a short fiction or nonfiction story aloud. Following reading students answer comprehension questions to assess understanding of what they learned. During reading, the teacher tracks student's accuracy and marks fluency on a scoring sheet. The overall score gives the teacher an idea of if the

story is at a student's independent, instructional, or frustration reading level, as well as which grade level they are reading at. The BAS and *Words Their Way* assessment will all play a role in determining if a student is making progress in reading. The BAS and *Words Their Way* assessments will focus on the impact of phonics instruction on students' word reading and writing. The BAS assessment will also be used to show the impact of phonics instruction on a student's ability to comprehend a story. Since we know phonics instruction is important in the context of a comprehensive reading program, assessing student comprehension is another important piece to assess (Bear, et al., 2012; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, 2004).

Summary

Phonics instruction is important to helping middle school students who receive special education services in reading in the resource room setting. Making gains in reading words and reading them fluently are important when presented within a comprehensive reading program (Bear, et al., 2012; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, 2004). The overview of the curriculum unit I created was presented in the Understanding by Design (Ubd) framework from Wiggins & McTighe (2011). The unit has the backing of research from Bear, et al. (2012), Groff (1980), Jaynes (2008), the National Reading Panel (2000), and Pearson (2004). The lessons in the unit follow the frameworks from Fountas and Pinell (2017) and Tannock (1994). The lessons follow the pattern of re-reading, phonics, pre-reading, reading, post-reading, and writing.

The curriculum unit was created in September to December 2021 and will be implemented in January of 2022. The project consists of assessing students using two phonics informal assessments, placing students in groups, teaching the students using

phonics, reading, writing and comprehension, regrouping as necessary, and reassessing at the end of each unit to keep track of progress. This unit is intended for use with students in middle school, which in my setting is 6th through 8th grade, who are receiving special education services for reading in the resource room setting. The small group classes are made up of 10 to 15 students.

Chapter Four will review my research question, *what is the most effective way to integrate phonics instruction into reading lessons in a middle school, resource room special education classroom?* It will review the research done to support my phonics curriculum project. I will discuss what I learned in the process of creating my project. Chapter Four will also discuss some limitations related to my project, how I will use the project in the future, and any changes I would make.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

Reading has always been a passion of mine. So when I went back to graduate school, I knew I wanted to get my Masters in something that related to reading. That being said, I also knew I wanted something that was outside the realm of special education. A Masters in Literacy Education was a natural way to hit both of my goals. Being a special education teacher currently, I knew I could not leave my special education background behind and I wanted to create a project that would support my teaching of reading, while also filling a hole I found in appropriate phonics instruction.

The creation of this project has really been an art form. What I envisioned when I started and how my project turned out are very different. When I started, I envisioned creating a phonics curriculum that could stand alone. My original research question was, *what strategies are most effective to teach phonics to middle school students in resource room special education?* However, as I did research I learned more specifically that phonics instruction should be integrated into a balanced reading curriculum (Bear et al., 2012; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, 2004). From here I adjusted my research question to be: *What is the most effective way to integrate phonics instruction into reading lessons in a middle school, resource room special education classroom?* The creation process was messy and sometimes stressful, but I ended up with a masterpiece of my own creation.

In this final chapter, I will cover major learnings that helped progress my project and develop a deeper understanding of my research question. Next, I will give a brief

overview of my literature review, dive into implications, limitations to implementation of my curriculum project, and discuss future research that could be done in relation to my research question. Finally, I will cover how I intend to communicate and share my project with others in the profession, and talk about how my project benefits the teaching profession as a whole.

Major Learnings

When I first started my capstone project, I had the goal of creating a phonics curriculum that could stand alone. My reasoning was I wanted to be able to pick it up and integrate it into whatever I was doing, no matter what the lesson was. As stated before, my original research question was, what strategies are most effective to teach phonics to middle school students in resource room special education? Throughout my research I learned phonics instruction should not be a stand alone curriculum. Phonics instruction should be integrated into reading so immediate practice can be done with students (Bear et al., 2012; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, 2004).

As I was completing my research I changed my research question because I noticed the research did not focus on what the most effective strategies were in teaching phonics. Instead it focused on how to integrate phonics into a curriculum. After this insight, my project completely shifted. I went from planning a curriculum solely dedicated to phonic instruction to planning a curriculum that integrated phonics into word study, reading, and writing.

Another, although smaller, learning was the amount planned in a lesson. Many teachers would agree having too little planned is not a good idea. That being said, having too much planned in well-scaffolded lessons is not good either. Throughout the project

writing process I have tried to keep in mind this balance. After completing the writing, I went back and timed out each lesson to see how it would fair in the classroom. Doing this made me realize I had some lessons that had too much in them and that some lessons went too fast for what my students would be able to handle.

Literature Review

Research in elementary school or early literacy skills in phonics instruction is vast. There was a great deal of information about what phonics instruction is and how it is used at the elementary level. There was also a lot of research about how important phonics instruction is at the elementary level (Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, 2019; Jeynes, 2008; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, 2004; Suggate, 2010). I encountered research that stated while phonics instruction is important, most young children do not catch on to phonics instruction through immersion (Pearson, 2004). Teachers need to teach students using explicit, systematic instruction with authentic literacy experiences; which is another way of saying students should be taught using balanced literacy (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017; Pressley, et al., 2002; Tancock, 1994).

Balanced literacy is a way of teaching reading to students that integrates all parts of reading. In this case that includes: re-reading a familiar text, pre-reading a text, reading the text, word study, and writing (Fountas and Pinnell, 2017; Tancock, 1994). The order of the components may vary but the pieces of instruction remain the same. When building a curriculum unit, it is important to provide routine to students so they know what to anticipate is next, and start to build ownership over their teaching (Fountas and Pinnell, 2017; Tancock, 1994).

When looking at Minnesota State Standards, foundational skills are taught from kindergarten through 5th grade. This means learning letter sound correspondences and long and short vowel sounds; students also need to be able to read to understand and self-correct while reading (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). Since standards in phonics instruction fall away after 5th grade and focus shifts to reading to learn, it ends up leaving behind students who have not learned how to read. That is where the focus of my research question, *what is the most effective way to integrate phonics instruction into reading lessons in a middle school, resource room special education classroom?*, came from. But what did the research say about phonics in middle school and above?

Research in the areas of middle school and high school were much slimmer than in elementary school. In middle school there was research saying focus on comprehension was more beneficial for students (Suggate, 2010), while Groff (1980) supported this by saying if middle school students had not learned phonics skills yet, there was little point in continuing to teach it. However, on the flip side, both Groff (1980) and Jeynes (2008) say to use phonics instruction only with middle schoolers who need it. At the high school level, Suggate (2010) found teaching comprehension had a much higher impact than phonics instruction. However, other research stated teaching phonics to high school students who are continuing to learn how to read is extremely important, because it improves self-confidence, while also improving their reading skills (Edwards, 2008). Overall, it was concluded that phonics instruction was important for students who are continuing to learn how to read.

Since the research question relates to resource room special education, which encompasses many intersectionalities including students who are English language

learners, students with dyslexia, and students who come from a variety of socio-economic statuses, research was done into the necessity of teaching phonics instruction into each of these areas. When doing research in this section, I learned the parameters are the same as teaching middle school and high school students phonics. This means students should receive phonics instruction in a balanced literacy curriculum no matter their age or other factors (Ciullo, et al.; 2019; National Reading Panel, 2000; Osborne, 2006; Pearson, 2004; Williams, 2017).

Implications

My capstone curriculum project has many benefits. The curriculum unit uses a book titled *When Stars Are Scattered* by Omar Mohamed and Victoria Jamieson (2020). This story is beneficial to students for a few reasons. First, it is accessible to many students. *When Stars Are Scattered* is a graphic novel written about a third to fourth grade level. Since many graphic novels are accessible to a wide range of ages, the unit can be used with students of many grades. Another benefit to this curriculum is its relevance to society and the world today. In the book, students are given insight into refugee camps, being an orphan, disabilities, and the meaning of community and family. There are refugees and refugee camps around the world. In the story, the main character and his brother live in Ifo Refugee Camp in Dadaab, Kenya. The story itself is founded in truth with some fictional characters added. Finally, the unit provides an insight into the beliefs in the Muslim religion and its culture. We learn about the differences between expectations for boys and girls. There is a celebration of Ramadan and Somali words are used throughout the story. Learning about these topics is important for successfully living

in the world today. It promotes students' understanding of others while also providing some students the opportunity to see themselves or their families in stories.

For teachers, this curriculum is beneficial because it supports equity and is easily implemented. In terms of equity, not only does the book used in the curriculum support diverse perspectives, it also includes articles from NewsELA that builds background knowledge about refugees and their lives. The *When Stars Are Scattered* and NewsELA articles expose White students to different cultures and give students, whose parents are refugees or who are refugees themselves, a connection to school they might not have had in the past. In terms of implementation, the curriculum unit is designed to be picked up by anyone and implemented without needing anything other than copies of the book and NewsELA articles.

When I think about how the unit supports policy, I think about the world today. We live in a divided society. I know in my district, as well as other districts, equity has become a large issue and standards have been written to support equity in schools. This project supports understanding of cultures and people who are typically marginalized. Writing this curriculum unit allows for teachers, administrators, and policy makers to feel confident that students are learning about cultures other than Anglo-Saxon cultures.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to my curriculum unit. The biggest limitation is the phonics portion in each lesson focuses on only one level of phonics instruction. Ideally, it would be written to support students with a variety of needs such as those who need work with syllables or inflected endings. The beauty of this would be all students could use the same book, but they would not have the same phonics instruction. In that sense, students

would not feel bad about being in a certain reading group because everyone would be reading the same book. Ideally, the structure of the phonics portion of the lessons would be the same no matter what level the students are at, again taking the stigma out of which reading group you are in.

Another limitation is the prep work that comes with the lessons. Since it is 20 lessons and each lesson is 4-5 pages long, it can be a lot to set up. Making sure you have every piece of every lesson separated out with copies made for each student can be overwhelming. This is not ideal for teachers who are short on time. On top of that, the curriculum requires a book for every student. If your school does not have access to funds to get you books for each student then you would not be able to complete the curriculum. Hopefully, the curriculum can be used as an illustration of how phonics instruction can be embedded into any curriculum.

Finally, this curriculum unit was written with Minnesota state reading standards in mind. If someone from out of the state of Minnesota were to pick up this lesson, there is no guarantee it would match standards in that state. However, practicing reading and learning phonics has been proven to be beneficial for any student who needs support, no matter where they live, their background, or their challenges (Ciullo, et al.; 2019; National Reading Panel, 2000; Osborne, 2006; Pearson, 2004; Williams, 2017).

Communicating Results

This curriculum is written to be fully implemented in January of 2022. However, I have been doing a trial run of it with one class to get a feel for areas that need to be worked out before implementing with other classes. In doing so I have presented my

project to my co-teacher and the paraprofessionals that work with us. This is the start of communicating and getting results for my project.

I also teach with a group of other middle school special education teachers who teach reading. I intend to share my unit with them as a way to support their teaching and their students. I also am familiar with other teachers who teach special education at all three schooling levels, elementary, middle, and high school. When discussing reading instruction with these colleagues, I will share my curriculum unit with them.

Future Research and Ideas

One of the biggest ways I wish to further develop this project is to expand the phonics instruction lessons. As stated previously, I would love to have students in reading groups where they were doing different phonics instruction within the same curriculum unit. That way students who were struggling with short vowel sounds and students who were working with inflected endings could read the same book but get instruction in the area they need.

In terms of research, it would be beneficial to research the most effective way to teach phonics instruction at the middle school level. When I started this project that was my initial goal, but before I could get to finding effective ways to teach it, I had to learn how to implement a balanced literacy unit that I developed on my own.. Now that I have created a unit using balanced literacy that integrates phonics, reading, and writing, research into effective ways to teach phonics would make the unit even stronger and more effective with middle school students who receive special education services in resource room classrooms. I could embark on an action research project to see the impacts and effectiveness of what I created in my own setting.

Benefit to the Profession

In Chapter One I talked about my journey to my research question. One big struggle in my early teaching career that continues today, is having an effective reading curriculum that supports middle school students learning to read in a time of school when students are reading to learn the majority of the time. Middle school resource special education teachers are not always given a curriculum to use with their students. Many times it is adapting a curriculum entirely too difficult for their students. While students should be challenged and be able to access grade level curriculum, they also need to be taught how to read and comprehend at their reading level. My curriculum unit bridges the gap between teaching students to read, while also focusing on real-world issues and equity. This is a benefit to the teaching profession.

Another benefit is this curriculum is designed to be picked up by anyone and taught. I have had paraprofessional, substitute teachers, and co-teachers all leading reading groups using this curriculum. While there have been bumps along the way, having a curriculum that supports, yet challenges students is a benefit to all teachers who pick up this curriculum.

Summary

This chapter has been a reflection of my learning throughout the development of my curriculum unit. I summarized how I came to my research question, including how my research question changed during the research phase of the project. I reviewed the important pieces of a balanced literacy curriculum and how it relates to teaching phonics to middle school students who receive special education services in the resource room

setting. Next, positive implications and limitations of the project were discussed. Finally, I dove into how I will communicate the results of my project, what future research and future ideas could stem from this project, and I discussed how this project benefits the teaching profession.

Phonics instruction at the middle school level is not as cut and dry as I initially thought it was. I have learned a lot over the last six months of brainstorming, researching, and developing this project. It truly has been an art form and a labor of love. The world is always in need of more and better readers. This project supports those who are struggling to read, while also giving teachers the peace of mind knowing they are expanding their students' views of the world around them.

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APPENDIX A

Words Their Way Primary Spelling Inventory**Primary Spelling Inventory (PSI)**

The Primary Spelling Inventory (PSI) is used in kindergarten through third grade. The 26 words are ordered by difficulty to sample features of the letter name–alphabetic to within word pattern stages. Call out enough words so that you have at least five or six misspelled words to analyze. For kindergarten or other emergent readers, you may only need to call out the first five words. In late kindergarten and early first grade classrooms, call out at least 15 words so that you sample digraphs and blends; use the entire list for late first, second, and third grades. If any students spell more than 20 words correctly, you may want to use the Elementary Spelling Inventory.

1. fan	I could use a fan on a hot day. <i>fan</i>
2. pet	I have a pet cat who likes to play. <i>pet</i>
3. dig	He will dig a hole in the sand. <i>dig</i>
4. rob	A raccoon will rob a bird's nest for eggs. <i>rob</i>
5. hope	I hope you will do well on this test. <i>hope</i>
6. wait	You will need to wait for the letter. <i>wait</i>
7. gum	I stepped on some bubble gum. <i>gum</i>
8. sled	The dog sled was pulled by huskies. <i>sled</i>
9. stick	I used a stick to poke in the hole. <i>stick</i>
10. shine	He rubbed the coin to make it shine. <i>shine</i>
11. dream	I had a funny dream last night. <i>dream</i>
12. blade	The blade of the knife was very sharp. <i>blade</i>
13. coach	The coach called the team off the field. <i>coach</i>
14. fright	She was a fright in her Halloween costume. <i>fright</i>
15. chewed	The dog chewed on the bone until it was gone. <i>chewed</i>
16. crawl	You will get dirty if you crawl under the bed. <i>crawl</i>
17. wishes	In fairy tales wishes often come true. <i>wishes</i>
18. thorn	The thorn from the rosebush stuck me. <i>thorn</i>
19. shouted	They shouted at the barking dog. <i>shouted</i>
20. spoil	The food will spoil if it sits out too long. <i>spoil</i>
21. growl	The dog will growl if you bother him. <i>growl</i>
22. third	I was the third person in line. <i>third</i>
23. camped	We camped down by the river last weekend. <i>camped</i>
24. tries	He tries hard every day to finish his work. <i>tries</i>
25. clapping	The audience was clapping after the program. <i>clapping</i>
26. riding	They are riding their bikes to the park today. <i>riding</i>

Words Their Way Primary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide

Student's Name _____ Teacher _____ Grade _____ Date _____
 Words Spelled Correctly: ____ / 26 Feature Points: ____ / 56 Total: ____ / 82 Spelling Stage: _____

SPELLING STAGES →	EMERGENT LATE		EARLY		LETTER NAME-ALPHABETIC MIDDLE		LATE		WITHIN WORD PATTERN EARLY			MIDDLE		LATE		SYLLABLES AND AFFIXES EARLY		Words Spelled Correctly		
	Initial	Consonants Final	Short Vowels	Digraphs	Blends	Long Vowel Patterns	Other Vowels	Inflected Endings	Feature Points											
1. fan	f	n	a																	
2. pet	p	t	e																	
3. dig	d	g	i																	
4. rob	r	b	o																	
5. hope	h	p				o-e														
6. wait	w	t				ai														
7. gum	g	m	u																	
8. sled			e			sl														
9. stick			i			st														
10. shine				sh		i-e														
11. dream					dr	ea														
12. blade					bl	a-e														
13. coach				-ch		oa														
14. fright					fr	igh														
15. chewed				ch		ew		-ed												
16. crawl					cr	aw														
17. wishes				-sh				-es												
18. thorn				th		or														
19. shouted				sh		ou		-ed												
20. spoil						oi														
21. growl				th		ow														
22. third						ir														
23. camped								-ed												
24. ties					tr			-ies												
25. clapping								-ping												
26. riding								-ding												
Totals	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	56	26