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## Phonological Awareness in the Elementary Classroom

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Phonological Awareness in the Elementary Classroom

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Arts in Teaching.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Introduction

As students enter early childhood or prekindergarten and kindergarten classes, children learn to read. However, many current third and fourth graders are still struggling to learn to read even though it is their fourth or fifth year of formal education. Our current literacy trends continue to highlight the concern for struggling readers that need further intervention with their word recognition. Word recognition is critical to our struggling readers because if they do not recognize words as they are reading, then they must focus on their decoding and phonological awareness skills instead of their comprehension skills (Kilpatrick, 2020). This of course is frustrating to our struggling readers and hinders their overall reading performance. Working with students that are developing skills in reading and helping them work towards grade level has led me to my research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?*

Teaching all students strong phonological awareness skills in an explicit manner lays a solid literacy foundation. Chapter one includes background information of my own personal positionality and what my experiences with reading were as a student. I also will share my personal experiences that I have encountered as a parent that has a child in our public school system who has struggled to read himself. Then, I will share my professional experience as a beginning intervention teacher. Working with students that are emerging in their reading and often behind grade level is part of my daily practice. I will also explain the rationale behind my desire to explore this research question.

## **Personal Student Experiences**

Looking back on my years in elementary school I distinctly remember my 5th grade year. My 5th grade teacher was instrumental to my success in school and I believe my love for reading began when I was in her class. She had a reading center set up in her classroom that included cozy chairs, a big cozy reading rug, and countless bins full of books. I remember DEAR time in her classroom everyday, or Drop Everything And Read time. I always felt like this time was relaxing and a time where I could get lost in a book and not worry about any of the life stressors that were going on at home with my family. In a book I could go anywhere, be anyone, and do anything. The environment that my 5th grade teacher created was one where I felt secure enough to grab books of many genres and find myself getting lost within them. I am grateful for this experience.

Beyond the time to freely read to myself in my 5th grade class I also was impacted by the Greek and Latin lessons that were taught to me. These lessons explicitly taught me how to break words apart and look at the beginnings and endings of the words so that I could determine the meanings. I didn't realize how helpful this was at the moment, but as I went into junior high and high school I continued to use this skill to determine the meanings of words as I went throughout my courses. I feel like this is true for almost all components of learning to read. We learn stepping stones, or bit by bit, and before we know it as we progress throughout the years, we are readers.

I don't remember ever being a good or bad reader. I know that we were always divided up into reading groups based on our levels. They gave us different colored reading groups, so as to not say which group was which level, but we all knew which group had the super smart kids and the not so smart kids. I always found myself

somewhere in the middle to lower middle groups. Reading never felt natural to me in elementary school and I always had to work hard at the skills being taught.

I recall practicing at home and reading to myself in my room before bed often. I grew up in a suburban neighborhood outside of Minneapolis, but I never really felt like I fit in with the other suburban kids. My parents were divorced, and together their income would have been equivalent to my peers' household incomes. Living in two separate homes, although never verbally discussed, I always knew money was tight. My parents didn't have many books purchased for me to read. I quickly fell in love with the library, both at school and the local library in my city. I could read as many books as I wanted to for free and if I were bored or didn't have anything to do, reading was always an option. My enjoyment of reading transitioned from childhood into my young adult life and ultimately into my career.

### **Personal Adult Experiences**

As an early childhood educator I have understood the importance of reading to young children and exposing them to print concepts for many years. I spent multiple years teaching preschoolers their alphabet, how to write their names, and learning their letter sounds. I really thought I had these early literacy skills down as an educator. Imagine my surprise when my own son began elementary school and quickly became a struggling reader. Where had I gone wrong? Not only as a mom, but as an educator. From birth through pre kindergarten I read to my child and did all of the things that I believed to be the best things to set him up for success. I was supposed to have not only prepared him for his elementary years, but I also should have known how to support him.

The reality was, I didn't know what to do and it became clear to me that his teachers, although trying their hardest, also weren't equipped to best support him either.

At this point in my life I was beginning my process at Hamline University to complete my Masters of Arts in Teaching and working towards obtaining my K-6 Elementary Education licensure. I knew there had to be more to what my son was struggling with and why he couldn't grasp reading concepts as easily as the majority of his peers, hence not reading at grade level. I also knew that the constant reminders that he was behind his peers was weighing on his self-esteem and confidence. After a full academic year of him making no gains in reading, I took the necessary steps as a parent to obtain Special Education services for my son. He has since received reading services per his Individualized Educational Plan, IEP, for 30 minutes per day in a small group setting.

He has made progress over the last few years, but he is still not reading on grade level and needs continued support to be successful in his academic reading. It has now been three years and my son is just starting to develop the image that he is a reader. He has learned skills to recognize words as he is reading, and now reading is becoming enjoyable for him. Instead of a stressful and anxiety driven experience, reading is becoming a fun adventure for him.

Simultaneously as my son received his individualized education services, I have completed my teaching license and am now a Title One teacher. I teach reading and math interventions throughout the day with students that are below grade level. I see first hand how students struggle with reading in a multitude of ways and that "being below grade level" does not look the same amongst each student. I know teachers that have five or



more different grade levels worth of reading levels within one general education classroom. For this one teacher to properly differentiate for all of these students and be able to reach them where they are at can be a stretch and as their intervention teacher I take this as my personal charge to intervene and help them to bridge the gaps where the students don't understand or have the skills already built in.

Their need to succeed is near and dear to my heart, and I strive to help each of my students obtain the skills that they are missing to be successful readers. As I am fresh out of completing my licensure and new to learning intervention curriculums I often feel ill prepared. I went to an amazing teacher preparatory program and took my elementary literacy courses. I passed everything with flying colors. I know the material I was taught and am expected to know, and yet I feel my knowledge is still coming up short on how to best help these students recognize words while they are reading. This constant feeling of being stumped has played a role in leading me to my research on word recognition.

I find myself doing research on my own as to how to best support my students as well as frequently leaning on my colleagues for advice. I am often trying to determine what the needs are of the student. What skills are they missing? Have they taken any specific diagnostic tests that would give me any indication as to where to start? There are so many questions, and it is all a process in and of itself before the intervention with the student has even begun.

I have learned through my daily interactions with students and throughout my studies that skilled readers possess skills inclusive of language comprehension skills and word recognition skills. They need both word recognition and language comprehension to be successful readers. I specifically am interested in what components go into word

recognition, and how I can help my students with these explicit skills. These first hand experiences are what have brought me to and motivated me to do my research question:

*How does an intervention teacher support students that are struggling with word recognition?*

### **Rationale**

Seeing how difficult helping a student that is struggling in word recognition while reading can be, as both an educator and a parent, I have a strong personal and professional interest in researching ways to best support these students. As I dive deeper into the research of reading I hope to learn what ways a teacher can best help their students to create strong foundational skills in their phonological awareness. Are there certain strategies that will help the students best? Perhaps one skill is developmentally prominent before another. These are all things that I need to do further research on.

Once I know a research based, explicit systematic approach to teaching these skills to our students, then I will know how I can help other teachers who also feel ill prepared to instruct readers like I once did. Teachers have many standards that must be taught within the school year. The curriculum can feel jam packed with many expectations from administration, policy makers, and individuals that are not in the classroom and do not know the individual students. As an intervention teacher, once I gain the knowledge from doing this research I can fill in the holes that students are missing.

### **Conclusion**

Thinking about my personal experiences with reading in elementary school, teaching preschool, my son's struggles with learning to read, and my time as an

intervention teacher it is clear that we must be solid in our practices for supporting readers. As a mom who didn't know how to help my struggling son learn to read, I know how hard it is for families that encounter these challenges. Teachers have full plates and they work extremely hard to meet the needs of all of their students. The harsh realities are that for many students this isn't enough as they are still struggling to recognize words while reading. We must help students to be confident and have strong phonological awareness, decoding skills, and sight recognition of familiar words.

Chapter one discussed the introduction of the research question: How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills? I shared my personal experiences that I recall as an elementary student, a parent, and as a teacher. From my multiple lenses, phonological awareness is an imperative skill for all of our students to be successful readers. Once I have completed my research I will gather strategies to help teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills to their students.

### **Introduction to Future Chapters:**

Chapter two will provide a literature review into phonological awareness. This will provide a detailed description of what explicit steps need to be taught in the classroom and will provide literature evidence to answer the research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?* Chapter two also discusses the background of literacy instruction pedagogical strategies and how phonological awareness comes into practice.

Chapter three will describe how the research evidence in chapter two lays the foundation for an online blog created with the intent to benefit all educators, families, and community members that help to teach our young students how to read. The chapter will

also outline an overview of a preview of what the individual blog content will contain. Each blog will highlight an essential part of phonological awareness and strategies for implementation in the classroom. Throughout the blog the research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?*, will be answered and modeled in a multitude of ways.

Lastly, chapter four will conclude with a reflection on both the research and the creation of the educational corresponding blog. This will provide an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the project creation after the project has been executed and the direct impact it had on answering the research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?*

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### **Introduction:**

The research question is: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?* Chapter two will explore a background of literacy pedagogical approaches. Then this chapter will review expert research on the foundation of phonological awareness skills and the importance of them being taught to all students. Students need instruction in all aspects of reading in order to be literate readers, not only certain skills. Being competent in one area of reading is not enough for students to be successful. Elementary teachers must provide students with explicit and thoughtful instruction so that all children can have access to all skills needed to be successful readers.

It is important for elementary teachers to explicitly teach phonological awareness to all of their students. Evidence has proven that a student's level of phonological awareness upon entering school in kindergarten is one of the greatest predictors and single determinant of the success or failure in literacy that the student will experience in their future educational years (Adams et al., 1998). Then it will discuss the umbrella of phonological awareness and many of the skills that are included such as decoding and sight or word recognition. Next this chapter will include the research based, explicit ways that teachers can implement phonological awareness building skills into their classrooms. Chapter two will conclude with a review of phonological awareness and

what research has taught us, as well as why it is important for all students to be taught these skills in order to be successful readers.

### **Literacy Background**

Throughout the years in education there have been many pedagogical shifts or pendulum swings as to what teachers are taught are the best practices in their reading instruction. There are essentially two pedagogical approaches that educators have been taught over the years or that their beliefs fall into: a whole language approach to teaching reading or a phonics first approach. Both of these approaches have benefits to students that are learning to read and many elementary schools have adopted curriculums that claim to embrace what is called Balanced Literacy. It is important to take a deeper look into the background of both pedagogical approaches to understand the research behind the shift to Balanced Literacy, and now the Science of Reading, and the need for explicit phonological awareness instruction which has prompted the research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?*

Those that believe that whole language instruction is an ideal approach, believe that submerging students in a rich language environment with lots of books is enough for students to naturally learn to read. This pedagogical approach believes that explicit instruction is not needed in phonological awareness, phonics, and reading comprehension due to oral language skills providing those learning opportunities for the student (Lyon, 1998). Whole language instruction also believes that skilled readers are able to gloss over the text. Research based data has proven that good readers rarely skip over words (Lyon, 1998). In fact, good readers look at every letter within a word even if they aren't consciously aware of it (Moats and Tolman, 2019).

The whole language approach does have applicable benefits for students as well. When following the whole language approach for instruction, students are submerged in a rich English language environment. This benefits young students with print awareness or the understanding that written language carries meaning. In a preschool or kindergarten classroom this may look like having items labeled. For example, the shelf labeled “shelf”, the door labeled “door”, each student's chair labeled “chair”, and desk labeled “desk”. This allows students an opportunity to not only hear the words throughout the day, but also to see the words in print to reinforce the understanding that the print does in fact carry meaning.

Advocates of the whole language reading approach do still understand that phonological and more specifically phonemic awareness do need to be taught. However, they do not believe that these skills should be taught explicitly nor without the richness of real contextual books (Zammit, 2019). Instead, these skills should be taught as needed to help students decode words and further strengthen their comprehension (Zammit, 2019).

Along the lines of the whole language reading approach, one may argue that phonics instruction has a place only with students that are lacking in phonemic awareness skills. On the contrary, phonics instruction is beneficial not only for those students who demonstrate a need in the skill, but for all students in the classroom (Barshay, 2020). There are dozens of studies that prove that students who receive explicit instruction in phonemic awareness from kindergarten through grade two, score higher on average than those students who did not receive explicit instruction (Barshay, 2020).

Using a systematic phonics approach allows teachers to utilize direct instructional practices in teaching phonics. Utilizing phonics instruction to teach reading focuses on

letter-sound correspondences in both reading and spelling (Panel, 2000). When learning letter-sound correspondence instruction, students learn that letters are connected to the sounds or phonemes that are attached to those letters. Teachers that believe in the phonics approach look for decodable texts in curriculums and teach from a controlled vocabulary (Panel, 2000).

The National Reading Panel reports significant advantages and benefits for elementary aged students grade kindergarten through grade six that have received phonics instruction (Panel, 2000). The students that received systematic phonics instruction demonstrated the ability to both read and spell words at a more successful level beginning at as young of a grade as kindergarten. Furthermore, across all grade levels, the National Reading Panel reports that when good readers receive explicit systematic phonics instruction their spelling improves (Panel, 2000). This data supports the argument that phonics and phonemic instruction are beneficial to all students in the classroom.

Balanced Literacy instruction, on the other hand, in theory was supposed to bring together the best of the whole language approach and the phonics instruction approach. The Balanced Literacy approach incorporates multiple strategies of reading and writing with a variety of teacher support and student effort, in the classroom this looks like different shared reading lessons (Lorimor-Easley, 2019). Authors Parr and Campbell describe Balanced Literacy as, "...teachers and learners plan, direct, and travel their routes towards literacy, making use of multiple tools and texts to read their environment, chart their route, and adjust their sails when necessary,...They blend theory and practice, reception and expression of information through the language arts, and thinking, doing, and becoming in a seamless way (Parr & Campbell, 2012).



This is inclusive of the whole language approach as it has interactive read-aloud and writing activities, as well as incorporating the idea of reading the environment or soaking in all contexts of literacy around a student. On the contrary, this is also inclusive of the phonics approach as it allows time for some phonics instruction and guided reading time, thus creating the idea of the balance of the two approaches.

Skeptics of Balanced Literacy instruction have similar arguments as skeptics to the whole language approach. Exposing young students to rich literature and unfamiliar texts will not teach them to naturally decode words, but will only lead to them practicing compensatory strategies such as looking at images which does not help their reading skills (Lorimor-Easley, 2019). Furthermore, studies have shown that a lacking foundation in phonics and a weak set of decoding skills ultimately leads to compromised reading comprehension (Lorimor-Easley, 2019).

As has been demonstrated, teaching phonics and phonological awareness are an essential part of instruction. By implementing an explicit phonological awareness instruction curriculum and teaching all concepts to students, every student in a classroom benefits and no student is harmed. There is not a one size fits all approach that will benefit every classroom and every student, but it is clear that phonics and phonological awareness instruction are a necessity in every classroom and for every student. Moats and Tolman clearly define both phonics and phonological awareness in their LETRS text as two different skill sets. Phonics is described as, “The study of the relationships between letters and the sounds they represent.” Where as phonological awareness is described as, “The conscious awareness of all levels of the speech sound system, including word boundaries, stress patterns, syllables, onset-rime units, and phonemes”

(Moats & Tolman, 2019). Although phonics and phonological awareness are not the same skills, they tend to overlap in literacy curriculums and go hand in hand in leading us to the research question of: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?*

### **Phonological Awareness**

Many schools and teachers are implementing strategies to help students become stronger and more confident readers. Districts look to many curriculums and approaches to boost reading scores, but teachers are still feeling ill prepared to support their readers and student test scores are still lower than where districts would like them to be.

Teaching phonological awareness to all students is an instructional approach that all teachers can turn to that will effectively help all of their students in their reading instruction. Research shows that all students need phonological awareness skills to successfully read and spell (Moats and Tolman, 2019).

Curriculums don't teach our students, we as educators are the ones that teach our students. With that being said, teachers need to have the knowledge and tools to best prepare their students. According to Moats and Tolman in *LETRS*, phonological awareness is, "The conscious awareness of the individual speech sounds (consonants and vowels) in spoken syllables and the ability to consciously manipulate those sounds" (Moats and Tolman, 2019). In other words, phonological awareness means that we are aware, or understand, that words are made up of sounds (Rog, 2002). Phonological awareness is included within the phonological processing system and when students are listening for and producing speech sounds, they begin to put those sounds together into chunks of meaning which activates the meaning processing system (Burkins & Yates,

2021). This is an example of how phonological awareness sets the foundation for all readers to be successful (Baker et al., 2018). Knowing what phonological awareness is gives teachers some background information in regards to the research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?*

Reading with automaticity, or quickly and accurately, they can then focus on their reading comprehension. When a student can read with automaticity, or the ability to read quickly without conscious effort, the student will be able to read words with automatic sight recognition. The ability to recognize words by sight during fluent reading depends on phonemic awareness (Moats & Tolman, 2019).

Students of all backgrounds including ethnicity, race, socioeconomics, early childhood experiences, etc., all enter Kindergarten together. They come into one classroom with this diverse magnitude of strengths and areas to grow, and one foundational skill that each student must be strong in in order to be a strong reader is phonological awareness. In fact, later problems and struggles with reading can be prevented if all of our students are taught early on in their education with letter-sound phonological awareness (Kilpatrick, 2016). Teaching phonological awareness in an explicit systematic approach is accessible to all students, equally creating a strong reading foundation.

Phonological awareness is an umbrella term that encompasses many different skills that all directly involve levels of the speech sound system (Kilpatrick, 2016). Teachers can utilize assessments and screening tests to determine which skills the students need extra instruction in and which skills they may have mastered. Conducting phonological awareness assessments with each individual student will give the teacher

information about the individual needs of each student, however all students can benefit from all aspects of phonological awareness instruction.

There are multiple assessments or screeners available for teachers to utilize in their classroom. Schools may utilize specific assessments or perhaps grade level teams or individual teachers will implement their own assessments. A phonological assessment should include a combination of levels with syllables, onset rime, and phonemes (WETA, 2022). Assessments of phonological awareness given in kindergarten would be most effective so that teachers can then begin explicitly teaching phonological awareness with a systematic approach. With that being said, all elementary grade levels can assess phonological awareness to determine any gaps in the students phonological skills and instruct accordingly from there.

In conclusion, phonological awareness skills are important for all students to be taught in an explicit systematic method and having a thorough understanding of phonological awareness is essential when answering the research question: How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills? When students enter kindergarten they should be assessed in the fall to determine their phonological awareness skills and immediately begin receiving instruction to help them build their phonological awareness skills. Even if students do not demonstrate a need for phonological awareness instruction, all students will benefit from instruction and research demonstrates that a strong explicit phonological awareness curriculum will improve students with their reading and spelling later on in their education (Kilpatrick, 2016). The next section will discuss the first set of explicit phonological awareness steps.

### **Syllables/Alliteration/Rhyming**

Beginning in the fall of the kindergarten year, teachers can implement early levels of phonological awareness developmental instruction into their learning days. The early levels of phonological awareness instruction, also referred to as the syllable level, includes word play, games, and nursery rhymes that work with syllables, alliteration, and rhyming. All of these skills are foundational for the higher-level phonological awareness skills (Kilpatrick, 2016). These activities are the first opportunities that kindergarteners will have to focus on the sounds we are making as we say words and not on the meanings of the words. Often these are fun experiences for students that are enjoyable and they don't even realize that they are experiencing a learning moment or even that they are building their foundation for future reading.

Learning syllables is an important skill for students to attend to as the sounds that they hear and the pronunciation of those sounds are the sounds that are focused around a unit of sound and are organized around a vowel (Moats & Tolman, 2019). Learning syllables is at the beginning of the explicit instruction for phonological awareness and lays the foundation for many aspects of literacy. According to Walpole and McKenna, it's not only important for students to hear and pronounce the sounds that are within a syllable, but also to be able to count the amount of syllables within a spoken word (Walpole and McKenna, 2013).

During a daily class routine there are many opportunities to implement syllabic activities. One opportunity may be during the morning meeting. When students introduce themselves, or each other, they can clap the syllables in their names. To add extra practice they could repeat it back to the student that clapped the syllables in their

name. For example: Ma-ri-sa clapped to the class, then the class would clap back to me, Ma-ri-sa. Another opportunity can be when students are lining up for a transition to leave the classroom. “If your name has two syllables, you may line up. If your name has three syllables, you may line up. And so on..”

Alliteration is when an initial consonant sound is identically repeated multiple times within a group of many words. Alliteration can also involve sorting words by their final sounds (Government, 2019). This is common in many well known children’s nursery rhymes and popular children’s books. The purpose of this for young students is for them not to see the sounds but to hear the sounds, or phonemes, therefore developing their phonological awareness. Phonemes are the smallest units of sound within a word and they can change the meaning of a word (Rog, 2002). Students that aren’t aware of phonemes are proven to be at risk of failing to learn to read or being behind their peers in reading, for this reason alliteration is an important aspect of explicitly teaching phonological awareness (Adams et al., 1998).

There are many ways that alliteration can be implemented within a classroom community. Following suite with the syllable example previously used, students may use alliteration with their name when introducing themselves. For example a student named Marisa could say, “Marvelous Marisa or Merry Marisa” and a student named Sam may say, “Silly Sam or Smart Sam.” An activity similar to this provides students with a low risk and engaging way for them to play with the sounds that they hear while including their identity into their learning.

Training the ear to attend to sounds of letters is a skill that students need to be explicitly taught (Rog, 2022). Listening to the sounds of words can best be explained

with an example. This can also be done in a large or small group classroom setting with students. Look at the following list of words and read them out loud: pet, pillow, penguin, phone, physical, phrase. As proficient readers, we are able to determine that although all of the words start with “p” they do not all make the /p/ sound. This is a teachable moment with our students when we hear the /f/ sound with some of the words, even though they start with a “p”. In an elementary classroom, these words would be used in a sorting activity where students could sort them into /p/ sound and /f/ sound piles.

Rhyming can be implemented in a classroom frequently as well. Rhyming helps students with predicting what words are likely to come next when they are reading if they are able to understand that rhyming words sound the same at the end (Caldwell and Leslie, 2005). Students can be asked by a teacher if individual words rhyme with one another, or students could be given the opportunity to think of their own words that rhyme with a given word. Activities where students are given opportunities to recognize rhymes as well as alliterations are beneficial for students too. For example: which words start the same: car, cat, lock? Which word doesn't belong: pin, tip, fin? These activities allow students to focus on the elements of sound in the words that make them the same and or different, an important phonological awareness skill (Rog, 2002). As you can see, there are many opportunities for rhyming to be implemented in the classroom.

In conclusion, there are many beneficial early levels of phonological awareness that can be implemented into the kindergarten and early elementary grade classrooms including lessons that incorporate syllable recognition, alliteration, and rhyming. Each of these phonological awareness skills should be explicitly taught by elementary teachers as

they allow students to focus on the elements of sound within words and are proven to benefit students in their future reading. Implementing syllables, alliteration, and rhyming are critical components of phonological awareness. The next explicit step that needs to be taught by elementary teachers when teaching phonological awareness skills is onset-rime skills.

### **Onset-Rime**

After students have been exposed to syllables, alliteration, and rhyming, the onset-rime level of phonological awareness is the next level of explicit instruction that teachers can implement. Knowing how to identify syllables is an important precursor to onset-rime, because for onset-rime students will need to break apart a syllable (Kilpatrick, 2016). Every syllable has two parts. The onset of a syllable refers to any consonant that comes before the vowel in that syllable. The rime then includes the vowel and what letters follow after it within that syllable (Moats & Tolman, 2019). Every syllable has a rime, but not every syllable has an onset (Kilpatrick, 2016).

Onset-rime is a more advanced skill than alliteration and students can begin to not only sort words by their sounds but also can be scaffolded to identify and name the onset and rime sounds within each syllable (Government, 2019). Teaching children the concepts of onset and rime will positively impact their phonological awareness skills and ultimately their reading skills as it will help them with learning word families. Research has shown that this aspect of phonological awareness is predictive of student success with both reading and spelling (WETA, 2022). When students are not progressing in their reading or are “behind” it is often because they are struggling with onset-rime, this skill is important and must be explicitly taught to all students (Kilpatrick, 2016).



There are many ways that onset-rime can be implemented within a general education classroom. Students can be given a list of words in small groups and create groups with patterns that they see, for example word families. Focusing in on their phonological awareness, students can be read a list of words and be asked what the rime is in a given set. There are many ways and teachers can be creative and have fun as they differentiate to meet the needs of the students in their classroom.

After students have been exposed to syllables, alliteration, and rhyming, the onset-rime level of phonological awareness is the next level of explicit instruction that teachers should implement into their instruction. This is a key step in regards to the research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?* Teaching children the concepts of onset and rime will positively impact their phonological awareness skills and ultimately their reading skills as it will help them with learning word families as they recognize common chunks within words as well as give them the skills needed to decode unfamiliar words.

### **Phonemic Awareness**

Phonemic awareness is a subcategory of phonological awareness which is an umbrella term for all work students do noticing and manipulating sounds in speech (Burkins & Yates, 2021). Phoneme awareness is the next challenging aspect of phonological awareness for students that must be explicitly taught by teachers. It is important that it is explicitly taught because research suggests that not all students will become phonemically aware without the explicit instruction (Walpole & McKenna, 2013). Furthermore, the National Reading Panel concluded that due to phonemic

awareness explicit instruction with students, there was a direct improvement in not only student phonemic awareness, but also reading and spelling (Walpole & McKenna, 2013).

Phonemic awareness is best assessed and instructed in kindergarten and first grade as it is one of the strongest predictors of how well our students will read in the later grades (Taylor & Ysseldyke, 2007). Phonemic awareness includes not only hearing sounds, but also manipulating those sounds or phonemes orally (Rog, 2002). This is important because as teachers we want our students to be fluent readers. In order to be a fluent reader, a student must be phonemic proficient, or fully competent at the phoneme level which includes: articulating, blending, segmenting, deleting, and substituting phonemes (Kilpatrick, 2016).

According to Moats and Toalman, "Whole class (Tier One) instruction that includes phonemic awareness training for a few minutes per day, several days per week, is one of the best antidotes for future reading failure in a cohort of K-1 learners" (Moats & Toalman, 2019, p. 102). According to The National Reading Panel, small group instruction (Tier Two) focusing on segmenting and blending of individual phonemes was the most effective instruction of phonemic awareness (Taylor & Ysseldyke, 2007).

Research has shown that if students do not have direct explicit instruction with phonemic awareness, about twenty-five percent of middle-class students and substantially higher amounts of students in less literacy-rich backgrounds, will have inconsiderable phonemic awareness skills (Adams et al., 1998). This information supports the validation that all students must receive explicit phonological instruction, including phonemic awareness instructional activities.

Phoneme blending and segmenting abilities involve blending sounds and isolating onsets and rimes. These skills typically develop hand-and-hand with reading ability (Rog, 2002). Learning to blend and segment phonemes is important because it is a precursor to reading (Rog, 2002). Utilizing a small mirror for students to hold can benefit them to notice where their mouth, lips, and tongue are during the process of producing different phonemes (Burkins & Yates, 2021). Different sounds have slight differences that students can notice when looking at themselves in the mirror.

In instruction this may also look like blending onset and rime together, for example what word would /th/ and /-umb/ make, thumb. Instruction in the classroom may also look like saying the separate phonemes and tapping the sounds, and then putting them together as a blend to make the whole word. For example, /k/ - /l/ - /ou/ - /d/ (cloud). For both of these examples it is important that the teacher models for the students to say each sound separately and blended together so that the student builds that skill too.

Teachers must explicitly teach phonological awareness with phonemic instruction that allows for students to isolate phonemes. This may look like students isolating beginning or ending sounds of a word. For example if a teacher is asking students to isolate the beginning phoneme and the teacher states “paint” the student would respond with /p/. If the teacher stated rock, the student would respond with /r/. Similarly if the teacher is asking students to isolate the ending phoneme of a word and the teacher states “paint” the student would respond with /t/. If the teacher stated rock, the student would respond with /k/ (McGee & Morrow, 2005).

Another instructional strategy that teachers can use in the classroom to build phonological awareness and more specifically phonemic awareness, is by segmenting or blending two components of compound words (Burkins & Yates, 2021). Compound words are formed by combining two root words to create one word, a compound word, that now has a new meaning. For example, foot + ball = football or cup + board = cupboard. In both examples the combined root words change in meaning when put together. Asking students to not only put the compound word together, but also to separate the root words, builds their understanding of phonological awareness. For example the teacher may say, “Say football.” “Football.” Then the teacher would say, “Now don’t say ball.” To which the student responds, “Foot.” Either root could be taken away in this activity as it is irrelevant for the phonological awareness instruction effectiveness as to which root is utilized.

In summary, phonological awareness is a large umbrella term that includes phoneme awareness. After students have explicitly been taught syllables, alliteration, rhyming, and onset-rime, phoneme awareness is the next sequential step of instruction. This is essential to note in regards to the research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?* This is an important instructional step to be explicitly taught because phonemic awareness, including how well students both hear and also manipulate the sounds that they hear, is one of the strongest predictors of how well students will read in later grades.

### **Alphabetic Principle**

The alphabetic principle is important to understand when teaching students to read and spell as it focuses on the concept that individual letters are used to represent

individual phonemes in the spoken words of language (Moats and Tolman, 2019). The alphabetic principle is sometimes referred to as decoding, word recognition, or phonics (Haager, et al., 2007). Alphabetic principle comes into practice when teachers are connecting the instruction of phonology previously mentioned and strategies of orthography. In other words, this is where students tie the sounds they hear to the letters and words that they see on their papers or in their books.

The alphabetic principle can be thought of as a code to the English alphabet and the action of reading it (Haager, et al., 2007). Beginning in kindergarten educators should teach their students letter-sound correspondence. The skill of letter-sound correspondence is the ability to see a single letter and say the sound that represents that individual letter (Haager, et al., 2007). For example, saying with the whole class “A is for apple /a/ /a/ /a/, B is for banana /b/ /b/ /b/..” and so on.

Having a strong foundation in phonological awareness instruction is beneficial when examining alphabetic principle. There are many overlapping skills that are built into the alphabetic principle from having a strong phonological awareness. For example, teaching students to clap syllables and to both blend and segment phonemes, sets students up for success when it later comes to reading unfamiliar texts and decoding new words (Haager, et al., 2007). Incorporating alliteration into the classroom helps solidify letter-sound correspondence as students play with the different sounds that they hear when saying or reading multiple words that begin or end with the same letters.

In summary, the skill sets that phonological awareness consists of are critical to students having a sturdy alphabetical principle. Alphabetic principle is the involvement where students tie the sounds they hear to the letters and words that they see on their

papers or in their books. The classroom instructional activities previously mentioned to build phonological awareness are precursors to the alphabetic principle and lead to reading skills such as letter-sound correspondence, blending and segmenting phonemes, word recognition, decoding, and ultimately automaticity while reading. As is evident, knowledge and understanding of the alphabetic principle are important when answering the research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?*

### **Orthographic Mapping**

A student's orthographic knowledge determines how quickly and accurately they will be able to read and write a word. One's orthographic knowledge includes decoding words in order to read, and encoding words in order to write words (Templeton & Gehsmann, 2014).

Orthographic mapping is a mental process used for storing words and immediately retrieving them. This helps readers with high-frequency words and reading with automaticity, as well as moving words into the students' long-term storage of their visual word form area (Burkins & Yates, 2021). Orthographic mapping is related to phonological awareness because when students read, or recognize words in print, they must activate their orthographic mapping to match the letters and letter sequences with the sounds of those spoken words (Moats and Tolman, 2019).

The English language alphabetic writing system has a long history and borrows many words from many other languages. With this being said, there are many deviations to the idea that each letter is equivalent to one phoneme (Kilpatrick, 2020). Students must also be taught to be phonologically aware of digraphs. A digraph is unique as it is a

combination of two letters and it creates one single phoneme, however neither letter represents its usual sound (Moats & Toalman, 2019). There are many digraphs, some that are common and taught earliest to our elementary students are: th, sh, ch, wh, ph, ng, and ck.

To conclude, A student's orthographic knowledge determines how quickly and accurately they will be able to read and write a word. One's orthographic knowledge includes decoding words in order to read and as we have previously read, much of phonological awareness is a process of skills that build upon one another and the skills lend themselves to help students successfully decode and encode words. This brings orthographic knowledge information into the research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?*

**Conclusion:**

After looking at all of the research, it is clear that simply having a student read more, the whole language approach, or submerging them with a plethora of books is not enough to help a student progress. Reading is not a natural process that a child can teach themselves by simply being in a literacy environment. It is also determined that teachers need a thoughtful and explicit, step by step, instructional approach in order to ensure that they are meeting the phonological awareness needs of all of their students to ultimately help them succeed in learning to read.

Phonological awareness instruction should begin right away in the kindergarten classrooms. Every student can benefit from multiple exposures to phonological awareness instructional strategies and no student is harmed by them, therefore whole class tier one instruction is suitable. The sequential order for instruction is as follows:

syllables, alliteration, rhyming, onset-rime, and phonemic awareness. Building upon these skills leads to a strong foundation in alphabetic principle and orthographic mapping, all of which help our students to be proficient readers.

### **Introduction to Chapter Three**

In chapter three the evidence of the above literature research will be demonstrated throughout a project description of an online blog created with the intent to benefit all educators, families, and community members that help to teach our young students how to read. The chapter will also outline an overview of a preview of what the individual blog content will contain. Each blog will highlight an essential part of phonological awareness and strategies for implementation in the classroom. Throughout the blog the research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?*, will be answered and modeled in a multitude of ways.

### **Introduction to Chapter Four**

Chapter four will conclude with a reflection on both the research and the creation of the educational corresponding blog. This will provide an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the project creation after the project has been executed and the direct impact it had on answering the research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?* Chapter four will also provide an opportunity for reflection on the effectiveness of creating an online professional learning community.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Introduction

It is important that teachers are able to collaborate and interact with one another so that all can support the learning and the well being of our students. When teachers work together collaboratively, professional learning communities are developed (Stoll, et al., 2007). With this knowledge, I have decided to create an online professional learning environment in the form of a blog. I will utilize the literature evidence found in chapter two to base individual blogs that will all lead towards answering the research question of: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?*

Chapter three includes an overview of the blog project including the importance of professional learning communities in education and the need for elementary educators to explicitly teach phonological awareness skills. Chapter three also explores the expected audience and timeline intended for the project, along with the anticipated assessment methods to be utilized to determine the outcomes of the project.

For the purposes of my project I chose to create a blog that serves as an online resource where the audience includes members of the educational community that can come together to reflect upon and ask questions around my research topic. A professional learning community, whether in person or online, involves a collectivity from members, so that student learning can be shared (Blankstein, 2008). For this reason, the blog project has multiple ways for members to engage. My research question is: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?* This chapter

provides a detailed description of the project and information regarding my research methods and findings.

Professional groups, or professional learning communities, are available in a variety of accessible ways for teachers so that we can have opportunities to professionally grow. Professional learning communities look differently amongst different organizations. However, Stoll and other contributors describe them as, "...there is a consensus that you will know that one (a professional learning community) exists when you can see a group of teachers sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way (Stoll, et al., 2007).

### **Description of Project**

The goal of this project is to provide an online resource that can serve as a form of a professional learning community. For my blog posts I am writing with the intention to support teachers as they implement phonological awareness instruction into their classrooms. I used the research based information that I have gathered in chapter two, and created an easy to follow blog that will help my audience to best support their students and implement phonological awareness instruction into their classrooms. In chapter two the literature review answered the research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?*

The first blog post that I am creating is an introduction post where my audience can get to know me and why this topic is so important to me. In this first blog I share my struggles as both a parent and an educator. My goal in this post is to connect with my audience so they know that I too have faced struggles with teaching literacy and that I

have found value in phonological awareness.

The second blog post will be a deep dive into the literacy background debate of whole language instruction or phonics first instruction and how this debate plays a role in phonological awareness. The whole language approach believes that explicit instruction is not needed in phonological awareness, phonics, and reading comprehension due to oral language skills providing those learning opportunities for the student (Lyon, 1998). Using a systematic phonics approach allows teachers to utilize direct instructional practices in teaching phonics. Utilizing phonics instruction to teach reading focuses on letter-sound correspondences in both reading and spelling (Panel, 2000). Within the blog post there are examples of both of these approaches to teaching literacy, and then tie in how each of these strategies correlate with phonological awareness.

The second blog entry also includes information about Balanced Literacy. The Balanced Literacy approach incorporates multiple strategies of reading and writing with a variety of teacher support and student effort, in the classroom this looks like different shared reading lessons (Lorimor-Easley, 2019). Balanced Literacy has multiple pros and cons which are discussed within the blog entry.

The third blog entry consists of a deep dive into phonological awareness. This blog entry is followed by a post discussing the assessment of phonological skills, and then a post regarding developing phonological skills as this is a rich topic with great depth to it. Teaching phonological awareness to all students is an instructional approach that all teachers can turn to that will effectively help all of their students in their reading instruction. Research shows that all students need phonological awareness skills to successfully read and spell (Moats and Tolman, 2019). For these reasons, elaborating on

the importance and strategies for implementing phonological awareness is critical in my blog. The subsequent blog entries specifically address syllables, alliteration, and rhyming, in that sequential order, as these are the explicit phonological awareness skills that teachers can implement in an elementary classroom setting. These individual skills are addressed within the blog entries with evidence from research based sources, and I also provide real world examples for each skill set for implementation into the classroom.

I have an individual blog entry for the skill set of onset-rime. After students have been exposed to syllables, alliteration, and rhyming, the onset-rime level of phonological awareness is the next level of explicit instruction that teachers can implement. Onset-rime is an important and impactful aspect of phonological awareness, and thus deserves much attention. Teaching children the concepts of onset and rime will positively impact their phonological awareness skills and ultimately their reading skills as it will help them with learning word families. Research has shown that this aspect of phonological awareness is predictive of student success with both reading and spelling (WETA, 2022).

Once onset-rime is thoroughly addressed in my blog I transitioned to discussing phonemic awareness. Phoneme awareness is the next challenging aspect of phonological awareness for students that must be explicitly taught by teachers. It is important that it is explicitly taught because research suggests that not all students will become phonemically aware without the explicit instruction (Walpole & McKenna, 2013). The blog entry provides a plethora of examples and strategies for teachers and professionals to implement phonemic awareness lessons into their classrooms.

All of these skills that are discussed in the blog fall under the umbrella of phonological awareness, and they also play a critical role in alphabetic principle. For this reason, my next blog focuses on the alphabetic principle. I discuss what alphabetic principle is, and why these skills are important when developing a students' alphabetic principle. Alphabetic principle comes into practice when teachers are connecting the instruction of phonology previously mentioned in blogs and strategies of orthography that will come in future blog entries.

I then am creating a blog post about orthographic mapping due to the connection with how quickly and accurately a student can read or write a word, based on their orthographic mapping. Orthographic mapping is related to phonological awareness because when students read, or recognize words in print, they must activate their orthographic mapping to match the letters and letter sequences with the sounds of those spoken words (Moats and Tolman, 2019). Due to this close relationship with the umbrella topic of phonological awareness it is important to have orthographic mapping be part of the phonological awareness conversation.

The final blog entry that I am creating for the purpose of this project is inclusive of a summary combining the research presented in all of the previous blogs as well as a transition to my viewing audience explaining that my future posts will be a reflection of my continued passion of phonological awareness and teaching literacy in general. I find this blog entry important to create because I feel I have created an authentic online platform and I intend to continue my blogging platform into the future. It is my intention that this blog will continue on for many years to come and be a resource for educators as we continue to collaborate and better support our students.

In summary, the goal of my project is to provide an online resource that can serve as a form of a professional learning community. The blog posts that will be created will be written with the intention to support teachers as they implement phonological awareness instruction into their classrooms. I will create blog posts in a sequential order that will follow the explicit instructional order that research has proven phonological awareness skills should be taught within the classroom.

### **Audience/Timeline**

The proposed audience for this blog is elementary educators, elementary administrators, early childhood educators, parents of young children, and all individuals in our community that have a hand in educating our students. Being that a blog is online, it is available to any individual that has access to the internet and an electronic device. The platform of a blog is also accessible at any time of the day, which makes it convenient for educators to utilize outside of the school day.

The blog has approximately two new posts per week. The posted blogs build upon each other in research based information to support the research question which prompted this project: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?* The design of the blog's website allows for followers, or online community members, to post comments and questions to the posts. This allows for teachers to discuss and collaborate to create an online professional learning community. The timeline to actually create the blog website varies depending on factors such as editing filters, settings, backgrounds, etc. The total time required to complete the blog project will vary from post to post depending on the phonological awareness topic as well as the amount of interaction the blog post receives from the online community.

**Assessment**

The effectiveness of my blog will be assessed throughout the process in a formative style. Essentially, the more engagement and feedback that the blog posts generate, the more successful this indicates to me that it is in building the desired online professional learning community. I will keep data, tracking how many times the blog is viewed and commented on. This information is a form of formative assessment in gauging the effectiveness of the project as it indicates how much interaction the blog is receiving.

There will be a corresponding email created that will be utilized for viewers to directly reach me that have viewed my blog and want to have further dialogue. It is my hope that as the author they would share questions with me, as well as other ideas or resources. I could then bring these sharings back to the blog and continue to enhance the growth of the professional learning community.

**Conclusion:**

Teachers working to collaborate and interact with one another ensure that they can support the learning and the well being of all students. When teachers work together collaboratively, professional learning communities are developed (Stoll, et al., 2007). The importance of professional learning communities inspired me to create a blog as a form of an online learning community platform.

The blog is designed to help guide teachers as they learn how to implement phonological awareness into their classrooms. I am providing step by step, evidence based information, along with real world examples for how teachers can utilize the information within their own classrooms. There are settings created so that the

professional learning community can interact with the blog posts by commenting on the posts, as well as by emailing me directly. Engagement with the blog from others helps to create the professional learning community that will make this blog project successful.

**Introduction to Chapter Four:**

Looking ahead to chapter four, there will be a reflection of the blog project and research process as a whole. This will provide an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the project creation after the project has been executed and the direct impact it had on answering the research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?*



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Critical Reflection

#### Introduction

In this chapter I will be reflecting on my completed project as well as assessing the effectiveness of the project creation, including the impact on the field of education, and the direct impact it had on answering the research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?* I will also be providing space for self-reflection on my emerging self as a scholar and what possibilities of improvement may be in the future for my blog.

#### Effectiveness of Blog

There are a multitude of reasons that exemplify the success of the blog that I created. My blog was created and all of my posts were published within a time frame of six weeks. Within those six weeks I was able to cover all of the explicit instructional topics/steps for teaching phonological awareness skills. I was also able to bring my own voice into my blog entries and make them my own, with this they didn't sound like a text book or a research paper. Bringing my own voice into the blog made it more approachable and relatable to my audience.

In the six weeks throughout my project creation I gained 32 separate followers. In order to become a follower of the blog, the individuals had to go to my blog webpage and enter in their email address to follow/subscribe. I didn't have a realistic expectation of how many followers my blog would attract within the short amount of time, but I believe 32 is a solid start as I am continuing to grow this online platform. I feel honored

to share information regarding phonological awareness with 32 educators that utilize the information in their classrooms to benefit their students.

The created blog made a widespread virtual footprint which I was beyond amazed to see take off. Throughout the six week timespan my blog was viewed 1,032 times in total. Included in the 1,032 views the blog platform provides data on which countries the views have come from. I was impressed to see that I had received views from twelve different countries. The blog was viewed in the following countries: United States, Canada, Australia, Ireland, South Africa, China, Ecuador, Kosovo, United Kingdom, Mexico, France, and India. This vast diversity of countries indicates to me that I have reached many educators and it is my hope that they have taken in the research provided within my posts.

Throughout the six weeks I was surprised that with over thirty followers and one thousand viewers, I only had one individual comment on my blog. I was hoping that my posts would create an online learning community that would be collaborative and include more feedback from my audience. I promoted my blog to colleagues via work emails, as well as in educational Facebook groups, and on my personal social media pages. In my communications sharing my blog, I was intentional about asking for comments and input. Therefore, only receiving one comment throughout the entire period felt like an item that I can work to improve on as I continue with my blog past the project portion of it.

### **Self-Reflection as a Scholar**

As my blog creation began to unfold, I realized that although I am now a teacher I am still an eager student. I would find myself going down many rabbit holes as I was completing my research. These rabbit holes, or tangents, were not due to boredom or

distractions, but as a result of fascination in the world of phonological awareness and how important it is for our students. The more my interest peaked, the more time consuming my project became for me to complete. Although I am happy to have gained more knowledge than what is included in my project I had to remind myself that as a scholar I have to be disciplined and stay on task towards my project goals.

It also dawned on me roughly one week into my project that individuals that I did not personally know were actually viewing my blog. This made me realize the impact that I was having and could potentially continue to have in my profession. I was researching important information and explaining it in ways that teachers needed to hear in order to implement it into their classrooms. This was not a realization that I took lightly and it made me hold myself and my work to a higher standard. After all, the more viewers I had on my blog meant the more educators were paying attention, and ultimately the more students would receive better phonological awareness instruction. This was and is important to me.

### **Conclusion**

In whole, I am extremely proud and satisfied of how my blog project turned out. I have every intention of continuing my blog into the future as I continue my teaching career. I will continue to bring my individual self into my blog posts, while simultaneously providing evidence based best instructional practices that are best for all of our students. As I continue my posts I am hopeful that the online learning community will continuously grow and over time become more engaging and interactive. In the six weeks that my blog has been up and running, I have successfully answered my research question: *How can elementary teachers explicitly teach phonological awareness skills?*

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