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Early Education Reading Intervention for ELL Students

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Abstract

This study examines and attempts to develop the best practices in reading intervention for English language learners (ELLs). As teachers, we are encountering more students who enter school having very few English language skills, and we are not feeling equipped with the strategies to deal with these situations. Saskatchewan is rapidly becoming a more diverse population. According to the Saskatchewan 2011 census, there was a climb in the visible minority population: 6.3 per cent of Saskatchewan's population was comprised of visible minorities, which jumped from 3.6 per cent in 2006. The majority of visible minorities resides in the two main metropolitan areas – Regina and Saskatoon. Saskatoon is home to 45.3 per cent of Saskatchewan's visible minority population with Regina being home to 34.7 per cent (Saskatchewan Bureau of Statistics, 2013). With immigration to Saskatchewan increasing, the student population within the classroom is diversifying.

As a group of three elementary teachers, we try to close the gap in literacy levels and to develop sets of skills that allow us to better teach and educate our students. The three participant teachers have been implementing many diverse strategies to promote growth in literacy and have been reflecting upon the process. We are only as good as the questions we ask ourselves: What is working and what is not working? How can we support each other and what supports do we need in place?

Each fall we enter the classroom with a general sense of the curriculum and what needs to be accomplished throughout the school year. However, with the increasing demands on classroom teachers, this is no longer a good starting point for adaptive instruction. Teachers are expected to adapt curriculum to suit the individual needs of every student in the classroom. Within each classroom there is a diverse range of needs. One of the greatest challenges is when an ELL student whose skills are significantly below grade level enters the school. The expectation is that a teacher can put an intervention plan in place so the student reaches grade level by the end of the year. We are seeking to discover the most effective instructional strategies that will help our ELL students make significant gains throughout the school year.

We collected data through various assessments to gain insight into what helps ELL students and developed strategies about what to teach and how to teach. Further, we used *The RTI Daily Planning Book, K-6*, which is "an approach to instruction that is ultimately designed to support students who have special learning and/or behavior needs" (Owocki, 2010, p. 2).

Background

This study examines English language learners (ELLs), or “students who come from language backgrounds other than English whose proficiency is not yet developed to the point where they can profit fully from English-only instruction” (August & Hakuta, 1998, p. 3). The ability to use the language of school textbooks is the key that opens the doors to higher learning. For many English learners, the achievement gap is a language gap and to close it we must focus on academic skills.

Within the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education’s Continuous Improvement Framework (CIF), there is a focus on elementary education. One of the improvement targets in the Ministry’s *Plan for 2014-15* stated “By June 2015, at least 78% of Grade 3 students will be reading at or above grade level” (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 4). The Prairie Spirit School Division is meeting the Ministry’s goals by focusing on improving student literacy. How these goals are met varies considerably because of the unique context of each school.

Hepburn School is located in the town of Hepburn, part of a primarily German-speaking community. About one-quarter of Hepburn School’s student population is ELL, making it a school with one of the highest populations of ELL students in the Prairie Spirit School Division. Three grades from Hepburn School participated in this study: Grade 1 was comprised of 26 students, Grade 2 had 14 students, and Grade 3 had 27 students. One teacher had a background in resource room instruction, including 25 years of experience in adapting learning. The other two teachers were in their seventh and ninth years of teaching at the time of this project. Having a teacher with extensive knowledge on teaching reading was a huge benefit to the group, especially when it came to sharing and group discussions. All students could speak English; however, many of them came from backgrounds where English was their second language. In my research, I discovered that a student who is an ELL hears about 3 million words a year vs. 11 million words a year from a professional family. By age four, the gap in words heard grows to 13 million vs. 45 million (Hart & Risley, 2003). As a result, many students are entering Hepburn School with lower English language development.

As a teacher, I feel I have limited experience with ELL students. I felt the need for an effective intervention plan – one that offered proof that it worked. Every year I start the year feeling like I have a plan; however, I am not sure it is an effective plan. “In the RTI [Response to Intervention] framework, the instruction delivered to students varies on several dimensions [tiers] that are related to the nature and severity of a student’s difficulties” (National

Center for Learning Disabilities, 2014, n.p.). I find it is easy to have whole-group instruction (Tier 1), but how do you structure a classroom to encompass ELL intervention (effective Tier 2 instruction)? We, as teachers, are trying to grow ourselves and shift from the thought process of: I prepared this lesson and it didn't work, but I tried my best; to why aren't the ELL students improving and how do we adapt our instruction so that we are seeing results? We are taking charge of our own growth and seeking to resolve our challenges in the classroom.

In an ELL situation, there is a need for additional support, and we as teachers often find it difficult to find the additional time and supports required to help each individual student. With collaborative time available, the researchers could meet during the day, which would help us to reexamine current strategies and to create better intervention practices. We would also have time to work individually with students to formulate individual reading intervention programs so students who were behind would be able to grow beyond a year and catch up to their grade level. With Rosetta Stone software (our students had access to an online subscription to the Spanish version of the program) and fluency intervention as a starting point, we could expand our practice and could delve deeper into the RTI strategies. Owocki (2010) explained:

Having a general sense of the kinds of things that children should ultimately be doing in your classroom does not provide you with a starting point for well-tailored teaching. It is only with the assessment of your particular students that you begin to gain insight into the particulars of what and how to teach. (p. 1)

Through assessment we would be able to identify the particular needs of each ELL student beyond what we had planned for the class in general.

The specific objectives of this study included:

- Discovering the best practices in reading intervention for ELL students within the context of Hepburn School.
- Reflecting upon what the data demonstrate and, consequently, what knowledge has been gained.

Methodology

Phenomenology was the research method used for this study because the research involved teachers developing self-awareness. Through this method, we gained an understanding of the experiences of the participating teachers and improved collaboration. The researchers gained insight into the benefits of collaboration and understood, from their own perspectives, the benefits of working together as a team. DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2006) stated:

The collaborative process enables team members to develop new skills and capabilities that in turn lead to new experiences and awareness. Gradually, this heightened awareness transforms into fundamental shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and habits which, over time, transform the culture of the school. (p. 4)

The teachers examined their experiences through informal and formal discussion during meetings. Educators reflected upon their own data, discovering which intervention strategies worked. The themes that emerged from the study were used to present the results of the study.

The researchers worked together to meet about the ELL reading intervention strategies being used in the classroom. We collected quantitative data using the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA2+) (Beaver & Carter, 2006) and the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) (1st ed.) (Beaver & Carter, 2004). After the data was collected, we met as a professional learning community and analyzed and reflected upon our data together. We decided what was working, what was not, and what needed to change. We discussed different ideas and strategies that we were using in our classrooms and also shared resources with one another.

Action research methods were employed at the school and classroom levels. Information about classroom practices was gathered at meetings; we gave each other suggestions to try. We gathered data using the same method and then reflected upon the results, deciding what was working in the classroom and what was not. The model we adopted was an integrated learning opportunity model.

Questions to lead the meetings were adapted from the book, *Professional Learning Communities at Work Plan Book* (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2006).

Data Analysis

The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA2+) and the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) (1st ed.) were used to collect the quantitative data. The colour zones were determined using the DRA sections of a literacy benchmark document provided by Prairie Spirit School Division (see Appendix D). The following pie charts display the quantitative data that was collected from a combined group of grades 1, 2, and 3 students during the school year.

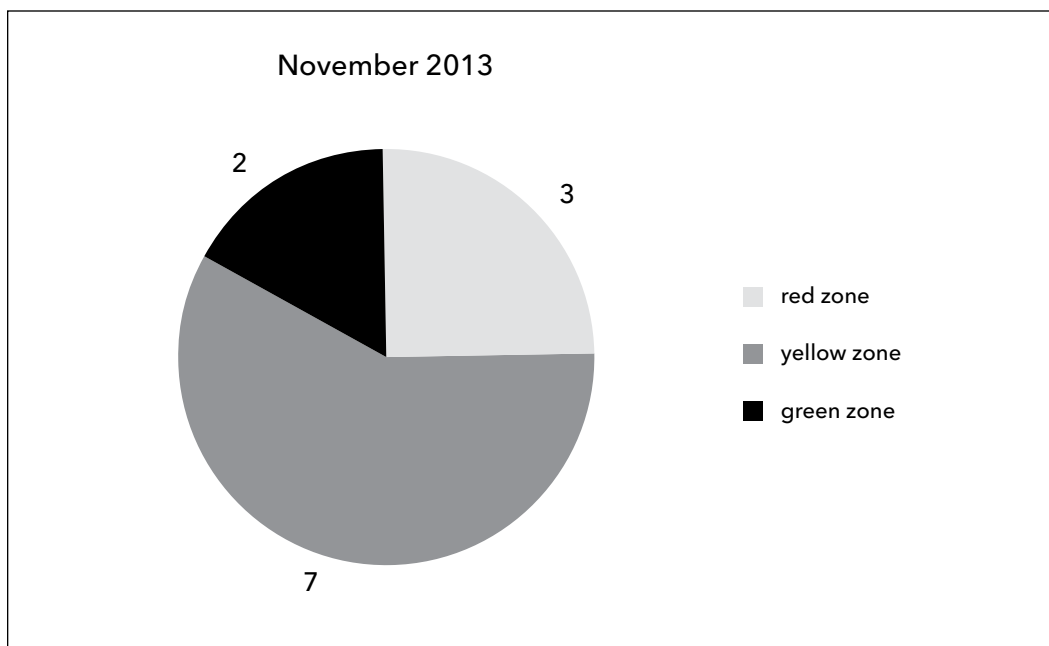


Figure 1. Quantitative data collected during November 2013. Copyright 2014 by D. Jemieff, B. Ludba, C. Holowachuk, and the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research Into Teaching Inc.

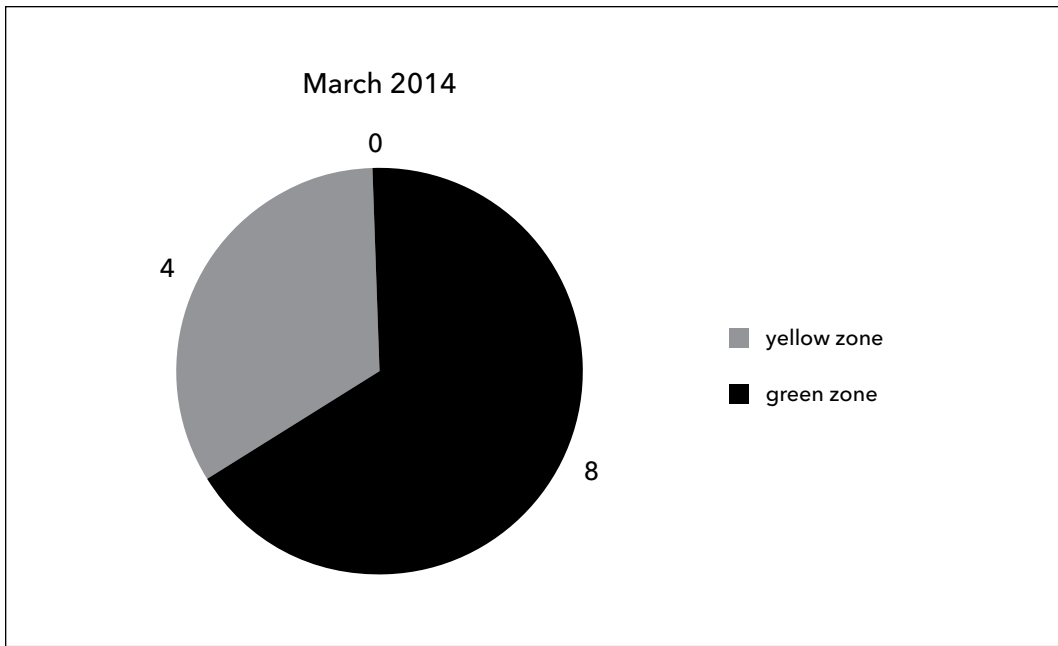


Figure 2. Quantitative data collected during March 2014. Copyright 2014 by D. Jemieff, B. Ludba, C. Holowachuk, and the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research Into Teaching Inc.

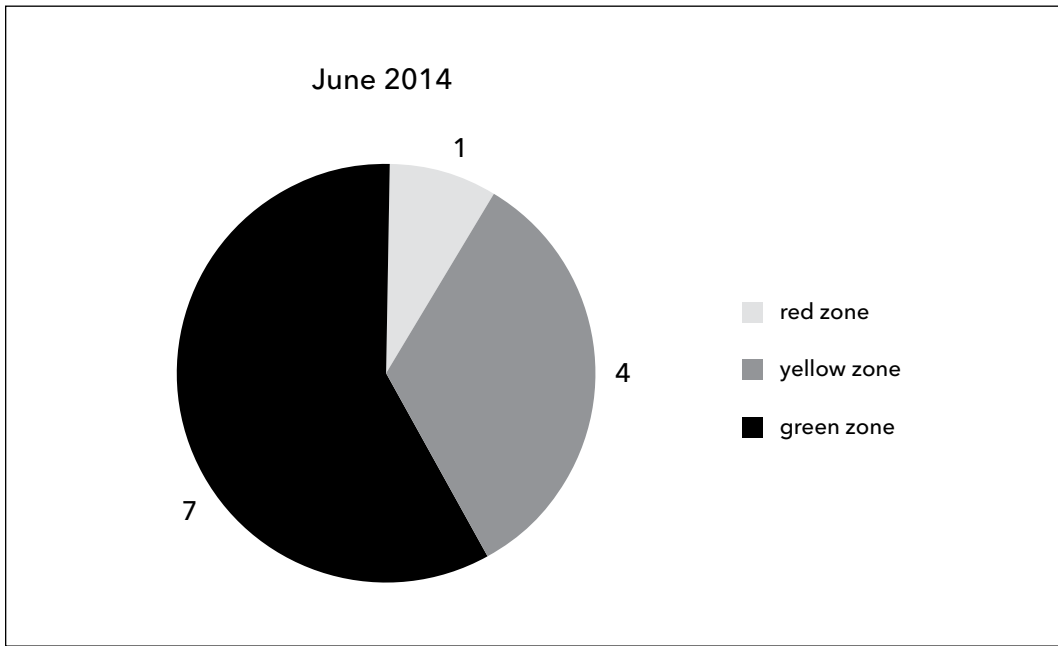


Figure 3. Quantitative data collected during June 2014. Copyright 2014 by D. Jemieff, B. Ludba, C. Holowachuk, and the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research Into Teaching Inc.

Explanation of the Quantitative Data

There were 12 students in all – eight boys and four girls. Since this was a project about three teachers working together, the individual grades are not identified, but rather data is displayed as a primary group of students. In the Prairie Spirit School Division, we refer to students as being in a red, yellow, or green zone. Red zone refers to students who need significant support and an intervention plan. Yellow zone describes students who need occasional to frequent support. Green zone refers to students who are at an independent learning level. The students in this study all made significant gains throughout the year. A few students tested lower in June, which may have been due to fatigue as they had been working really hard during the school year.

Qualitative Data and Analysis Techniques

Qualitative data was gathered during professional learning community meetings. Two meetings occurred during the year – one in the fall and one in the spring after data were collected. Specific questions were used to guide the meetings (see appendices E & F) in order to keep some structure to the meetings and also to prompt our reflection. Meetings were semistructured because it was important for all teachers to lead in this project and not just one person. One researcher recorded the discussions that occurred during the meetings, including feelings and direct quotes from the teachers. We also reflected upon our quantitative data as a group. We interpreted the data together and came to conclusions about what strategies were working and what were not. I found that my intervention plan changed frequently throughout the school year. The following themes emerged as a reflection of the notes taken during group meetings:

Theme 1:

We discovered strategies that were effective.

As the meetings went on throughout the year, we began to develop a sense of trust and comfort with one another, our discussions became rich, and we began sharing more resources and strategies.

For Grade 3, we used Debbie Miller’s reading workshop model for comprehension in the classroom. The intervention group used sight words, choral reading, shadow reading, and repeated readings to help boost the fluency of ELL students. These strategies are briefly outlined below:

- Sight words – Sight words are the high frequency words that typically make up a large portion of the vocabulary in children’s literature. Strategies such as games, puzzles, and print materials can all be used to help ELL students recognize these words by sight, thus improving their reading fluency.
- Choral reading – In choral reading, students read aloud in unison in a small group or as a whole class. This strategy is particularly helpful in building self-confidence in ELL readers, as they are able to read with the support of the group before being asked to read on their own.
- Shadow reading – This technique helps ELL students combine their reading and comprehension skills. Although many adaptations are possible in this strategy, a student will usually listen while a teacher or another student reads a passage of text.

The listening student will then begin to break the text into chunks or passages that can be paraphrased and summarized by the listener. This helps the language learner to not only process what he/she is hearing, but to combine it with reading, summarizing, and/or paraphrasing the text in a way that promotes and demonstrates comprehension.

The Grade 3 teacher also used a questionnaire (see Appendix B) to determine students' interests at the beginning of the year so that students knew what books to choose that would hold their interest. The Grade 3 teacher observed students began to enjoy reading more when they knew how to choose "just right" books that were at their reading level.

For grades 1 and 2, we used the *Lindamood Phoneme Sequencing Program* (LiPS). It is a program about phonemic awareness. The series entitled *Explode the Code* (Hall, 1993) was helpful for short vowels. The Grade 1 level of this series was used for students participating in our research, but the series itself encompasses a range of grade levels.

Teaching all the short-vowel before long-vowel sounds was useful. In Grade 1, we found the students would get confused if you tried to teach long and short vowels at the same time.

In Grade 2, we found that reading all sentences in the *Phonics Level B* (Elwell, 2003) resource was helpful. Sight word lists were used and were also sent home for parents to help out their children. Every week numerous mornings, recesses, and after school time were spent reading individually with the ELL students to provide extra time with each individual student to ensure progress in reading.

Theme 2:

The meeting time allowed for an opportunity to reflect and to analyze what was working and what was not.

Teachers in this group found that everyone has a different style of instruction in their classroom. We enjoyed learning ideas and strategies from other teachers. We felt it brought cohesiveness to the primary grades within the school. As one researcher commented, "Collaborating always gives you an idea as to how much you can change things or come at it more effectively." We also felt the need to communicate with each other to ensure that we were meeting the students' needs.

We also felt time was needed in order to have some one-on-one time with each ELL student. This time allowed for assessment; however, it did not provide enough time to formulate intervention plans – this was still done on teachers' own time. Researchers' comments included: "For a larger class I could have used more time." "For my smaller class the time provided was about right." "We have to do this next year." We felt the daily one-on-one time with each student really allowed us to make an impact on those students' achievements.

We felt it was important to meet as a group because it helped us to establish a common ground with intervention techniques that were working. All three of us had very different classroom techniques. As we met, we were able to establish some common language that was consistent across all three grades. This would also keep some consistency in the comprehension strategies that we were teaching our students.

Theme 3:

Importance of time to work one-on-one with each student to formulate and revisit effective intervention.

We felt the students who were not moving into the average reading range (green zone) after receiving the daily reading lesson needed further assistance. There needed to be either very small-group or one-on-one learning opportunities with these students. We were seeking some time beyond the classroom to see where we could make an impact on classroom reading scores within one school year. One researcher suggested:

As a Grade 3 teacher, I feel that my struggling readers benefit more from working in a small group or individually with a teacher rather than reading independently and practicing a comprehension strategy which was expected from the rest of the class. I did, however, feel it was important that the struggling readers were always part of the lesson and practiced strategies with the class in addition to their intervention support.

Even though the time given was enough time to collect data and have a few professional conversations, it still was not enough time to formulate and to revise intervention plans. This was conducted on teachers' own time. Researchers commented: "I felt I was given enough time as far as testing goes. The time was not enough for me to formulate proper intervention plans. I did that at home on my own time." "Meetings were helpful for ideas in guiding intervention."

Theme 4:

Importance of having extensive data to analyze, to make informed decisions about the direction of instruction, and to demonstrate student growth.

The DRA2+ and the DRA2 word analysis were used with the Grade 1 students. One researcher explained:

The DRA was helpful for leveling students and for finding out what their needs are, but when I looked at the strategies suggested, many of them only suggested modeling so I went to other resources to find some other strategies.

One resource that was very helpful was a spelling inventory from *The RTI Planning Book, K-6* (Owocki, 2010). It wasn't about spelling, but rather about grouping students according to where some of the language gaps were occurring (see Appendix C).

In Grade 1, we found the DRA2 word analysis really helpful. The teacher grouped the students and built upon their skill sets. A researcher noted: "I was really able to get down to the nitty-gritty as to where the breakdown is occurring."

Findings

The purpose of this study was to discover the best practices for reading intervention for ELL students within the context of the school. This study produced the following findings:

- The three teachers involved in the study were able to develop intervention plans that resulted in a significant positive impact on students' reading scores.
- In terms of intervention, the time a teacher has to work one-on-one or in a small group, the class size, and the amount of time a parent works to help a child read at home are all linked in terms of improving a primary student's reading ability.
- It was beneficial for the three teachers to collaborate together to strategize, to share ideas, and to bring consistency in assessment.

Discussion

There is a direct correlation between class sizes, time spent on the intervention plan one-on-one with each student, and home support.

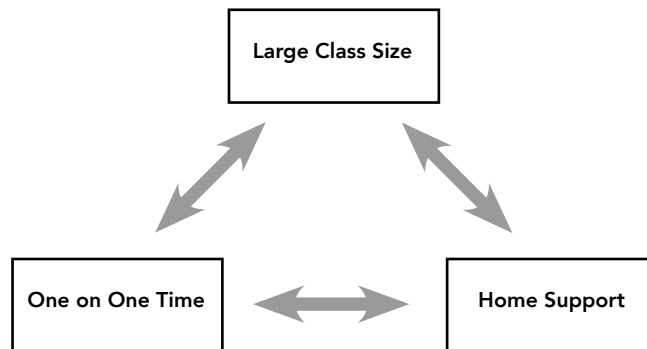


Figure 4. Comparatives for success of students. Copyright 2014 by D. Jemieff, B. Ludba, C. Holowachuk, and the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research Into Teaching Inc.

Teachers in this study felt if you had two of these supports in place, they could make a significant impact on a students' reading. If teachers had a large class size and adequate one-on-one time with the ELL students, then they could make a difference, even without the parents working on reading with their children at home. If teachers had a large class size and the parents support helping the student with reading at home, then one-on-one time with the particular student was not needed as much. If the teacher had home support and one-on-one time with the student, then a large class size would not significantly impact that student's reading.

Why Meeting as a Team was so Effective

The meeting time was valuable because it provided time for high-quality teacher training. One teacher had a resource background and was able to provide teacher training using the DRA during our first meeting. The time also allowed for all teachers to share ideas and strategies that were working so teachers had other ideas to try if their strategies were not effective. Every school has its own unique situation. The findings from this study do not necessarily mean these are the best practices in all schools; however, they did prove to make a positive impact on the ELL students of Hepburn School.

Sustainability

When a new teacher enters into this group, it is important that there is time provided to share what supports and programming are currently in place so he/she can continue to develop his/her own intervention programming that is best suited to the needs of the students. There needs to be a sustained level of commitment from all stakeholders. The teachers need to be invested in reading intervention and the administration also needs to support the teachers by providing them with the time needed to meet as a group. Administrators must believe that when teachers collaborate, they improve their own practice as well as the learning that takes place in their classrooms. Our findings suggest that more support is required for focused, teacher-initiated collaboration on classroom practices that enhance teaching and learning.

Implications

The results of this study are within the context of the school. This research may not apply to other schools as each school has its own unique challenges. The ELL students in Hepburn School could all speak English already, even though it may have been their second language. They could all communicate adequately, which was beneficial in instructing reading development skills.

One of the teachers in this group had extensive knowledge in reading intervention. She also received extensive training on how to use the DRA effectively. Teachers need to be trained to analyze the data that the DRA generates so that teachers make decisions about what needs to be done instructionally.

In order for teachers to have additional time working one-on-one with students, another teacher was provided. The teacher helped out in the grades 1, 2, and 3 classrooms two to three times a week or for a half-hour every day. This allowed teachers to have additional one-on-one time with each student every week. Our research grant was already in motion at the time of this job creation; therefore, the fourth teacher was not a part of the research.

We are hopeful this initiative will be continued in the future years. The challenge is to provide time for teachers to have one-on-one conferences with students. Teachers must work together to provide each other with this time or another position must be created that allows teachers to have the time to work with each child on an individual basis.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Permission for Research Participation

Title

Early Education Reading Intervention for English Language Learning Students

Introduction

Research shows early education reading intervention positively impacts the reading levels of individual students. The project in which we are asking your permission to participate is aimed at developing reading intervention strategies that improve students' reading.

Procedure

Students' reading levels will be determined using benchmarks set out in the Diagnostic Reading Assessment. This will determine the students' reading levels. Daily intervention strategies will be used in the classroom. Students will be reading individually, with the librarian, and with the classroom teacher.

Risks and Benefits

The benefits of this research will serve to develop the Readers' Workshop Program in the Grades One, Two, and Three classrooms and to evaluate its effectiveness. There are no known risks of participation in this program.

Research Personnel

The Grade Three teacher, Miss Jemieff, is the primary researcher. The Grade One teacher, Mrs. Ludba, and Grade Two teacher, Mr. Holowachuk, are also researchers involved with the project. Mr. Sigstad, Hepburn School's principal, supports the research being completed. If you have any questions, please feel free to call.

Confidentiality

Any information derived from participation in this study will be kept confidential by the researchers. There will be no identification of individual students in the research report. Individual student information may be reported to his/her parent or guardian.

Voluntary Participation

All students will participate in the classroom Readers' Workshop Program. I understand that using my child's results as part of a research study is completely voluntary and that I can deny the use of information at any time.

Early Education Reading Intervention for English Language Learning Students is a project funded by the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research Into Teaching. The Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation will publish the final report.

Consent

Having read the above, I agree to allow the use of the information obtained through participation in the Reading Intervention Program for the purpose of this project.

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix B: Questionnaire to Determine Students' Values

Determining Values

1. What does your bedroom look like at home? (posters on wall, toys, books, game stations)
2. What do you do afterschool?
3. When are you most disciplined? (something no one has to ask you to do)
4. What do you think about most?
5. What do you envision or visualize most? (daydream)
6. What do you internally dialogue about most?
7. What do you talk about most with your friends?
8. What do you set goals toward most?
9. What are you excited by the most?

Appendix C: Spelling Inventory

SPELLING INVENTORY

Name: Emilia

Date: 3/31

Date: 5.15

1. SATE
2. LED
3. WINE
4. hop
5. BUG
6. QAK
7. LIF
8. KOVE
9. VERS
10. SOOM
11. THORNEE
12. CHARDID
13. FLASHLIS
14. FASTIST
15. GROING
16. BOOGENR
17. DIFRITLEE
18. SKREES
19. CHRAKSHINMAN
20. INCREDBL

1. SAT
2. LED
3. WINE
4. HOP
5. BUG
6. QAK
7. LIF
8. COV
9. VERS
10. SOOM
11. THORNEE
12. CHARDID
13. FLASHLITS
14. FASTIST
15. GROING
16. BOOGENR
17. DIFRITLEE
18. SKREES
19. CHRAKSHIN
20. INCREDBL

Appendix D: Literacy Benchmarks

The table below is the Developmental Reading Assessment portion of the Prairie Spirit School Division benchmarks for students' instructional reading levels at grades 1-3 (T. Reeve, personal communication, October 30, 2014). These are benchmarks for the students' instructional levels in November 2013 and June 2014. The colour indicates the level of literacy instruction required:

Green = regular classroom instruction

Yellow = additional literacy instructional supports required (within the classroom)

Red = targeted literacy instructional supports required (in addition to classroom literacy support)

Name of Scale or Test	Date of Assessment	
	End of November	End of June
DRA2+		
Grade 1 Green	4-14	12-20
Grade 1 Yellow	2-3	6-10
Grade 1 Red	1	1-4
Grade 2 Green	18-20	24-34
Grade 2 Yellow	14-16	16-20
Grade 2 Red	1-12	1-14
Grade 3 Green	28-38	34-40
Grade 3 Yellow	20-24	24-30
Grade 3 Red	1-18	1-20
DRA		
Grade 1 Green	4-14	12-20
Grade 1 Yellow	2-3	6-10
Grade 1 Red	1	1-4
Grade 2 Green	18-20	24-34
Grade 2 Yellow	14-16	16-20
Grade 2 Red	1-12	1-14
Grade 3 Green	28-38	34-44
Grade 3 Yellow	20-24	24-28
Grade 3 Red	1-18	1-20

The *DRA2+ Program Overview* (http://assets.pearsonschool.com/asset_mgr/current/201316/ReaBro121705DRA2+_lo.pdf) suggests the following grade/level correlations:

- Grade 1 (Early) – Levels 4-12
- Grades 1-2 (Transitional) – Levels 14-24
- Grades 2-3 (Extending) – Levels 28-38

Appendix E: Questions from Meeting 1

- What intervention plans are we going to use in Grades 1 to 3?
- How can we make our assessment practice consistent?
- What strategies can we try out in our classrooms?
- Should we use a data wall? If so, how should our current data wall change?
- What rubrics are other people using?
- How can we use the RTI and DRA together?

Appendix F: Questions from Meeting 2

- What strategies are we using that are effective? How do we know?
- Do we need more time to work individually with the reading intervention students?
- Was the time given beneficial to formulate effective intervention plans?
- Did the DRA provide enough information to create effective intervention plans?

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