Research Basis for *From Phonics to Reading*™

A Research Study on the Effects of Using Decodable Texts with Systematic Phonics Instruction

Grades K–3

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About the Research

In 1985, the government document *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1085) provided a set of criteria for creating controlled, decodable text. It said this type of text should include the the following three criteria:

1. Comprehensible
2. Instructive
3. Engaging

Wiley Blevins applauded this document and conducted a research study to show the potential impact decodable texts have on early reading and spelling growth as well as motivation to read. Based on the results of his study, Wiley has incorporated decodable texts in every lesson of *From Phonics to Reading* that are comprehensible, instructive, and engaging.

1 **PURPOSE** OF STUDY

Wiley Blevins conducted a research study during the school year 1999–2000 to examine the effectiveness of decodable text in promoting word identification skills, phonics, and spelling abilities, as well as positive reading attitudes in early readers. Previous research on the influence of basal readers had indicated that the types of words that appear in beginning reading texts exert a powerful influence in shaping children's word identification strategies (Juel and Roper-Schneider, 1985). However, there had been no research on the direct effects of decodable texts on early reading growth. In this study, it was hypothesized that students receiving reading practice with decodable texts would achieve greater mastery in early reading skills than students who continued reading with standard classroom literature as follow-up reading to phonics instruction.

Research Questions

- Does practice with decodable text in conjunction with a systematic phonics program accelerate word identification skills for first-grade students?

- Do first graders who use decodable text demonstrate significantly greater gains in word identification skills than a comparison group of students who use trade literature?

Sample

Two New York City Public Schools participated in the study from September of 1999 to February of 2000. There were two first-grade classrooms selected at each school—one experimental classroom using decodable text, and one control classroom using trade literature. A total of 101 children in first grade participated in this research. The selected schools were in the lowest third of the district, based on achievement scores. 90% of the students in this district qualify for free or reduced lunch, 62% of the students were classified as below grade level, and 80% of the students were identified as Latino. Both schools used the same systematic and explicit phonics instruction covering the identical phonics scope and sequence. The only difference between the experimental and control classrooms was the type of text used for reading practice: the decodable text or the standard trade literature series.

Program Background

The decodable texts used in this study were written to directly address the requirements outlined in Becoming a Nation of Readers (Anderson et al., 1985). Students in both groups read a major piece of literature for the week and received phonics lessons follow-up practice five days a week. First graders in the experimental group practiced reading with decodable (controlled) text for their phonics lessons follow-up. The controlled texts were 100% controlled for phonics and sight words (for example, Sam sat. Sam sat in the sand. Sam sat and sat.). The major reading text was 80% controlled for phonics and sight words, as well as being specially written and illustrated.

In comparison, the control group's phonics lessons follow-up included patterned and predictable text (for example, Sam sees a sandwich. Sam sees a snake. Sam sees a sailor. Sam sees a lot!). For their major reading text the control group used popular first-grade books written by well-known authors. Many of these texts were approximately 35% decodable.

Controlled text percentages were determined through a decodability analysis carried out based on a clear scope and sequence of phonics skills. In addition, a review of Marcy Stein's study "Analyzing Beginning Reading Programs: The Relationship Between Decoding Instruction and Text" (Stein, Johnson, and Gutlohn, 1999) confirmed controlled text percentages for both the experimental and control groups of students.

Professional Development

Wiley Blevins conducted an initial training session with the experimental group's teachers on how to incorporate the decodable text into their comprehensive reading program. Each participating classroom was visited and observed four days per week—two days by Blevins and two days by a research assistant. This method ensured that all teachers stayed on pace, taught the phonics lessons as intended, and read the required books. Detailed anecdotal notes on these sessions were kept. In addition, each classroom was formally observed for two weeks in order to develop classroom profiles.

Implementation

Two types of classroom observation were conducted throughout this study: formal and informal.

- **Formal Observations**—either the primary investigator or the research assistant observed each classroom for two weeks.

  Observers made notations in the Teacher's Edition (TE) of specifically what lessons/activities the teachers did during their Language Arts block. During the phonics lessons, observers evaluated how closely teachers stayed verbatim with the prescribed lessons.

- **Informal Observations**—the research assistant kept a detailed log of what she observed in the classrooms, including consistency in use of lessons and behavioral changes in teachers.

Assessment Measures

This study included four assessment measures:

- *The Woodcock Reading Mastery Test (WRMT)— Word Identification sub-test:* Required children to look at printed words and read them aloud.

- *The Blevins Phonics–Phonemic Awareness Quick Assessment:* A simple five-word spelling test administered at the start of school. Students fall into three categories—below level, on level, and above level. This test quickly identifies students in need of intervention and provides information about students' phonemic awareness and phonics proficiency.

- *Decoding Assessment:* A phonics mastery assessment developed especially for the study. It consisted of 20 words, all decodable based on the phonics scope and sequence. Ten of the words presented on the assessment appeared multiple times (four or more) in the reading selections by both groups of students. The other ten words never appeared in the stories read by both groups, or they appeared only once. Ability to decode 75% of the words or more was necessary to receive a "passing" score. All words were real words, not pseudowords.

- *Reading Attitudes Survey:* An informal interview-style assessment, which evaluates how children feel about learning to read, as well as how they perceive themselves as readers.

This study included a pre- and post-test design for the WRMT, the Blevins Phonics–Phonemic Awareness Quick Assessment, and the Reading Attitudes Survey. Pretesting was conducted in September 1999, and post-testing was conducted in February, 2000. The Decoding Assessment was only administered at the end of the study, in February of 2000.

2 DATA ANALYSIS

Woodcock Scores (WS) were used as the scale scores for statistical analysis in this study. A 2x2 ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) or "repeated measures" design was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in pre-test to post-test WS gains on the WRMT—Word Identification sub-test for students in the control and experimental groups. In keeping with the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards, this research reported results with accurately derived Effect Sizes (ES) to determine educationally significant outcomes. The Effect Size conveyed the magnitude of the difference between the scores of students in the Decodable Text group and students in the Trade Literature group.

In addition to the analysis above, a comparison of phonics mastery was evaluated by using the percentage that students achieved on the Decoding Assessment. Percentages were determined by the number of words read correctly out of 20 total words. 70% was considered the minimal percentage for phonics mastery.

WRMT—Word Identification Sub-Test Results

Results revealed that students in the experimental group significantly outperformed students in the control group on the WRMT. Analysis determined that W-score differences were statistically significant at $F(1.69) = 12.954$, $p < .001$. The Effect Size was determined to be $E = .16$.

Furthermore, results revealed that a significantly greater number of students using the decodable text for their reading practice achieved on-level WRMT mastery: 72% decodable text students vs. 54% trade literature students. The decodable controlled text group made a significant leap from 28% on-level mastery at the beginning of the year to 72% mastery in February. In contrast, the trade literature group only increased WRMT mastery from 40% in September to 54% in February. Some students in the decodable controlled text group achieved as much as two years' growth during one half of the school year.

Changes in Pre-test W-scores on the WRMT-Word Identification Test
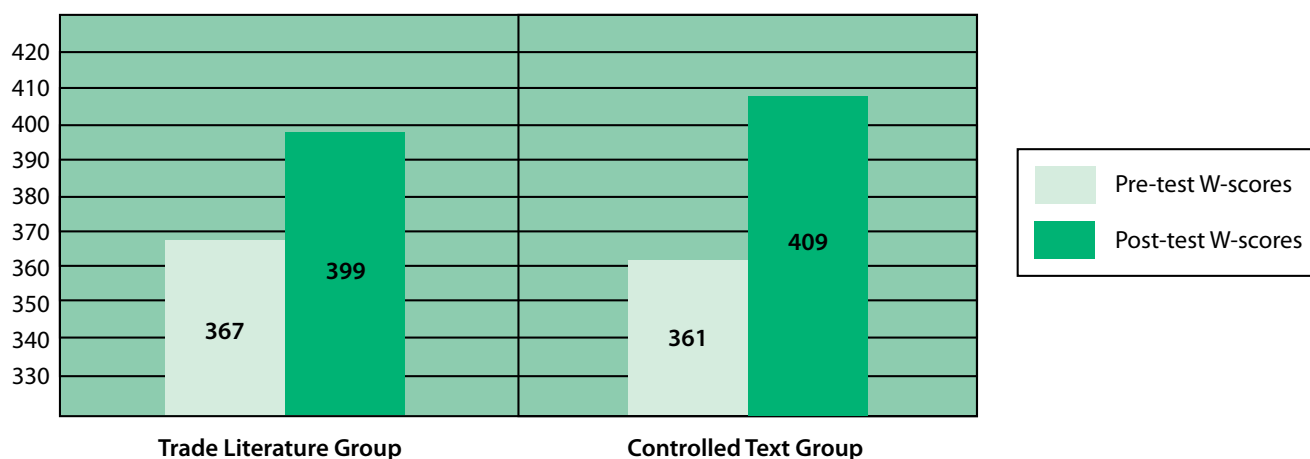
Phonics Practice Group

Analysis of Variance reveals that students in the controlled text group achieved significantly higher WRMT W-scores than students in the trade literature group.

Phonics–Phonemic Awareness Quick Assessment Results

Findings revealed that a significantly greater number of decodable text students vs. trade literature students achieved mastery on the Phonics–Phonemic Awareness Quick Assessment: 92% decodable text students vs. 66% trade literature students. 92% of decodable controlled text students were able to spell all five words correctly.

Decodable (Phonics Mastery) Assessment Results

Results revealed that 87% of the students using the decodable text achieved mastery (75% or higher score) on the Decoding Assessment as compared with only 54% of the students in the trade literature group.

Reading Attitudes Assessment Results

Findings revealed that significantly fewer students reading decodable text vs. trade literature reported a dislike of reading, or identified themselves as poor readers. Only 3% of decodable text students reported that they didn't enjoy reading vs. 11% of trade literature students. The percentage of students in the decodable controlled text group who reported a dislike of reading decreased during the study from 14% in September to only 3% in February. This can be attributed to their growing sense of confidence and control in their reading. In comparison, the percentage of students in the trade literature group who reported a dislike of reading actually increased during the study from 6% in September to 11% in February. This is a very troubling number. Already, students realize something isn't working and teachers are beginning to lose them.

3 CLASSROOM OBSERVATION RESULTS

Classroom observations revealed that working with decodable controlled text carried over to other important areas of teaching, such as read-aloud modeling and writing activities. In general, teachers were observed over time to pay more attention to words, and specifically to how words work.

As further evidence of the power of decodable controlled text, classroom observations also revealed that children in the decodable controlled text group were more confident in tackling difficult books for their read-at-home reading choices. It was observed that children in the experimental (decodable controlled text) group would examine the words in books before selecting a story to take home. Conversely, children in the control group were observed to have difficulty choosing books with appropriate text for their level.

4 DISCUSSION

Students in the decodable controlled-text group were more prepared to transfer their phonics skills to new words presented to them in formal assessments. In addition, these results reinforce what previous research by motivation experts has revealed: reading success breeds reading self-confidence and enjoyment of reading. This study also reinforces that the type of text selected for beginning readers does matter. Students who use decodable controlled text in their early reading instruction get off to a stronger start in their reading development.

5 SUMMARY

Results of this study reveal that using decodable text does make a significant difference in beginning reading skills. The positive impact of this teaching method is measurable through standardized assessments, such as the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test, as well as more informal phonics, spelling, and reading attitude instruments. Phonics instruction in addition to reading practice with decodable text also made a positive impact on spelling ability, which was demonstrated in students' independent writing. It is evident that using controlled text as an alternative to traditional trade literature for phonics lesson follow-up is preferable for getting young children off to the best start in learning to read. Furthermore, the results indicate that children gain reading self-confidence, which then leads to reading enjoyment. Thus, decodable texts can be engaging and motivating to students. Most importantly, the evidence is that they make a significant difference in teaching young children to read.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wiley Blevins studied at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Bowling Green State University and has his doctorate in Education. He is an author, educational consultant, and researcher and has taught both in the United States and South America.

Wiley has written over 17 books for teachers, including *A Fresh Look at Phonics, Phonics From A to Z*, and *Choosing and Using Decodable Texts*, and he has authored several phonics and reading programs including Sadlier's **From Phonics to Reading**. He also wrote the phonics brief by the International Literacy Association, *Meeting the Challenges of Early Literacy Phonics Instruction* and has penned over 100 children's books. Wiley's current focus is on adaptive technology, differentiated professional development, and children's literature. He is SVP and Associate Publisher at Reycraft Books, a new imprint focused on publishing books by authors and illustrators from under-represented groups.

From Phonics to Reading for Grades K–3, authored by Wiley, is a Tier 1 program that aligns with the Science of Reading research and was recognized as a high-quality foundational skills program by EdReports. See complete review **here**. Embedded professional development in the program, along with a critical review and repetition cycle, make early reading mastery possible for every student. Wiley has three complementary *From Phonics to Reading* programs: the **Interactive Practice Bundle** for practicing and applying newly taught skills; the *Fluency Booster Practice Book*, which provides a variety of practice for building fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills; and **Interactive Assessments**, offering diagnostic, formative (Lesson), and summative (Unit) assessments in an interactive format online. His newest program is **Building Reading Success with Wiley Blevins**, a Tier 2 & Tier 3 intervention program for Grades K–5. Grounded in the latest science of reading research, it offers a systematic and explicit approach to literacy and seamlessly integrates into any classroom setting.

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Research Basis for From Phonics to Reading: A Research Study on the Effects of Using Decodable Texts with Systematic Phonics Instruction

Meeting the Challenges of Early Literacy Phonics Instruction, **ILA Leadership Brief**

Influential Reading Group Makes It Clear: Students Need Systematic, Explicit Phonics, **EdWeek**

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