Understanding the Experiences of a First Grade Class with Explicit Phonics Instruction: A Qualitative Case Study

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Understanding the Experiences of a First Grade Class with Explicit Phonics Instruction: A Qualitative Case Study

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the College of Education and Social Work
West Chester University
West Chester, PA

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

By
Haley Fry
May 2024
Abstract

The reading wars in American education have raged on with the most recent *Science of Reading* movement, with the discussion centered around phonics. This qualitative case study examined a real first-grade class as they experienced explicit phonics instruction within the context of a classroom environment in public elementary school in northeastern United States. Participants of this study included eight first-grade students and one first-grade teacher, in one first-grade class. Data collection was broken down into two phases that were rooted in Social Constructivism’s Zone of Proximal Development and Ehri’s Phases of Word Learning Theory. Phase I consisted of classroom observations during explicit phonics instruction over the course of six weeks. Phase II consisted of a narrative interview with the teacher and task-based interviews with the students. Baseline and benchmark quantitative student data was obtained to compare with data from interview tasks. Data was transcribed and analyzed using inductive coding to allow for themes to arise from the data and to better understand the metacognition, understanding and the case’s experiences with explicit phonics instruction. Findings included how the teacher approached and implemented phonics instruction with autonomy and integrity for the students, while how students experienced and applied their knowledge from their individual phase of word learning.

*Keywords*: science of reading, phonological awareness, phonics, zone of proximal development, phases of word learning theory.
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Dedication

To my first best friend, my amazing sister, Jaimie. Thank you for your unwavering love, support, and motivation. You are my biggest cheerleader and inspiration. I am forever grateful for you. This wouldn’t have been possible without you.

To my amazing parents, for their constant reassurance and strength throughout this life-changing journey. I am beyond lucky to have had the two of you as my role models. Your hard work, sacrifices and voices of reason have afforded me with every opportunity to succeed and more.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Teachers of primary-grade classrooms nationwide grapple with how to teach their students to read effectively as trends in literacy curricula and instruction have frequently shifted and raised debate (Pearson, 2003). Currently, the reading debate sits at the chasm between structured literacy and comprehensive literacy instruction, with some researchers having championed explicit phonics instruction or the direct and systematic teaching of letter-sound and spelling correspondences (Castles et al., 2018; Seidenberg, 2017; Shanahan, 2020) while other researchers (Fountas & Pinnell, 2018) have remained faithful to a more balanced approach, which includes explicit language instruction and independent language exploration which aligned with the original theories of Marie Clay (1987). Balanced literacy is an instructional approach that presumes reading and writing skills are learned through various environments with differing levels of support from the teacher and student control (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Guided reading remained a pivotal instructional strategy within balanced literacy that focuses on small group instruction while reading specific texts to match students' reading levels. More recently, researchers and scientists have investigated whether this approach adequately prepares readers given a gap in reading expectations and student reading achievement (The Reading League, 2022).

The term science of reading has sparked the latest resurgence of the reading wars. This research involves investigating the complex process of how the brain develops and learns how to read involving the front lobe and the temporoparietal and occipitotemporal areas (Kearns et al., 2019). Authors (Gentry & Ouellette, 2019) define the science of reading as a body of research from educational fields, cognitive and developmental psychology, and neuroscience that describes how students learn to read. In their text, Brain Words: How the Science of Reading
"Informs Teaching," Gentry and Ouellette (2019) focus on how children’s brains develop as they learn how to read from a neurological standpoint while highlighting spelling as the core of the reading brain. Neuroscientist Mark Seidenberg (2017) also supported this brain-based approach by linking speech to print to teach students to read. In 2022, journalist Emily Hanford highlighted “the science of reading” in a highly-publicized podcast following the global pandemic that focused on reading instruction from a parent and textbook publisher point of view. This perspective furthered the public tensions surrounding reading instruction, the science of reading, and the reading wars.

There is resistance to the science of reading movement, claiming it is yet another swing of the pendulum in the reading wars. Although, neuroscientist and child development expert Maryanne Wolf (2018) approaches learning to read from a brain-based perspective, she discusses the cognitive processes and rewiring of the reading brain. Without highlighting foundational skills as building blocks but rather as a part of reading development and how are brains change with literacy development. Some critics have argued that this approach does not account for the many components of skilled reading (Calkins, 2020). Literacy consultant and curriculum designer Mia Hood (2019) expressed that supporters of the science of reading do not prioritize comprehension as the goal of reading. Instead, they focus on decoding skills and assume comprehension skills follow. In addition, authors such as Natalie Wexler (2023) and Lucy Calkins (2020) have been reluctant to change their previous thoughts about reading instruction, stating that focusing on phonics instruction is only one piece of the puzzle (Goldstein, 2022). Yaden et al. (2021) have raised questions about the validity behind the science of reading movement, claiming that it is too narrow of a concept of reading, while having little reliance on the environmental factors of readers and seems experimental. Critics (MacKay et al., 2021;
Denton et al., 2022) have questioned the code-oriented focused impact on comprehension skills in sentence-level reading and beyond.

Each group has approached reading instruction with a different perspective and ultimate goal. Even teachers of varying grade levels or in districts of different socioeconomic statuses perceive reading instruction from a unique point of view. Over the years, the tension between all perspectives grew to multiple boiling points, leaving the groups divided. Students and school communities continue to need clarification on this debate. With provided curriculums and district mandates, teachers should make sense of scientific reading research within their classrooms.

**Problem Statement**

For years, teachers, administrators, policymakers, scientists, and researchers have all debated the best ways to teach students how to read (Lemann, 1997; Pearson, 2003; Kim, 2008). In classrooms across America, students of varying grade levels struggle to read. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assesses American students in grades 4 and 8 every two years to measure their achievement and progress. The NAEP Reading Assessment measures comprehension skills through questions based on grade-specific passages. The assessment framework defines reading as “a dynamic cognitive process that involves understanding written text, developing and interpreting meaning, and using meaning as appropriate to the type of text” (NAEP, 2022, p. 2). According to the 2022 NAEP Reading Assessment, fourth- and eighth-grade reading scores declined or saw no significant change, with 37% of fourth graders and 30% of eighth graders performing below basic. No grades or districts saw increased reading comprehension scores in 2022, compared to 2019 or 1992.

The National Reading Panel (NRP) formed in April of 1998 and conducted two years of research surrounding reading, writing, and literacy instruction. The panel focused its research on
the “Big 5” phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The panel published their findings to summarize, explain, and provide guidance about how teachers implement reading instruction in classrooms. The length of each section in the National Reading Panel report is intriguing: phonemic awareness, 86 pages; phonics, 89 pages; fluency, 43 pages; vocabulary, 35 pages; and text comprehension instruction, 80 pages. While the varied lengths in each section are a product of the number of studies that met the inclusion criteria, some proponents of phonics-focused instruction have used this report to support their stance. The National Reading Panel dedicated much of the report explaining the findings in regards to phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, as more of those studies met the strict methodological criteria for inclusion in the report. Phonics, phonemic awareness, and comprehension were heavily emphasized, while fluency and vocabulary were not, but all five areas are said to be equally important to skilled reading. Panelists have reported that it was not their intention to convey that those specific content areas in the longer sections of the report were more critical to the reading process than the others. Despite panelists addressing this misconception, educators and publishers have frequently used the findings from this report to support claims regarding the importance of those skills.

Including the NRP meta-analysis and the 2022 NAEP Reading Assessment data is vital to this problem because it helps understand the dilemma within reading instruction. While the NRP report highlighted the “Big 5” in reading instruction, there remained a heavy emphasis on phonemic awareness and phonics instruction data. On the other hand, the NAEP Reading Assessment defines reading as understanding written text while assessing specific reading comprehension skills. Given the NAEP Reading Assessment data and the NRP report, providing evidence that there is a disconnect between reading research and real classroom practice. The
underlying issue remains the way reading research information gets taken up by publishers and legislation and transferred into classroom practices is where communication breaks down.

Analyzing the National Reading Panel Report and the disconnect between research and practice adds to the national reading crisis surrounding the science of reading (Shanahan, 2020). Currently, the terms science of reading and phonics instruction are interchangeably used in the media and public debate as a result of research stressing the importance of foundational reading skills. Shanahan (2020) warned of the impact of linking the science of reading directly to phonics instruction, as it is misleading to convert basic reading to prescribed instruction directly.

Although the science of reading does support explicit phonics instruction, it does not ignore reading instruction beyond phonological awareness and decoding (Shanahan, 2020). The science of reading represents the accumulation of research about reading instruction acquired through the use of the scientific method (Petscher et al., 2020), including theories such as The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) and Scarborough’s Reading Rope (2001). The importance of foundational skills and explicit phonics instruction in primary grades is emphasized in this debate (Moats, 2020). The problem within this study is linking that understanding of foundational reading instruction research and how foundational reading skills are applied and experienced in real classrooms.

**Purpose of Study**

In an attempt to understand the experiences of students during reading instruction in classrooms, I examined how the members of a first-grade class engaged with explicit phonics instruction in the classroom setting. This qualitative case study considered the frequent shifts and turmoil in reading instruction throughout American education, which informed the schools' curricula to facilitate reading instruction (Lemann, 1997; Pearson, 2003; Kim, 2008). This study
focused on the small foundational components of skilled reading: phonological awareness and decoding found in explicit phonics instruction in a first-grade classroom environment. The focus of this study was to examine how this specific case of students and their teacher engaged in explicit phonics instruction in the classroom, why the teacher made specific instructional decisions and how students apply this newly acquired knowledge to related tasks.

**Research Questions**

The primary research question of this study was: *In what ways do members of a first-grade class experience explicit phonics instruction?* The study was guided by the following sub-questions directly linked to specific members of the class and specific skills:

1. In what ways does a first-grade teacher engage in the delivery of explicit phonics instruction?
2. In what ways do first-grade students experience explicit phonics instruction?
3. How do first-grade students apply explicitly-taught phonological awareness skills?
4. How do first-grade students apply explicitly-taught phoneme segmentation skills?

**Rationale for Methods**

In this study, I employed a qualitative case study design and utilized student and teacher interviews as well as classroom observations as data sources. I related interview and observation information to student data to describe how members of a first-grade class experienced explicit phonics instruction. Stake (1995) described case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). In this research study, the case was the single first-grade class and how they experienced and transferred the specific activities of explicit instruction in phonological awareness and phoneme segmentation.
Stake (1995) emphasized that case studies should be more flexible and defined the case as an integrated system that allows people and programs to be logical potential cases. Relating Stake’s (1995) qualitative case study approach to this research study allowed for the appreciation of “the uniqueness and complexity of [the case], its embeddedness and interaction with its context” (p. 16). A case study design was appropriate for this study because it aimed to understand this particular first-grade class's unique and complex experiences and their interactions with the phonics curriculum and instruction.

Data collection included individual narrative interviews with first-grade students and their teacher. This approach allowed the students and the teacher to share their thoughts and perspectives on phonics and learning foundational skills. I also included classroom observations during phonics instruction and curriculum investigation in data collection. These measures were necessary to ensure the instruction was completed with fidelity and to see the student participants in the authentic classroom environment of this particular case. These findings correlated with district curriculum-based measurements that assessed students’ phonological and phoneme awareness before and after four weeks of consistent instruction. The data within this case study provided greater insight into the experiences of a first-grade class during explicit phonics instruction.

**Significance of Study**

As of May 2023, 31 states and the District of Columbia had applied laws or policies concerning evidence-based reading instruction (Schwartz, 2023). In addition, many universities are currently reviewing how they prepare their preservice teachers to teach reading (Hikida et al., 2019). As of April 2023, 22 Pa. Code § 49.14(4)(i), the Pennsylvania Department of Education now requires structured literacy practices to be integrated into teacher education programs, along
with current teachers engaging in professional development through continuation of learning. Along with state guidelines, teachers are advocating for structured literacy practices as they share research and resources on social media. In addition, publishing companies are marketing their products to include claims of following the science of reading and structured literacy.

With these current shifts in practice, the significance of this study aims to contribute to meaningful reading research conversations surrounding explicit phonics instruction and phonological awareness that highlight student voices and experiences. Also, I acknowledge that skilled reading encompasses more than phonics instruction.

The current study aimed to provide a platform for qualitative research with student voices, sharing their point of view regarding what they are learning in the classroom and how they engage with the content. There is minimal qualitative research with student participants sharing their thoughts on explicit phonics instruction, specifically in a first-grade classroom. Adding student voices from an authentic classroom environment into reading instruction research will give more depth to understanding how students engage in explicit phonics instruction on their individual levels. I hope to provide the Target District with specific themes and trends found from student assessment data, classroom observations, and student interviews. This insight will provide actionable steps for the allotted literacy block for phonics teachers.

**Positionality**

I began teaching first grade 10 years ago in an urban city at the height of balanced literacy instruction. My instructional block consisted of reading workshop, writing workshop and guided reading groups. There was an emphasis on fostering the love of reading and creating a culture of readers and learners. At the time, phonics instruction was not emphasized. There was no whole-group explicit phonics instruction or systematic approaches to teaching students how to
Guided reading was considered the all-important element of the literacy block. I met with small groups of students on similar levels during guided reading, working on similar skills or strategies. While I was with students in small groups, the rest of my class would work on other tasks such as silent reading, independent writing, or other literacy activities and games. Much of my time was spent creating differentiated instruction, centers, and daily schedules for students to follow during this time. I worked hard for my students, but they still struggled to read.

As years passed, I grew increasingly frustrated with giving a great deal of effort to my students, yet I sensed I was failing them. Sometimes, students’ progress significantly and then plateau during the year or even later when they progress into second or third grade. I consistently rooted back to foundational phonics skills during small groups to help students progress.

Then, phonics instruction resurfaced, with my district requiring extended periods of instructional time dedicated to foundational skills and ordering several years of phonics curriculum materials. Many teachers were reluctant to make changes and had difficulty transitioning to structured literacy, while others were offended by the teaching scripts that accompanied the resources. Throughout virtual learning in 2020 and the explosion of the science of reading in the reading wars conversation, I was captivated by the research and how it benefits students. When we reentered the classrooms, I felt more confident and prepared to implement phonics instruction properly through my understanding of vital foundational skills instruction. I recalled my first encounters with phonics and realized I did not have the knowledge or the tools to teach it properly.

First hand, I watched many of my students struggle with balanced literacy instruction, which did not seem all that balanced because they needed to gain the background knowledge and foundational skills that balanced literacy was asking of them. My first graders were asked to
“read” silently for extended periods of time without the foundational knowledge to decode words, because they did not acquire those skills through explicit phonics instruction. Phonics instruction gives my beginning learners the tools they need to read words successfully. As an experienced teacher, I know that skilled reading is much more than phonics instruction - there are many components that support literacy development such as fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. For the sake of this study, I am focusing on phonics instruction and phonological awareness because I found those skills to be the essential building blocks for students to construct during independent reading. Constructing higher-level skills is challenging if those foundational skills are missing.

**Limitations**

While this study can be replicated to ensure reliability across the Target District or other districts implementing explicit, systematic phonics instruction, generalizability remains a limitation of the case study design. The specific outcomes may vary based on each case as a result of factors such as culture, socioeconomic status, and other life experiences outside this study’s control. The diverse participants involved in this case study allowed for a broad understanding of the experiences of first-grade students in this specific classroom setting while using a narrative interview design.

Another possible limitation of this study may be a threat to internal validity. Since the researcher is a current educator at Target School in another classroom, this may threaten validity within the study site. Although this is a possible limitation, the researcher took many steps to protect all participants’ confidentiality. Using this particular case was essential to the researcher due to its motivating factor in conducting the study.
A final limitation of this study is that it does not address all of the other elements within Scarborough’s Reading Rope and the Phases of Word Learning Theory that are noted within the theoretical framework. In this student, I focused on the foundational reading skills addressed in 6 weeks of first grade through explicit phonics instruction. Despite the focus on explicit phonics instruction, I understand that many other skills encompass skilled reading, but they were not a direct focus during the data collection and analysis of this study.

**Definition of Terms**

*Balanced Literacy*

An instructional approach that states reading and writing skills are learned through various environments with differing levels of support from the teacher and student control (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

*Comprehension*

The process of making meaning from text (Woolley, 2011).

*Decoding*

Ability to disassemble or translate words from print to speech by using knowledge of letter-sound correspondences and putting them back together (Gough & Tunmer, 1986)

*Explicit Instruction*

A direct instructional approach where teachers guide students through the learning with a clear purpose, process and learning target (Archer & Hughes, 2011).

*Fluency*

The act of reading a text with accuracy, rate, expression, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000).

*Phoneme*
The smallest unit of sounds within a word. There are approximately 41 phonemes in the English language (National Reading Panel, 2000).

**Phonics**

The method of teaching students to read by identifying the relationship between sounds and letters used to spell words (Harris & Hodges, 1995).

**Phonological Awareness**

The awareness of sounds in spoken words (Stahl & Murray, 1994).

**Phonemic Awareness**

The ability to identify and manipulate sounds in spoken words (National Reading Panel, 2000)

**Science of Reading**

A body of research from educational fields, cognitive and developmental psychology, and neuroscience that describes how students learn to read (Gentry & Ouellette, 2019).

**Structured Literacy**

An instructional approach that emphasizes the explicit and systematic instruction of all literacy components (Spear-Swerling, L, 2022 August 11).

**Summary**

Currently, reading instruction sparks debate in classrooms across America, with the science of reading movement resurfacing the conversation about reading wars. Students lacking the proper foundational instruction struggle to become successful readers, and teachers are unsure of the best instructional approach amid the varying perspectives within the reading wars. While the science of reading emphasizes the importance of explicit phonics instruction for foundational readers, a more comprehensive and cohesive understanding of literacy skills should
occur to build a reliable foundation for skilled reading. The translation of reading research to curriculum to real classroom practice by teachers remains misinterpreted.

Within this chapter, I identified the study’s problem, purpose, and significance. I reviewed my guiding research questions and positionality. In addition, I provided the limitations and important terms and definitions to be found throughout the study. In the next chapter, I will propose the study’s theoretical framework and review related literature.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Reading curriculum and instructional methods have remained controversial topics in American education for centuries (Lemann, 1997; Kim, 2008; Pearson, 2016). The debate regarding phonics has been at the forefront of the conversation since the mid-nineteenth century when Horace Mann claimed graphemes, or alphabetic letters were useless (Kim, 2008). William S. Gray (1948) questioned and opposed the emphasis on phonics instruction (Baumann et al., 1998). He supported Mann’s previous claims of meaning-based instruction, which he soon referred to as the “look-say” method. A Harvard Professor, Jeanne Chall, soon followed with her work, Learning to Read: The Great Debate (1967), where she reviewed and consulted various research on approaches to teaching reading, including the look-say method, systematic phonics, and intrinsic phonics. Chall (1967) found that phonics instruction in the early grades produced better word recognition and comprehension through fourth grade.

As time continued, so did vigorous debate among researchers and psychologists like Richard Venezsky (1977), who emphasized the importance of reading researchers and educational planners collaborating to see the practical side of reading. Stahl & Miller (1989) added to the reading instruction conversation by conducting a quantitative synthesis examining “the effects of whole language and language experiences approached on beginning reading achievement” (p. 87). For students of low socio-economic status, Stahl & Miller (1989) summarized that “children who have not had as much exposure and the same types of interactions need direct instruction to catch up… systematic approaches teach letter sounds and other basic literacy concepts as new information children have not learned” (p. 108).

By 1992, the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) released data stating that 52% of fourth graders in California were reading below the basic level (Kim, 2008). Jarring
data such as this led to a need for further research to help students become successful readers. In 1997, the federal government formed a panel of fourteen individuals, including scientists, college representatives, teachers, administrators, and parents. This panel, known as The National Reading Panel (NPR), conducted ample research on reading acquisition. In 2000, the NRP provided extensive reports that concluded that proper reading instruction should incorporate essential instructional methods. Those methods included “explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, systematic phonics instruction, methods to improve fluency, and ways to enhance comprehension” (National Reading Panel [NPR], 2000). As a result of this meta-analysis, the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) included phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension as essential components of effective reading instruction (Learning Point Associates, 2004). Due to these findings, Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell (1996) are two authors that designed a program with a balanced literacy framework which addresses phonics and whole language practices. Fountas and Pinnell were influenced by Marie Clay (1987) and her Reading Recovery program which was initially developed in New Zealand. This approach emphasizes shared reading, read-alouds, guided reading, and independent reading and writing.

The balanced literacy approach remained at the forefront of reading instruction since the mid-1990s, remaining the core framework of many elementary school districts and teacher preparation programs nationwide until recently. Researchers, scientists, and teachers have recently advocated for change regarding reading instruction. Literacy experts (Burkins & Yates, 2021) have expressed concern with balanced literacy, stating that it is more aligned with the whole language and only provides the illusion of balance. Scholars such as Mark Seidenberg (2017) and others (Ehri, 2020; Shanahan, 2020) have advocated the importance of the science behind how children learn to read. Popularly known as “the science of reading,” this resurgence
of focus on foundational literacy skills has gained momentum and is considered a relevant and essential topic in reading instruction (Cassidy et al., 2021). The science of reading is stressed as research-based in science rather than a one-size-fits-all approach (The Reading League 2022).

In this literature review, I will address the most recent research surrounding the science of reading movement in the media and structured literacy. I will also discuss the curricular implications of this debate about reading instruction in schools and teachers and how this affects reading instruction today.

**The Buzz Around Science of Reading**

Following a global pandemic and virtual learning, the term, science of reading, gained significant momentum and is considered a relevant topic in reading instruction (Cassidy, 2021). According to an organization named The Reading League (2022), the science of reading is a “vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research” surrounding reading and writing (p. 6). This group of advocates compiled a number of studies to gain insight into how proficient reading and writing develop, why some students have difficulty learning how to read, and how educators can effectively assess and teach to improve student outcomes (The Reading League, 2022). Semingson & Kerns (2021) reflect on the term science of reading and break it down into two parts that remain consistent throughout the debate: (1) instruction that prioritizes phonics and (2) research that is consistent with phonics developing literacy skills in students.

Many science of reading activists reference the National Reading Panel Report (2000), which examined 52 studies on explicitly teaching phonemic awareness. The findings from this research highlighted that direct instruction improved phonemic awareness skills. This report also emphasized the importance of the components within teaching reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). In the current
literature, some find the science of reading movement to be another fad or swing of the pendulum in the reading wars (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2021), while others understand that it has created misconceptions. However, some (Ehri, 2020) may express that the movement aims to stress the critical roles foundational skills like phonemic awareness and phonics instruction play in students’ reading abilities.

In 2020, school buildings nationwide were closed due to a global pandemic. Students and teachers were required to shift to virtual learning from their homes. During this time, parents and guardians saw how their students were learning or not learning. In her highly publicized podcast, Sold a Story, Emily Hanford highlighted this shift during virtual learning, along with a scandalous backstory of the recent reading wars. Throughout the podcast, Hanford (2022) referenced publishers, authors, educators, and policymakers, ultimately concluding that students are not being taught how to read. Along with Hanford’s podcast came many other podcasts referencing the term science of reading, literacy-based practices, and various reading theories. Not only were podcasts promoting the term science of reading, but teachers turned social media influencers were also endorsing it. Social media teacher influencers marketed their self-made products on social media platforms and teacher websites, claiming their products followed the science of reading. In addition, when the term “science of reading” was entered into Google in April of 2024, about 6.1 billion results were populated.

The term science of reading created a lot of turmoil in the field of reading instruction. Researchers debated whether this was an appropriate term and who could claim it (Calkins, 2020). Policymakers shifted to mandating resources and instructional practices that followed the science of reading. Publishing companies began to market their products with the tagline that
they followed the science of reading. This hot-button term captured the attention of many in and out of the education field.

**A Sturdy Foundation: Structured Literacy**

Despite the buzz around the term science of reading and organizations capitalizing on the use of the term, it is essential to look at what the term is referencing pedagogically. The National Reading Panel (2000) emphasized the value of phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension in reading instruction. Regarding phonemic awareness, the NRP found that students who could not identify or hear the separate sounds within words were at a disadvantage when it came time to learn phonics. In fact, kindergarten and first-grade students benefitted most from direct phonemic awareness instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000).

The NRP also differentiated the explicit instruction between phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding. Regarding phonics instruction, the NRP (2000) found that kindergarten through first-grade students benefit from direct instruction in letter sounds and spelling patterns to decode words. Systematic phonics programs were found to be most effective for students (National Reading Panel, 2000). The emphasis that science of reading activists and influencers have placed on foundational reading skills, such as phonological awareness and phonics instruction, stems from an instructional method already in practice: structured literacy.

Structured literacy is the term used to describe the content and instructional methods in learning to read and spell printed words (Moats, 2019). Spear-Swerling (2018) notes the following key features of structured literacy:

“(a) explicit, systematic, and sequential teaching of literacy at multiple levels - phonemes, letter-sound relationships, syllable patterns, morphemes, vocabulary, sentence structure, paragraph structure, and text structure; (b) cumulative practice and ongoing review; (c) a high level of student-teacher interaction; (d) the use of careful chose
Regarding Spear-Swearling’s (2021) key features of structured literacy, explicit is characterized as skills taught clearly and directly by a teacher without inferencing. Systematic and sequential refer to skills taught in a logical order with specific prerequisite skills first. According to this perspective, there are a number of elements necessary for structured literacy. One element includes a high level of student-teacher interaction is necessary in structured literacy to allow teachers to provide step-by-step instructions with immediate responses and student feedback. Cumulative practice and ongoing review allow students to review skills and frequently practice previously taught skills along with both examples and non-examples of words that have a specific phonics pattern and words that do not have that specific phonics pattern. In addition to examples, direct feedback is provided from the teacher to the students regarding specific errors or misconceptions. Finally, decodable texts are student books used with specific phonics patterns that were explicitly taught (Spear-Swearling, 2018). Decodable texts are emphasized within the science of reading approach due to the focus on foundational skills practice the texts provide.

**Phonological Awareness and Phonics**

Spear-Swerling (2018) states that the explicit and systematic teaching of literacy skills at various levels is a key component of structured literacy which ranges from phonemes through text structure. Within this study, I focused on two key components of structured literacy for a first-grade class: phonological awareness and phonics instruction. Phonological awareness is the ability to recognize and identify various sounds of speech within a word, including phonemes, syllables, onsets, and rimes (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; National Reading Panel, 2000). Phonemic awareness is a term under the umbrella of phonological awareness that
specifically refers to the ability to identify and manipulate phonemes within words (National
Early Literacy Panel, 2008; National Reading Panel, 2000). This is demonstrated and taught
through spoken language and not in references to written print or letters. Phonics is an
instructional method that explicitly and directly teaches the connection between sounds and
letters (Piasta & Hudson, 2022). Phonics progresses from individual letter sounds to more
complex spelling patterns using digraphs, trigraphs, vowel patterns, and beyond.

Semingson & Kerns (2021) saw Jeanne Chall as the “forerunner” of the science of
reading movement following her 1967 study. In her case study, the student had more success
with explicit phonics instruction rather than basal reading textbooks. She also warned against a
one-size-fits-all approach to reading instruction (Chall, 1967). According to Ehri (2020), there is
a case for explicit phonics instruction in allowing students to learn how to read words. Here, Ehri
was also led to a dual-route view, which stated that the two ways to read words consisted of
phonological decoding or accessing memorized visual forms. This dual view theory can be
linked back to Chall’s (1967) warning against a one-size-fits-all approach to reading.

**Curricular and Instructional Implications**

Moats (2020) highlighted the importance of explicit phonics instruction by directly
teaching phonemic awareness and decoding. She also stressed that a meaningful curriculum
provides context for developing reading and writing skills, balancing oral language skills, and
applying academic and purposeful reading and writing. It is vital to remember that phonemic
awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension are all pieces of the same reading
instruction puzzle (Moats, 2020). The challenge remains how those pieces are put together in
classrooms across America within commercial or mandated products.
The use of commercial programs or mandated products does become an issue within the instructional implementation of reading practices. Teachers must be well-versed in the content they are teaching and often do not have the knowledge necessary to succeed without extensive product training (Brown et al., 2021). Along with teacher knowledge of commercial programs, the implementation of programs may vary based on the teacher's craft (Paige et al., 2021).

Ehri (2005) identified the four phases of word learning: pre-alphabetic, partial alphabetic, full alphabetic, and consolidated alphabetic. This theory is vital information for implementing structured literacy into curriculum and instruction because the concepts taught to students must be appropriate and meaningful for each student's phase. Connor and Morrison (2016) supported this theory by expressing how educators fail to consider the strengths and weaknesses of individual children when they come to school. They also emphasized how individualizing instruction is essential for students to get what they need. Furthermore, Connor and Morrison (2016) emphasize the need for individualized instruction in classrooms, while Denton et al. (2022) highlight the need for intervention (Denton et al., 2022). This remains a challenge for teachers implementing whole-group instruction at the tier 1 level. Unfortunately, the practicality of individualized education in today’s American classrooms is rare.

Duke & Cartwright (2021) also analyze the literature by exploring Gough & Tunmer’s 1986 theory regarding the simple view of reading while identifying research studies that have shown instruction aligned with this view in improving student reading. Following this analysis, Duke and Cartwright (2021) presented a model of reading that can be used to express the important advances to better align reading instructional practices. The active view of reading includes active self-regulation related to motivation and engagement, executive function skills, and strategy use. Followed by active self-regulation, which includes word recognition and
bridging processes like reading fluency and language comprehension. The authors propose that all of these factors together are known as reading.

**The Teacher’s Role in Structured Literacy**

The constant change of direction in the reading wars leaves educators confused and conflicted. A pivotal research point surrounds teacher knowledge of foundational skills, phonics, and reading instruction. Hudson et al. (2021) conducted a study correlating teacher preparation programs and how they enhance pre-service teachers' knowledge of phonological, phonics, and morphological awareness. The findings noted that teacher preparation programs grounded in structured literacy practices could increase teachers’ understanding of foundational skills. Interestingly, the novice teachers felt unprepared to teach concepts related to reading instruction (Hudson et al., 2021). Likewise, Campbell (2018) concluded that early childhood teachers knew less about phonics and how phonics shapes young children's types of experiences. Better alignment between preservice teacher education and the understanding of learning how to read is essential for student success (Hindman et al., 2020). Teachers and future teachers must be better equipped with the toolbox of knowledge in reading instruction, not simply introduced to it. Proper teacher training in structured literacy is essential for teachers to feel prepared and confident to teach their students.

Continued training is essential to both teacher and student success. Hudson et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of having opportunities to practice applying knowledge and concepts - just like educators expect young learners to do. Teachers would benefit from ongoing and targeted training. Unfortunately, teachers’ belief in professional development is not always positive. No matter the teacher's background, if they do not believe the content is worthwhile, they may be unlikely to be aligned with it and not implement it (Rodgers et al. 2021).
While researchers advocate for explicit phonics instruction (Ehri 2020), others grapple with the thoughts around teacher effectiveness, teacher quality, and literacy instruction, expressing that they depend on one another (Paige et al. 2021). For example, a person could know all there is to know about foundational skills but have no quality or craft when teaching. However, if a teacher engages with practices like readers’ theater but does not have a firm grasp of the literature or the content knowledge, they may not be effective. Paige et al. (2021) express that “the art of teaching acknowledges teachers’ judgment and its role in the critical decisions made by teachers regarding the [literacy instruction] and the selection, preparation, delivery, and assessment of literacy activities within the social interactions of the classroom” (p. 346). This can also be used to explain why continued teacher training is vital to teacher and student success. Teacher effectiveness and teacher quality are essential, no matter the content; teacher knowledge must also be in place.

**Theoretical Framework**

In this section, I will discuss the inspiration for the theoretical framework as well as the developed theoretical framework that guided this research study. This study drew inspiration from Scarborough’s Reading Rope (2001) which enabled me to create a theoretical framework that encompassed two theories: Ehri’s Phases of Word Learning (Ehri, 2005; Ehri & McCormick, 1998) and Vygotsky’s Social Constructivism (1978), focusing on the Zone of Proximal Development. I will explain each theory and then explore its significance in relation to the research study.

During my review of the literature surrounding reading instruction, I found a common theme that skilled reading encompasses many skills. I was most inspired my Scarborough’s Reading Rope (2001), which depicts elements of reading skills as individual strands woven
increasingly tighter together to form skilled reading. The individual strands include two sections including language comprehension and word recognition. Language comprehension incorporates background knowledge, vocabulary, language syntax, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge. Word recognition involves phonological awareness, decoding and sight recognition. An adaptation of Scarborough’s Reading Rope can be found in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Theoretical Framework Inspiration*

**Language Comprehension**
- Background Knowledge
- Vocabulary
- Language Syntax
- Verbal Reasoning
- Literacy Knowledge

**Word Recognition**
- Phonological Awareness
- Decoding
- Sight Recognition

*Note:* This figure is an adaptation of Scarborough’s Reading Rope (2001) which depicts elements of reading represented as strands woven increasingly tighter together to represent skilled reading.

As I conducted this background research on reading instruction, my personal experiences and positionality came into play. Being a first-grade teacher for ten years, I saw first-hand how vital the lower strands of Scarborough’s Reading Rope, or foundational word recognition skills
were for students in skilled reading. If students were missing these skills, or missing strands of this rope, they are missing key elements to be a skilled reader. Developing this inspiration further, I wanted to specifically understand the phonological awareness and decoding strands of the Reading Rope because these are skills taught in first-grade. This close examination of the strands within Scarborough’s Reading Rope is depicted in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Examining Scarborough’s Reading Rope*

![Diagram of Scarborough’s Reading Rope focusing on Word Recognition, Phonological Awareness, and Decoding.](image)

**Note:** This figure depicts “zooming in” on an adaptation of Scarborough’s Reading Rope (2001) which depicts elements of reading represented as strands woven increasingly tighter together to represent skilled reading, to focus closely on two skills including, phonological awareness and decoding.

Upon closely researching word recognition skills, I discovered Ehri’s Phases of Word Learning to provide a lens for this study. Ehri’s Phases of Word Learning was the primary theory used to guide the research, while Vygotsky’s theories supported and connected to the primary
theory. Utilizing these theories will provide a unique perspective in approaching phonics instruction research since approaches to teaching phonics are primarily behaviorist in nature (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). These theories will help guide the research to understand the experiences of the first-grade class with explicit phonics instruction, specifically instruction around phonological awareness and phoneme segmentation. Approaching this case study with this theoretical framework will enable the research to show the first-grade instructional experiences from a social lens within student participants (Vygotsky, 1978)

**Phases of Word Learning Theory**

Scarborough (2001) created the visual of “strands” (p. 1) to represent the components of skilled reading, first independent of one another, then gradually woven together. Using Gough & Tunmer’s (1986) Simple View of Reading, Scarborough’s Reading Rope is represented in lower strands, word recognition skills, and upper strands, encompassing language comprehension skills. These strands are woven together with increased automaticity and strategy to represent accurate and fluent reading. For the purposes of this study, the focus will zoom in on two of the lower word recognition strands: phonological awareness and decoding. With the visual of zooming in on Scarborough’s Reading Rope in mind, this study will use Ehri’s Phases of Word Learning Theory (Ehri, 2005; Ehri & McCormick, 1998) to support the research being conducted during this specific case’s timeline since the primary instructional focus will be phonological awareness and decoding.

Ehri’s Phases of Word Learning consists of five phases that are “characterized by learners’ understanding and use of the alphabetic system in their word reading” (Ehri & McCormick, 1998, p. 140). The four phases of this word learning theory are (1) the pre-alphabetic phase, (2) the partial-alphabetic phase, (3) the full-alphabetic phase, and (4) the
consolidated-alphabetic phase. These periods of word learning development may or may not intersect or be a prerequisite for the following phase. Each phase of this theory focuses on a specific aspect of word learning for learners to master.

Children in the first pre-alphabetic phase are typically preschool and kindergarten-aged and do not use alphabetic knowledge to read words. Children are primarily familiar with environmental print or graphics in this phase but cannot decode words. Letters are not linked to sounds in the pre-alphabetic phase, so students use non-phonetic visual cues when attempting to read words (Ehri & McCormick, 1998). When students are in this phase, they are considered to be nonreaders. However, pretend reading and guessing from pictures or context clues are common strategies seen during the pre-alphabetic phase.

The next phase, the partial alphabetic phase, typically consists of kindergarten and early first-grade students who use some of their alphabetic knowledge to read words. During this phase, researchers (Ehri, 1991, 1994; Ehri & Wilce, 1985, 1987; Mason, 1980) have concluded that children can decode some letter-sounds correspondences. Children in the partial alphabetic phase could present themselves by guessing words, misreading specific graphemes when decoding words, and reading words backward. Hard consonant sound knowledge and h, w, and y may also be missing. Digraph and blend knowledge may also be difficult for children in this phase. Decoding strategies for unfamiliar words are not accessible during this phase.

The full-alphabetic phase occurs once the first two phases are mastered and is the starting point for more complex reading skills. Children in this phase have an accessible awareness of letter-sound correspondences. They can decode familiar and unfamiliar words, with increased automaticity for decoding strategies and relating other words through analogy (i.e., cat and bat). This increased automaticity enables children to begin storing words by sight into memory

The consolidated alphabetic phase begins during the previous phase when children can assemble larger units of letter-sound relationships (Ehri & McCormick, 1998). This phase encompasses more mature aspects of word learning, including prefixes, suffixes, root words, onsets, rimes, syllables, common word patterns, and linguistic origins (Ehri & McCormick, 1998). Children’s sight word vocabulary will continue to grow within this phase with increased automaticity. More complex decoding strategies and reading words by analogy also increase in this phase (Ehri, 1991, 1994; Juel, 1983).

Additionally, Chall (1983) initially coined a fifth phase as the automatic phase due to the speed and automaticity of reading unfamiliar and familiar words. Various strategies are used while most words are recognized by sight on an unconscious level through “automatic, fluent word recognition [which] frees the reader's attention to focus on text meaning” (Ehri & McCormick, 1998, p. 157).

The Phases of Word Learning (Ehri, 2005; Ehri & McCormick, 1998) as a theoretical framework helps frame the context of the first-grade classroom experiences during explicit phonics instruction. Students should range within these phases during the timeline of this study. After classroom observations, interviews, and data analysis, coding all of the data is essential, as well as inquiring about the relationship with which phase those students are in and how this may affect their experiences during explicit phonics instruction. For example, if a student is still in the pre-alphabetic phase and the class is learning about a specific suffix, this may negatively impact that student’s experience since it is outside the zone of their proximal development. In contrast, if a student arrives in first grade already in the automatic phase, and the class is learning letter-
sounds correspondences within the partial-alphabetic phase, how might their advanced knowledge affect that student’s experience? These two examples are often seen within one classroom on any given day in a typical first-grade classroom, so the research will aim to examine the first-grade phonics experience to determine what interventions are accessible and used with each phase of word learning.

**Social Constructivism**

The theoretical perspective, behaviorism, emphasizes observable behavior changes (Watson, 1924). Behaviorism has influenced reading instruction through the ways reading tasks are comprehended, the scope and sequence of reading instruction, the invention of reading materials, and the assessment of reading skills (Skinner, 1986). Explicit and direct instruction can be linked to the behaviorist perspective by focusing on children’s specific reading skills (Engelmann et al., 1988). Specifically, phonics instruction is direct and explicit, with the teacher being responsible for the student’s learning. Despite explicit phonics instruction being heavily based on a behaviorist perspective, approaching this study from a Social Constructivist perspective will allow student visibility in a traditionally teacher-centered area.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a key concept to Vygotsky’s (1978) Social Constructivism theory, which refers to the parameters in which students can independently learn, learn with support, and do tasks that are too far out of reach even with support. This support can be various levels of assistance like “clues, reminders, encouragement, breaking down the problem into steps, providing an example, or anything else that allows the student to grow in independence as a learner” (Slavin, 1997, p. 48). Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) introduced the term scaffolding as a reference to the various levels of support during learning. Bruner (1978) defined scaffolding as “the steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom in carrying out some
task so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill she is in the process of acquiring” (p. 19). While Vygotsky did not use the term scaffolding, it is not uncommon for these terms to be linked together. Despite this link, scaffolding and various learning supports were not a focus within this specific research study.

While considering the Phases of Word Learning (Ehri, 2005; Ehri & McCormick, 1998), it is essential to use Vygotsky’s concept of and zone of proximal development to support those phases. For example, if the students within this case enter the classroom within the pre-alphabetic phase and the lessons are geared to learners in the full-alphabetic phase, this may be considered outside the student’s zone of proximal development. The researcher may question what zones or phases students may need to be in to access the content compared to what zone or phase they are currently in. The researcher will use both theories to guide the classroom observation and the teacher interview to see how it is being addressed if students are missing or beyond the foundational skills being taught. Not every student will be in the same phase or zone of proximal development, so therefore, these theories will guide the research on how this affects the overall experience for students and their learning of foundational skills.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I highlighted that the deep-rooted history of the reading wars dates back to the mid-nineteenth century with Horace Mann’s perspective regarding letters. Throughout time, the supreme method of early reading instruction swayed from one approach to the other and back again. This has left teachers searching for ways to meet the needs of their students. With the latest topic in the debate, the Science of Reading Movement is requiring schools and teachers to look closely at their foundational skills practices, such as phonics instruction. In this qualitative case study, I utilized Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development Theory in
relationship with Ehri’s (2005; Ehri & McCormick, 1998) Phases of Word Learning Theory to understand how the members of a first-grade class experience phonics in the real classroom environment. In the next chapter, I will discuss the methodology, and the study procedures.
Chapter III: Methodology

In the previous chapters, I discussed the buzz around the science of reading movement and the importance of specific aspects of structured literacy, such as phonological awareness and explicit phonics instruction. In this chapter, I will explain the qualitative case study design that I applied in this research study to understand the experiences of a first-grade class with explicit phonics instruction. In addition, I will explain the instrumentation and study procedures. There were two phases to collect qualitative data through observations and interviews to fully understand the experiences of first-grade students and their teacher as they engage with explicit phonics instruction in the classroom setting. Phase I included observation of explicit phonics instruction in the first-grade classroom over the course of six weeks while Phase 2 consisted of individual semi-structured interviews with student participants and their teacher about their experiences with phonics instruction. Once Phases I and II were completed, I coded the data for themes using inductive coding to enable the participants’ experiences to arise from the data. Then, I compared the coded data with student scores and curriculum materials to answer the research questions.

Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative research uses an “inquiry approach used for exploring and understanding a central phenomenon” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 627). To learn about this central phenomenon, the researcher collects “detailed views of participants in the form of words” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 627). In qualitative research, the researcher analyzes the data from these detailed views and looks for patterns or themes. An additional characteristic of qualitative research includes an inductive process which is when “researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively” (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). A
qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study because it was essential to collect the detailed views of student participants regarding their experiences with explicit phonics instruction within the classroom. I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with participants to collect qualitative data or detailed views of their experiences. In addition, I also coded the data using inductive coding to allow the themes to arise from the data. With these characteristics of qualitative research in mind, this was the most appropriate approach for this study to understand individual experiences through inquiry.

**Case Study Methodology**

This research study used a qualitative case study design, implementing and analyzing interviews, observations, and corresponding student data to tell the experiences of a first-grade class with explicit phonics instruction. Stake (1995) described case study as “the study of the partularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). The Stakian perspective allows for a flexible design that enables the researcher to determine when data collection and analysis should begin. This point of view differs from Yin’s (1994) perspective, which calls for a structured design.

In this research study, the case was the single first-grade class and how they experienced the specific activities of explicit instruction in phonological awareness and phoneme segmentation. Stake (1995) emphasized case studies to be more flexible in nature and defined the case as an integrated system that allows people and programs to be clear potential cases. Adopting Stake’s (1995) qualitative case study approach in this research study will allow for the flexibility needed in a true classroom environment and the appreciation of “the uniqueness and complexity of [the case], its embeddedness and interaction with its context” (p. 16). Specifically,
this study aimed to examine this particular first-grade class’s unique and complex experiences and their interactions with the phonics curriculum and instruction.

**Research Questions**

The primary research question of this study was: *In what ways do members of a first-grade class experience explicit phonics instruction?* The following sub-questions guided this study which are directly linked to the participating teacher, students, and the specific skills addressed:

1. In what ways do first-grade students experience explicit phonics instruction?
2. In what ways does a first-grade teacher engage in the delivery of explicit phonics instruction?
3. How do first-grade students apply explicitly taught phonological awareness skills?
4. How do first-grade students apply explicitly taught phoneme segmentation skills?

**Figure 3**

*Study Design: Qualitative Case Study*

*Note:* This figure illustrates the design of this study.
Instrumentation

This study used several instruments to collect data, including observation notes taken during explicit phonics instruction with a district-mandated phonics curriculum. Semi-structured interview data collection allowed for participants’ experiences with phonics to emerge naturally. I embedded phonics tasks within the student semi-structured interviews to engage the learners and note their transfer of the phonics skills taught in this time period to an alternative task. Evidence from lessons, such as student worksheets provided information about how students engaged with phonics instruction.

Observation Notes

I collected observation notes during 45-minute, whole-group phonics lessons once a week for 6 weeks. The phonics lessons observed are laid out in Figure 4. Using the teacher’s guides for each lesson, I noted how the teacher engaged with and implemented the phonics instruction. For example, I recorded the language that she used and the sequence in which she taught the individual parts of the lesson. I also recorded where the teacher deviated from the lesson plans in language, sequence or activities. While collecting classroom observation notes regarding students, the protocol included only data regarding the teacher’s interpretations of the phonics curriculum and the students’ responses who provided assent and parental consent. I noted how students were responding and engaging with the phonics instruction. Once the observation notes were complete, I drew inspiration from phenomenology with its process of restorying when transcribing the observation data. Restorying is a process of reordering events in the chronological sequence in which they took place (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). This process applied to my study and the observation notes, because I noticed that the teacher changed the suggested order of activities within the scripted curriculum. I recorded the order in which she
implemented the instructional activities and which she omitted. When transcribing the observation notes, I then could restory the observation notes by rewriting the notes to mimic the flow of the lesson that the teacher implemented. This allowed me to compare the scripted phonics curriculum and the implementation of the curriculum.

**Figure 4**

*Explicit Phonics Instruction: Lesson Schedule*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Week 2</th>
<th>Week 3</th>
<th>Week 4</th>
<th>Week 5</th>
<th>Week 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lesson 46: The Letter X</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lesson 48: Digraph sh</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lesson 53: Final v, Spelling with Final ve</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lesson 58: Final, stable, syllable -tle, -gle</strong></td>
<td>Lesson 61: Vowel y (part 1)</td>
<td>Lesson 66: Compound Words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 50: Assessment</td>
<td>Lesson 55: Assessment</td>
<td>Lesson 56: Assessment</td>
<td>Lesson 60: Combination er</td>
<td>Lesson 63: Trigraph -igh</td>
<td>Lesson 68: Digraph ai</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* This figure depicts the phonics lessons taught in the first-grade during the six-week period of the study. Lessons in bold font are the lessons that I observed and recorded observations notes.

**Student Task-Based Interview**

Students were interviewed 1-on-1 after 6 weeks of explicit phonics instruction outside school hours for about 20 minutes each. I completed all interviews in person and audio recorded the complete interviews. During this interview, I asked students interview questions that I created around their experiences with learning how to read (See Appendix H). I embedded these questions within tasks directly correlated with skills taught during explicit phonics instruction.
Students completed the tasks to the best of their abilities. The first task included phoneme segmentation using a Pop-it toy, where students were given a word and would isolate each sound by popping individual bubbles on the toy. The second task included a familiar first-grade literacy center called Spelligator, where students were given a word and would use letter tiles to spell it on the back of the alligator toy. The final task included giving the students the *Words Their Way* Primary Spelling Inventory (Bear et al., 2011). For this task, I dictated a list of fifteen words individually and students were required to use paper and pencil to spell each word, similar to a typical spelling test.

**Teacher Interview**

I interviewed the teacher in person for 45 minutes outside of school hours following the six weeks of phonics instruction. I created the interview questions for the teacher based on the lesson observations and understanding the debate around various reading instructional approaches, such as science of reading and balanced literacy. I aimed to understand the teacher's point of view in this particular case while engaging with the phonics curriculum and implementing explicit phonics instruction (See Appendix G).

**Setting**

This study took place in a public elementary school in an urban city in the northeastern region of the United States. The school serves about 500 students from pre-k through eighth grade, with a total of 42 registered first-grade students in general education. The school sits within a neighborhood that varies in socioeconomic status, race, and cultural identities. During this time of this study, the science of reading movement remained very popular. This district emphasized explicit phonics instruction and foundational skills in the primary grades and was in
the last year of a phonics program that the teachers had used for a number of years. The following year, teachers were getting a brand-new phonics and reading program to implement.

The first-grade classroom in this study was on the first floor of a very large school building in the inner city. Upon entering the classroom, a carpet with colorful primary colors was positioned in front of a Smartboard. The traditional fluorescent lights were off, while lamps and natural light from the six large windows lit the classroom. There were tables grouped together in primary colors with chairs that matched. Student work filled the walls around the room and was a very warm, calming classroom environment where students seemed to feel safe and welcome.

**Purposeful Sampling**

In purposeful sampling, “researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019, p. 206). In this study, I used purposeful sampling to select both the school and grade participants. I selected this specific school due to the location and variety of student populations. I selected this school because I noticed how the primary grade teachers, in this case, shifted their instructional practices to meet the foundational and individual needs of their students. The teachers noticed how students had greater success in reading after putting emphasis on explicit phonics instruction that met their specific needs. For example, some students needed more practice in segmenting the sounds in words. Therefore, the teachers gave those students different opportunities to practice this skill.

**Case and Participants**

When defining the case within a case study, Stake (1995) agreed with Louis Smith’s (1978) definition regarding the case as a “specific, a complex, functioning thing” and a “integrated system [that] has a boundary and working parts” (p. 2). The integrated system or case
for this study included members of a first-grade class learning phonics through explicit instruction.

The participants in this study included seven first-grade students currently enrolled in first grade at the Target School in the one first-grade class receiving explicit phonics instruction, along with the teacher of the one first-grade class. I began the recruitment process by emailing the first-grade teacher of this particular case. Once the first-grade teacher was in agreement and consented to participate, I distributed a flyer to the teacher of the first-grade class to send home in student folders to all parents/guardians of children assigned to the class. I also provided a digital copy of the flyer to post on the class’s digital mode of communication. Both the paper and digital flyers were the same document, explaining the research study in detail, including risks, benefits, and necessary participation information. Along with this flyer, I provided consent forms to the teacher to send home with students to give to parents/guardians. After reading the information flyer, parents/guardians signed and returned consent forms to the first-grade teacher, which then were given to me. Ten days after the initial flyer was sent home to all first-grade families, eight signed consent forms from parents were returned back to school, and data collection was able to begin. Any non-participants (those who did not have consent or did not assent to participate) were excluded from all data collected in observations, interviews, and benchmark assessments data retrieval.

Internal and External Validity

Qualitative researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 1998) engage in various practices to establishing validity within their research (Creswell & Miller, 2020). Examples of these practices that I implemented in this qualitative case study include triangulation and thick, rich descriptions. Triangulation is “a systematic process of sorting
through the data to find common themes or categories” (Creswell & Miller, 2020, p. 127). Stake (1995) noted four types of triangulation including data source triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation and methodological triangulation. The study implemented data source triangulation which is the use of multiple data sources to aid in a comprehensive understanding of the data. In addition, in this study, I implemented the use of thick, rich descriptions. The purpose of thick, rich descriptions of the setting, participants and themes is to establish credibility with the readers of the research study (Creswell & Miller, 2020).

**Internal Validity**

In the effort to maintain internal validity of this study, I triangulated the data to establish internal validity and reliability of the findings. The three sources of data included: observation notes, interview data, and quantitative curriculum-based measurement data from the Target District. The observation notes were notes that derived from my personal observations during the explicit phonics instruction of the classroom. The interview data was audio-recorded and highlighted the perspectives of those being interviewed. I viewed the quantitative data from the Target District in a qualitative way to understanding the experiences of the students, rather than in a comparative or evaluative way. Collecting all three of these data sources in different formats, settings and from varied perspectives allowed me to establish internal validity and reliability of the findings.

**External Validity**

In the effort to maintain external validity of this study, I provided detailed descriptions of the setting, the participants and identified themes. I also ensured the protection and confidentiality of all participants within each description. I also took measures to acknowledge the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the first-grade student participants. In an effort to limit
bias, I extended the participation invitation to all 20 students for the study. The parents/guardians of eight students consented while the remaining declined participation or did not respond. Since this research study is a case study design, the results are not generalizable beyond this teacher and these students in this class, as a result of the complex and individual experiences captures. Replication is possible using the methodology, instruments, and procedures.

**Researcher’s Bias**

I acknowledge my bias as a researcher regarding being a first-grade teacher for ten years. I note that I have experience with the phonics curriculum that was implemented in this study. To limit my bias, I took measures to remove any personal connection or opinions for all questioning. I triangulated all data collected and provided thick descriptions as measures to protect the study’s validity and limit bias.

**Procedures**

I used Stake’s (1995) case study perspective due to the flexible nature of the design. This allowed me to map out the study based on the needs of the first-grade class outside of the study. Figure 5 shows the flexible plan I followed throughout the study.
**Figure 5**

*Study Procedures*

Note: The figure represents the study procedures used within this study in a flow-chart format.

Before beginning Phase I of this study, the classroom teacher administered required district-standardized curriculum-based measurement assessments to all students using the Renaissance Star program to identify a baseline for student participants. Assessments assessed students’ prior knowledge of phonemes and decoding skills through one-minute assessments of Phoneme Segmentation and Expressive Nonsense Word Fluency. All students at this site participate in this assessment regardless of their participation in this study, as a part of regular classroom instruction.
Phase I

Phase I of this case study began with students engaging in six weeks of typical, first-grade explicit, systematic phonics instruction taught by their teacher. The phonics instruction received was in alignment with the Target District expectations, scope and sequence. Students participated in daily whole group lessons for 45 minutes. All lessons included explicit instruction in phonological awareness, alphabetic principle, and phoneme segmentation. I observed five lessons throughout the six weeks. I took notes on the classroom environment, the curriculum materials used for the lesson, observations of the student and teacher participants’ participatory behaviors and actions during the lessons, and observations of specific student applications related to using or applying phonics skills. I did not include any non-participants in the documentation.

Following the explicit phonics instruction lessons and observations, the teacher administered required district-standardized curriculum-based measurement assessments to all students using the Renaissance Star program to identify a benchmark for each of the student participants. Assessments reassessed students’ acquired knowledge of phonemes and phonological awareness through one-minute assessments of Phoneme Segmentation and Expressive Nonsense Word Fluency. All students participated in this assessment regardless of their participation in this study as part of their regular classroom instruction.

Phase II

After the baseline assessment, six weeks of explicit phonics instruction, and the benchmark assessment, I began Phase II of this study, which included teacher and student individual interviews. First, I contacted the teacher using the preferred method of contact to set up an audio-recorded interview outside of school hours. The teacher engaged in a narrative
interview with me, asking about their experiences with phonics instruction and how they believe their students engage with the skills being taught. Then, I contacted students' parent/guardians by the preferred method of contact provided on informed consent to set up an audio-recorded interview outside of school hours. Parents/guardians accompanied their child to the interview location. Parents/guardians did not participate in the interview. Students participated in a narrative, task-based interview with me asking about their experiences during phonics instruction while engaging in entertaining phonics activities to see how they are applying their skills with phonological awareness and phoneme segmentation. Following each interview, I transcribed the interview data and coded for themes using inductive coding.

**Analysis and Coding Procedures**

After each interview, I transcribed the audio-recording of the interview and used Dedoose to aid in coding and theme identification. For this case study, I implemented the inductive coding methods. This means that I did not begin coding with premeditated codes or themes in mind. I allowed the narrative interview data of the teacher and students to help me understand their individual experiences. Following coding, I analyzed the commonalities to identify themes across the multiple perspectives.

**Coding**

While coding, I used inductive coding to allow the codes and themes to arise from the data instead of approaching the data with any preconceived notions or biases (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This analytical approach allows the student and teacher narratives and experiences to emerge from the data. I also implemented the first and second cycle coding method (Saldaña, 2009). As I read through the data during the first cycle, I coded for larger, overarching commonalities. During the second cycle, I coded for small, sub-categories
throughout the data. Once I completing the coding, I was able to notice similar trends and identify themes.

**Identifying Themes**

After analyzing and coding the data, I looked for specific themes from the individual experiences. I included thick descriptions and direct student quotes to highlight student voices and experiences within the findings. Approaching the coding process aware of any bias, allowed me to be more aware of the authentic data from the participants as I identified common themes and subthemes across perspectives.

**Generalizability**

I conducted this case study within one elementary school in the northeastern region of the United States which limits the results to this specific case. The small sample size of participants also limits the generalizability of the results. While the results are not able to be generalized, this study can be replicated for other regions and populations using the outlined methodology, procedures, and instruments.

**Informed Consent and Protection of Human Subjects**

To recruit student participants for this case study, the classroom teacher sent home a flyer and an informed consent form to all students in her class. To confirm their participation and provide their consent, parents/guardians wrote their name in the statement stating they understood the purposed of the study and offered consent. Parents/guardians also provided a signature and date. I also asked students for assent before each interview.

**Confidentiality**

The confidentiality of all participants remains an important priority in this research study. I ensured to follow several procedures to protect each participant and their personal information.
All documents related to this study including consent forms, observation notes, interview transcripts, materials, and data were stored on my password-protected computer in my home. I redacted all participants names from any data. I also de-identified the data by assigning each participant a pseudonym, that I used throughout the study. All data and materials related to this study will be destroyed three years following the completion of the study.

**Risks**

There were minimal risks to participants in this study. Teacher and student participants may have experienced mild discomfort with responding to interview questions regarding phonics and reading instruction. In an effort to mitigate this discomfort, participants were advised they could skip any questions that made them for uncomfortable or stop participation at any time. Confidentiality was also a potential risk within this study. To avoid the possible loss of confidentiality, the participants were assigned a pseudonym. All identifiable information was removed from the data and their name was replaced with the pseudonym. Participants’ names were not used; the name of the school and school district were not identified; data is stored on a password-protected computer that is stored in a locked cabinet in my home when not in use.

**Benefits**

There are no direct benefits to the participants of this study as student participants would engage in this curriculum and testing regardless of their participation in the study. However, this study benefits the Target District and the larger community as a whole to understand how their students are engaging and applying the foundational reading skills they are being taught. This study will aid the Target District in seeing what curricular and instructional aspects are working well for their first-grade students, and what more they might need. In addition, this study provided information on the real classroom application of explicit phonics instruction.
Specifically, many studies of phonics instruction are conducted outside of authentic learning environments (Ehri, 2020). Thus, in examining the application of explicit phonics instruction through students’ voices in an authentic classroom environment, results from this study aimed to capture the lived experiences of participants who are engaging in this type of instruction, similar to those in this particular environment.

Summary

For this research study, I utilized a qualitative case study design. Within Phase I of the study, I observed one first-grade class as they engaged in their typical explicit phonics instruction. During those observations, I took notes regarding the implementation of the curriculum by the teacher as well as the engagement and participation of the students. During Phase II of the study, I interviewed the teacher and student participants. The format of the teacher interview was semi-structured and narrative. The format of the student interviews was semi-structured and task-based. During the student interviews, I asked questions about general phonics knowledge embedded with phonics games and tasks.
Chapter 4: Results

With the current emphasis on structured literacy and the importance of foundational skills in the early grades, I wanted to know more about this specific instructional time in an actual first-grade classroom. This study examined what happens in a natural classroom environment during phonics instruction. I wanted to understand how this specific case engaged with explicit and systematic phonics instruction and how they could apply various skills outside of the instructional time.

For this qualitative case study, the case is defined as the classroom and its inhabitants. The teacher and her students who had permission to participate in this study are the classroom inhabitants. In this section, I will describe the classroom environment and provide background information on the teacher and her students. In the following sections, I will review and analyze the results from the data collected.

The Classroom

The classroom at the center of this case study is a large, welcoming space on the first floor of a century-old building. Upon entering the classroom, a large carpet with individual squares in rows of primary colors faces the SMARTboard and a vibrant orange accent wall. Whiteboards on both sides of the SMARTboard display the daily schedule, calendar, and norms in colorful print. In the far corner of the classroom, there is a small, cozy classroom library filled with picture books in brightly-colored bins. The wall opposite the classroom door has large windows, allowing tremendous natural light to flow into the space. The overhead typical fluorescent lights always remain off, while the natural light and cheerful lamps around the room fill the space with soft light. The teacher’s table sits in front of the grand windows, with student tables grouped together around the room. The walls display various anchor charts and vibrant
areas of student work. The classroom exudes love and may serve as a space where students would feel comfortable and safe.

The Teacher

Ms. Wilson is a passionate teacher who has taught for sixteen years, all of which were at Target School. Over that time, she has spent ten years teaching in kindergarten, five years in first grade, and one year in third grade. She holds both a Master’s degree in Education and a reading specialist certification. Ms. Wilson prides herself on doing what she perceives is best for her students, including conducting independent research and professional development in her teaching areas. In the past, she has received a distinguished teaching award for her excellence in promoting rigor in learning. She was selected for this award because she fosters intellect and character development in her students. Ms. Wilson appears to be a fun-loving teacher who loves her students. She is a dedicated member of the school community.

The Students

Eight students from Ms. Wilson’s first-grade class participated in the qualitative case study. The students represented various cultural, racial, and academic backgrounds. Two Asian students, one Black student, one Hispanic student, two White students, and two Mixed Race students participated. This diversity provided various perspectives to inform this study and understand different experiences with explicit phonics instruction.

Grace is a timid girl in the first-grade classroom. She is hardworking and has excellent attendance. Grace loves to learn and be engaged in lessons. In the fall, she tested at the intervention level in Phoneme Segmentation and at or above the benchmark level in Expressive Nonsense Words for the Star Curriculum-Based Measures.
Steven is a hardworking student who enjoys learning. He can be very hard on himself and is motivated to answer questions correctly. His pride is evident when he participates in class. In the fall, he tested at the intervention level in Phoneme Segmentation and the on-watch level in Expressive Nonsense Words for the Star Curriculum-Based Measures.

Casey has a sweet, bubbly personality. She is an unmotivated student who is disinterested in phonics but thrives in one-on-one instruction. Math is her strongest academic area. In the fall, she tested at the intervention level in both Phoneme Segmentation and Expressive Nonsense Words for the Star Curriculum-Based Measurements.

Chloe is a highly motivated and focused student. She works hard and is contemplative. She loves to analyze and dig deeper into the content. In the fall, she tested at or above the benchmark level in both Phoneme Segmentation and Expressive Nonsense Words for the Star Curriculum-Based Measurements.

Evelyn loves learning and is enthusiastic about phonics instruction. She is analytical and engaged in the classroom, with active attendance and participation. In the fall, she tested at or above the benchmark level in Phoneme Segmentation and the on-watch level for Expressive Nonsense Words for the Star Curriculum-Based Measures.

Aaron is highly inattentive and has difficulty focusing on a single task for an extended period of time. He is sometimes non-compliant with participating and sometimes does not recall the information across subject areas. Otherwise, he is a happy and funny student. In the fall, he tested at the intervention level in both Phoneme Segmentation and Expressive Nonsense Words for the Star Curriculum-Based Measurements.

Faith thrives in smaller settings and is extrinsically motivated. While she rarely participates in whole-group instruction, she often follows directions and completes tasks. In the
fall, she tested at the intervention level in both Phoneme Segmentation and Expressive Nonsense Words for the Star Curriculum-Based Measurements.

Jacob is a high-performing student who excels across content areas. He is in constant motion and can be preoccupied with other thoughts and actions while learning. He often makes mistakes by working too quickly. He frequently has to be prompted to participate but usually gets the correct answer. In the fall, he tested at or above the benchmark level in both Phoneme Segmentation and Expressive Nonsense Words for the Star Curriculum-Based Measurements.

A Case Study of a First-Grade Classroom’s Experiences with Explicit Phonics Instruction

In this section, I will analyze and interpret the data collected throughout this qualitative case study regarding first-grade experiences with explicit phonics instruction. The overarching research question of this study was: *In what ways do members of a first-grade class experience explicit phonics instruction?* The following sub-questions guided the study:

1. In what ways does a first-grade teacher engage in the delivery of explicit phonics instruction?
2. In what ways do first-grade students experience explicit phonics instruction?
3. How do first-grade students apply explicitly taught phonological awareness skills?
4. How do first-grade students apply explicitly taught phonics skills?

In the following sections, I will review each phase of the qualitative case study, from data collection through analysis. I will also link the data points and resulting themes to the research sub-questions, as seen in Table 1, to answer the overarching research question.
Table 1

Data Collection Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Data Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>In what ways does a first-grade teacher engage in the delivery of explicit phonics instruction?</strong></td>
<td>Teacher’s Balance of Expectations and Personal Experience</td>
<td>Teacher Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Balanced Literacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Science of Reading</td>
<td>Teacher Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Misconceptions, Social Media Money-Makers</td>
<td>Teacher Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s Use of Professional Discretion: Changes in Lesson Sequencing</td>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>Observation of Phonics Instruction/Teacher Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom Management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adapting to Student Needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In what ways do first-grade students experience explicit phonics instruction?</strong></td>
<td>First Graders’ Definition of Phonics</td>
<td>Student Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accurate Definition of Phonics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inaccurate Definition of Phonics</td>
<td>Student Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional Awareness</td>
<td>Student Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Graders’ Metacognition Regarding Phonics Instruction</td>
<td>Awareness of Phonics-Reading Connection</td>
<td>Student Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do first-grade students apply explicitly taught phonological awareness skills?</strong></td>
<td>First-Grade Students’ Application of Phonological Awareness Instruction</td>
<td>Student Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pop-it Activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do first-grade students apply explicitly taught phonics skills?</strong></td>
<td>First-Grade Students’ Application of Explicit Phonics Instruction</td>
<td>Student Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spelligator Activity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary Spelling Inventory</td>
<td>Student Interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: This table provides an overview of data collected throughout this qualitative case study in relation to the research questions.

During Phase I of this case study, which occurred over six weeks, I observed five phonics lessons in the classroom with the participating teacher, Ms. Wilson, and her class, which included the eight participating students: Grace, Steven, Casey, Chloe, Evelyn, Aaron, Faith, and Jacob. I observed how these members of the first-grade class engaged with the phonics content in
this specific environment. I noted where students were participating and engaged in the lesson, as well as points in the lesson where Ms. Wilson followed the script or modified the content. Through the observations, I answered sub-research questions 1 and 2 regarding how students experience phonics instruction and how the teacher delivers the phonics instruction. I could see how students actively and enthusiastically responded to their teacher. In this case, classroom culture and routines, along with the predictability of the lesson, played a significant role in the experiences of the lesson. All students were familiar with Ms. Wilson’s lesson development and the sequence of each lesson section laid out in Table 2. There was only one behavior redirection throughout the five observed lessons. Based on these observations, the experiences with phonics instruction for this particular case were positive as a result of the emphasis placed on classroom routines, procedures, and culture of learning.
Table 2

**Curriculum Overview**

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Alphabet Activity</td>
<td>Activities that require the students to work with the alphabet by reciting the alphabet, alphabetizing, playing games with the alphabet, and learning about accents and syllabication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Phonological/Phonemic Awareness</td>
<td>Practice with phonological awareness skills (words, syllables, onsets, rimes, and phonemes) and phonemic awareness skills (individual sounds in words).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Daily Letter and Sound Review</td>
<td>Visual flashcards to review previously learned letter-sound correspondences, sight words, and affixes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Spelling Review</td>
<td>Written review of previously learned sounds/spellings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>New Increment</td>
<td>New skills focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Handwriting</td>
<td>Written application of new skill (only applicable when individual letters are introduced)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Spelling with Letter Tiles</td>
<td>Application of new skill to allow children to spell words with physical letter tiles with uppercase and lowercase letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>New Cards for [letter/skill]</td>
<td>Flash cards that align with new skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Board work</td>
<td>Students practice coding and reading words/phrases containing previously taught skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Worksheet</td>
<td>Spelling practice with words containing the new skill and decoding words with new and previously taught skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Various applications and reinforcement of phonics skills are meant for practice at home. This includes passages, comprehension questions, and high-frequency words.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: This table provides an overview of each section included in the provided phonics curriculum, Saxon Phonics.*

Following the six weeks of phonics instruction and five observations, I interviewed Ms. Wilson in a semi-structured interview. The interview answered the first research question regarding how members of this first-grade class experience explicit phonics instruction. The semi-structured narrative format of the interviews highlighted Ms. Wilson's perspectives as the first-grade class's teacher.
**Teacher Delivery of Explicit Phonics Instruction**

In Research Sub-Question 1, I asked, “In what ways does a first-grade teacher engage in the delivery of explicit phonics instruction?” I answered this question through classroom observations of explicit phonics instruction and the semi-structured interview with Ms. Wilson. I understood how she engaged with the provided curriculum and influenced her students’ experiences during explicit phonics instruction. Ms. Wilson’s motivation surrounding the topic of phonics instruction played a significant role in her engagement with the curriculum. She also used her discretion to modify the given curriculum to meet the various needs of the students in her class.

**Teacher’s Balance of Expectations and Personal Experience**

Reading instruction remains a topic of discussion in educational conversations (Cassidy, 2021). With terms such as Balanced Literacy, Science of Reading, and structured literacy making headlines continually, it can be difficult for practitioners to understand what works best for their students and specific classrooms. Fountas & Pinnell (1996) defined balanced literacy as a “philosophical orientation that assumes that reading and writing achievement are developed through instruction and support in multiple environments using various approaches that differ by level of teacher support and child control” (p. 27). The Reading League defines the science of reading as “a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing” (p. 6). Structured literacy is an instructional approach that includes the following key features: explicit, systematic, and sequential teaching of literacy from the phoneme level through text structure, cumulative practice and review, student-teacher interaction, carefully chosen examples and non-examples, decodable texts and corrective feedback (Spear-Swerling, 2018). These terms are relevant to this case study because Ms. Wilson
began her career using the Balanced Literacy approach. Over time she gained the personal experience to understand that different students benefited from different instructional approaches, such as structured literacy. In the following sections, I expand on the relationship between how Ms. Wilson balanced the expectations from her administration while doing what was best for her students.

**Within Balanced Literacy.** Throughout her career, Ms. Wilson witnessed the fluctuation in reading instructional practices in foundational grades. When she began teaching in the Target District, balanced literacy was a directive for literacy instruction. In recalling her experiences with balanced literacy, Ms. Wilson expressed:

I didn’t hear the term balanced literacy until I came to the [Target District]. It wasn’t a term we used when I was in college. There was a focus on getting your kids to love to read and make the environment really comfortable and fun. There was a focus on leveled readers - which, looking back on it now, we were just teaching [students] how to guess the text, whereas they could read one text really well, but that doesn’t mean they could apply that knowledge to other texts. They had to use pictures, look at the beginning sounds of the word, and try to see which one made sense (Teacher Interview).

Here Ms. Wilson is acknowledging that she never heard the term, balanced literacy, during her teacher preparation program or prior to working with the Target District. When she began her teaching career, this approach was new to her. She also recalls key elements of the balanced approach, including instilling a comfortable reading environment, reading levels, and teaching students how to read texts on a particular level. In recalling these practices, Ms. Wilson noted how these practices worked for some students, but she expressed that she knew something was missing for her students. For example, she referenced a specific assessment, “There was one
particular text where [the students] had to read the word ‘chair,’ and they all said ‘couch’ because we did not learn phonics in a systematic way” (Teacher Interview). Ms. Wilson’s references to previous literacy practices and her realization of why they did not work for her students is evidence of how she is using her personal experience to reflect upon her teaching practices and adjust as necessary. She was aware that something was not working for her students with this specific instructional practice and identified that something needed to change about the way she was teaching reading within the balanced model.

Ms. Wilson used her personal experiences to identify elements of Balanced Literacy that did not work for her students. She used a critical lens to analyze practices that were not fulfilling her students’ needs. Now that Ms. Wilson knew what was not working, now she needed to find other approaches that met the needs of her students.

**Within Science of Reading.** Ms. Wilson first encountered the Science of Reading at the height of a global pandemic, virtual teaching, and the collective frustration of students struggling to read. When asked how she has interpreted the Science of Reading, she explained:

> Our brains have a systematic way of learning how to read. I think ‘cracking the code’ is a really good term for people to understand what it is. My misconception, in the beginning, was that it was just phonics, but now I realize it’s how our brains comprehend things and how all the different components [of reading] come together - That this is not just a theory; it’s actually proven by scientific research (Teacher Interview).

This way of thinking provides evidence that Ms. Wilson is a teacher digging deeper into what the term Science of Reading implies. Just as she used a critical lens with Balanced Literacy, she is doing the same with the Science of Reading. She notes that our brains have a systematic way of learning how to read, followed by the metaphor of cracking the code. When using the word
systematic, she is referring to the method of teaching reading by connecting letters and sounds in a clear sequence. When using the metaphor “cracking the code,” she is referring to the idea of letters and sounds representing “the code,” and students’ learning those correspondences representing the “cracking.” These references align with structured literacy practices of explicit and systematic phonics instruction (Spear-Swerling, 2018). She went on to recognize that there was an initial misconception about the Science of Reading as having a primary focus on phonics. Her acknowledgment that the goal of reading is comprehension shows that she is aware of the objective of reading and that phonics remains one component.

**Misconceptions and Social Media Money-Makers.** Social media greatly influenced the rise of the Science of Reading movement and how teachers absorbed and distributed content (Thomas, 2022). Ms. Wilson explained that there are differing perspectives regarding the Science of Reading movement, “I think some people have been hesitant because they think it’s just another trend that we’re being introduced to, and [the term] has become trendy” (Teacher Interview). Here, Ms. Wilson refers to researchers from differing perspectives, educators, administrators, and publishers who are skeptical of the term Science of Reading and its meaning. Authors such as Lucy Calkins (2020) expressed their discontent with “owning” the term science. Shanahan (2020) also cautioned against using the term Science of Reading interchangeably with phonics. Ms. Wilson acknowledged these misconceptions around its meaning and that various practitioners are skeptical of the term Science of Reading. Here, she demonstrated that she is aware of the tensions in the reading instructional environment.

Ms. Wilson continued on to reference social media platforms and online marketplaces that further these misconceptions, “People who sell things online are using [Science of Reading] like a buzz word for them to make some money. It’s kind of frustrating to see those resources
when sometimes it's not even accurate” (Teacher Interview). She recognizes that various publishers are using the term Science of Reading in order to make a profit by appealing to educators trying to help their students, but she expressed her frustration with seeing products labeled as “following the Science of Reading” to profit even though they do not align with structured literacy.

Ms. Wilson acknowledged the differing interpretations of the term Science of Reading. She views the Science of Reading movement critically and understands that there are misconceptions regarding its definition. She is also aware of the implications of those misconceptions by analyzing products that claim to meet this specific standard of structured literacy.

**Teacher’s Use of Professional Discretion**

Throughout the school day, teachers face countless decisions regarding their classes (Blackley, 2021). Many of those decisions surround autonomy and accountability in line with curriculums (Ormond, 2016). For example, the teacher, in this case study, faced challenges with the choice of following a scripted phonics curriculum exactly or modifying it to meet the needs of the students in front of them as the teacher saw fit. Boote (2007) stated that “a teacher has adequate professional discretion for a particular task when that teacher has the ability to make professional judgments and the capacity to act on those judgments” (p. 462). For a teacher to use their professional discretion, they must have the appropriate knowledge and training to best support their students.

**Change in Lesson Sequencing.** One instance in which a teacher would use their personal discretion while implementing a curriculum would be the sequence in which they deliver that curriculum and its components. While observing, I noticed that Ms. Wilson regularly deviated
from the suggested sequence of instruction dictated in the curriculum guides, depicted in Table 4.1 (Classroom Observations #1-5). Ms. Wilson began four of the five observed lessons as suggested in the curriculum with the Alphabet Activity, followed by the Phonological/Phonemic Awareness activity, and Daily Letter and Sound Review. In lesson five, she began with Daily Letter and Sound Review, followed by the Alphabet Activity and then the Phonological/Phonemic Awareness activity. Overall, the routine of the lesson warmup generally started the same way and was consistent with the curriculum guide.

Following the warm-up, the curriculum outline stated to implement the spelling review with the worksheet, followed by introducing the New Increment, Handwriting, Spelling with Letter Tiles, New Deck Cards, and Boardwork, all of which do not require a worksheet. Ms. Wilson continued four out of five lessons with the New Increment and New Deck Card sections of the curriculum before distributing the worksheets and continuing with the Handwriting (if applicable), Spelling Review, and Worksheet sections. She omitted Spelling with Letter Tiles and Boardwork in all five observations. During the teacher interviews, Ms. Wilson explained that she changed the suggested lesson sequencing for several reasons, including time management, classroom management, and adapting to what her students needed.
### Table 3

**Curriculum-Suggested Sequencing vs. Teacher-Implemented Sequencing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum Suggested Sequencing</th>
<th>TEACHER IMPLEMENTED SEQUENCING DURING OBSERVATIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 Alphabet Activity</td>
<td>Alphabet Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 Phonological/Phonemic</td>
<td>Phonological/Phonemic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 Daily Letter and Sound</td>
<td>Daily Letter and Sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 Spelling Review</td>
<td>New Increment: The Letter X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5 New Increment</td>
<td>New Deck Cards for X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6 Handwriting</td>
<td>Handwriting for X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7 Spelling with Letter Tiles</td>
<td>Spelling Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8 New Deck Cards for [letter/skill]</td>
<td>Worksheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#9 Boardwork</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#10 Worksheet</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#11 Homework</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** This table lays out the suggested curriculum sequence of lesson activities and compares them to the teacher-implemented sequencing of lesson activities.
**Time Management.** A prime example of why a teacher would use their professional discretion to change a lesson’s sequencing would be due to the amount of time they are provided to complete the lesson. During her interview, Ms. Wilson expressed that the district and school administrations provide a specific duration of time for phonics instruction. This time directive influenced the changes she made to the lesson sequencing (Teacher Interview). She explained that each lesson in the curriculum provides at least 90 minutes of activities listed within the phonics curriculum guide. Yet, the district and school administrators provide just 45 minutes within the daily schedule to dedicate to explicit phonics instruction. For example, during the observations, I noticed that Ms. Wilson consistently omitted the Spelling with Letter Tiles section of the curriculum. When I asked if she completed this activity outside of the 45-minute block, she stated that she did not do this activity at all and attributed time as the reason. Ms. Wilson used her professional judgment to determine which activities were not essential to the understanding of the content and which activities were most beneficial for her students and would fit into the allotted time for phonics instruction. Since there are more activities given by the curriculum than teachers are allotted time, I concluded that teachers have to use their discretion as to what works best for their class and what they will have to leave out. There is a need for more clarity within the curriculum around what activities are essential to the lesson’s understanding and the duration of time that teachers should spend on those activities.

**Classroom Management.** Another example of why educators would change the sequence of a lesson would be to manage their classroom. During the interview, Ms. Wilson shared that she had “found a flow,” or a sequence of activities, that worked for her class (Teacher Interview). She continued by stating how engaging the students and transitions play a role in her classroom management. In changing the suggested sequencing, she perceived she was better able
to engage and manage the students she had in front of her. Ms. Wilson referred to this adaptability as “teaching with integrity instead of blind fidelity” (Teacher Interview). Through this point of view, she highlights the importance of an educator understanding what works for the students in any given class. Here, she also stresses the importance for educators to recognize what students need academically, socially, and emotionally and adapt as necessary. For example, even though the curriculum suggested implementing the Spelling Review before the New Increment, Ms. Wilson knew from her professional experience that this sequence would not work for her students as her students have more success when they face fewer transitions and material changes. Teachers should be able to use their professional discretion to engage with the curriculum and adapt it to fit their classroom environment.

**Adapting to the Students’ Needs.** An additional example of why teachers may change the sequence of a lesson includes determining what activities meet the needs of their students. During the interview, Ms. Wilson explained that another reason for her curriculum deviations was in response to adapting to meet the needs of the students in her class. For example, the curriculum provides a section for Handwriting instruction. This section asks students to ‘skywrite,’ or pretend to write with their finger in the air, the letter taught under the New Increment. Ms. Wilson noted that this section is something not all of her students would benefit from but acknowledged the importance of the letter formation component of the activity. Therefore, she first distributed the lesson’s worksheets, where students were able to physically write the letters being explicitly taught. She then used the explicit handwriting directions provided in an additional component of the curriculum to teach handwriting instruction (Teacher Interview). Ms. Wilson used her professional judgment while implementing the handwriting section of the curriculum. She understood that pretending to write the letters in the air would not
be beneficial for her students as he knew they would benefit more from writing the letters on paper with clear and explicit directions on how to form the letters.

Another example of adaptation I noticed throughout the observations was that Ms. Wilson referred to what the curriculum called sight words as *heart words*. During the interview, I asked Ms. Wilson to explain heart words, and she explained them as “words that have parts that we have to remember by heart” (Teacher Interview). For example, the word *said*: s is spelling /s/, ai is spelling /ɛ/, and d is spelling /d/. The only letters that spell a sound that they do not typically represent are ai. So, therefore, ai is the “heart part” of the word *said*. This method teaches students to recognize the parts that make up a word instead of memorizing an entire word at a glance. Ms. Wilson also expressed that “eventually we want all words to become sight words” (Teacher Interview). Here, she states that students should get to the point in their reading where they are not analyzing the parts of words through decoding but rather reading fluently and recognizing all words through immediate sight. This specific adaptation is in alignment with orthographic mapping, which involves the connections between letters and sounds and how their pronunciations and meanings are committed to memory (Ehri, 2017). Noting that Ms. Wilson made this seemingly small adaptation to the curriculum shows how she is using her professional experiences and discretion to benefit the needs of her students in her class. Teachers should be able to use their judgment and adapt curriculum to fit the academic needs of their students.

Throughout the classroom observations and the teacher interview, I found that the teacher in this specific case balanced the expectations from her administration with her personal experiences in order to benefit the students. She used her professional discretion to make adaptations to the curriculum to engage her students during explicit phonics instruction. These
adaptations gave me the opportunity as the researcher to see how the teacher engaged and interacted with the phonics curriculum in order to implement it successfully with her students.

**First-Grade Students’ Experiences with Explicit Phonics Instruction in the Classroom**

This case study aimed to understand the experiences of a first-grade class with explicit phonics instruction. The case included both the teacher and students, and following the six weeks of phonics instruction and five observations, I also interviewed each participating student individually in a semi-structured task-based interview. The interviews answered student-specific research sub-questions two, three, and four to inform the overarching research question regarding how members of this first-grade class experienced explicit phonics instruction while highlighting the perspectives of Ms. Wilson’s students. I incorporated phonics games and tasks within the student interviews to answer sub-research questions three and four, which focused on their ability to apply phonological awareness and phoneme segmentation skills.

**First Graders’ Definition of Phonics**

Phonics is the teaching practice of the relationship between letters and sounds and how they are used to recognize words (Adams, 1990; Harris & Hodges, 1995; Stahl, Duffy-Hesters, & Stahl, 1998). I begin each task-based student interview by asking the students to define phonics in their own words. Some students were able to identify elements of phonics accurately, and some students were unable to identify elements of phonics.

**Accurate Definition of Phonics.** When asking students to define phonics, I was looking for their understanding of the subject itself regarding what they learn during phonics instruction. For example, Grace defined phonics as “spelling and words” (Student Interview 1). Although this is a very concise response, it demonstrates an understanding of phonics regarding the spelling patterns that make up words. She also understands that phonics instruction results in
spelling and reading words. Additionally, Steven also referred to spelling in his definition of phonics, stating that it is “to learn letters to spell words” (Student Interview 2). This demonstrates an understanding of phonics by identifying that words are made up of letters. Chloe explained phonics as “when you learn the sounds in words. It is also like reading. Reading and phonics are basically the same thing” (Student Interview 4). This response showed an understanding of phonics through the perception that words are made up of sounds. When she compared phonics to reading, she showed an awareness that there is a correlation between learning the letters/sounds to recognize words and reading. Similarly, Evelyn defined phonics as “how you learn to read and write your letters” (Student Interview 5). The definition displays an understanding of phonics through the awareness that letters represent sounds within words in order to read as well as write. Jacob described phonics as “sounds and words” (Student Interview 8). This depicts an understanding of phonics regarding the sounds that make up words. All five of these students were able to accurately identify key elements of phonics, showing an awareness of what they were learning during that instructional time.

**Inaccurately Defined Phonics.** While some students were aware that phonics represents the relationship between letters and sounds to spell words, there were a few students who were unable to define phonics. Three out of the eight students could not correctly identify a definition of phonics (Student Interview 3, 6, 7). Both Casey and Aaron described phonics as “math” and “numbers” (Student Interviews 3 & 7). When asked to define phonics, both students thought of the same subject and written form. Faith did not provide a definition directly to answer academic subjects, but when asked follow-up questions, she agreed that it happens in school (Student Interview 6). She was unable to identify any elements of phonics or what she may have learned during that time. While Faith may have felt shy and skeptical as it was the first question of the
interview, she also may have been reluctant to answer the question incorrectly. These inaccurate definitions show that even though students are seemingly engaged in the content, they may not be fully aware of what they are learning during that instructional time.

Students’ understanding of phonics and when instruction occurs in their classroom demonstrates that they are aware of what they are learning and its purpose. When asked during the interview, students who correctly identified phonics components also associated the relationship between phonics and how it helps students be successful readers.

First Graders’ Metacognition Regarding Phonics Instruction

Simply put, metacognition refers to the process of “thinking about thinking” or the awareness of what we know and what we do not know (Mahdavi, 2014; Costa & Kallick, 2009; Livingston, 1997). Flavell (1979) thought of metacognition as a much more complex cognitive phenomenon and broke it down into four classes, including metacognitive experiences, metacognitive knowledge, goals, and actions. During the student interviews, I observed students exhibiting behaviors that aligned with metacognitive experiences and metacognitive knowledge. Students also demonstrated metacognitive experiences through their emotional awareness regarding phonics. Students demonstrated metacognitive knowledge through their awareness of the relationship between phonics and reading.

Emotional Awareness. Flavell (1979) described metacognitive experiences as “items of metacognitive knowledge that have entered consciousness” (p. 908). He related that consciousness to the emotional awareness about knowledge. For example, how students might feel about a particular subject, like phonics. Throughout the student interviews, students were aware of the importance of phonics instruction in their classroom. When asked about how they felt about phonics, most students claimed to enjoy phonics time in their classroom. Students used
words like “happy,” “good,” and “excited” to describe how they felt during phonics (Student Interviews 1-8). Each student used a positive emotional expression regarding phonics time in their classroom, even if they could not correctly define phonics or identify when it was happening in their classroom. Although the students may or may not actually feel happiness or excitement during phonics lessons, their metacognitive experiences stimulated a positive response when asked about phonics in this interview. Therefore, their metacognitive experience, or emotional awareness regarding their phonics knowledge, was positive overall.

**Awareness of Phonics-Reading Connection.** In addition to their emotional awareness of phonics, students expressed awareness of its importance and how it helps them be better readers. Flavell (1979) defined metacognitive knowledge as “beliefs about what factors interact to affect the course of cognitive enterprises” (p. 907). He broke this idea down into three categories, including a person, a task, and a strategy. A prime example of this would be a student (person) engaging in explicit phonics instruction (strategy) to become a better reader (task). During the student interview, students were asked how phonics might help to make them better readers. Most of the students responded with the awareness that phonics instruction helps them to sound out words. Chloe expressed:

*I’d say like sometimes I read [a passage], and I don’t get the words exactly right, but the second time I read it, I get the words right. So I would say it helps me be a better reader ‘cause (sic) I can sound out words.* (Student Interview 4)

Here, Chloe is exhibiting metacognitive knowledge, which means that sounding out the words (strategy) enables her to read the words correctly (task). She is demonstrating an awareness that phonics instruction has given her the ability to break apart words and put them back together to read them. Evelyn explained that phonics “helps us know all the sounds of the letters, or all the,
like combinations and stuff so when we read books we can, like, sound them out” (Student Interview 5). She is describing the explicit instruction of phonics that directly teaches the letter and sound correspondences, including combinations of letters, in order to read. She is exhibiting the awareness that phonics instruction directly teaches students those letter-sound correspondences to sound out words, which produces reading. I questioned Evelyn further by asking about the correlation between the letters, sounds, and reading. She responded that “in reading, you have to know what it says… so to know that you have to know what the sounds are and what letters make the sounds” (Student Interview 5). Evelyn’s metacognitive knowledge demonstrates the awareness of person, task, and strategy. She understands that she is the person completing the strategy of connecting the letter-sound relationships in order to complete the task of reading. This metacognitive practice helps increase students’ awareness of tasks and strategies they are learning during explicit phonics instruction.

First-Grade Students’ Application of Explicit Instruction

Phonological awareness is often defined as the umbrella term in reference to the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate sounds in spoken words. Some say phonological awareness instruction can be “done in the dark” (Clemens et al., 2021). Phonemic awareness is a specific skill under the umbrella of phonological awareness. The phonemic awareness level is understanding the specific representation of phonemes or letter-sound correspondences (Lewkowicz, 1980). Phonics is defined as a way to teach students how to read that aims to “promote the discovery of the alphabetic principle, the correspondence between phonemes and graphemes, and phonological decoding” (Scarborough & Brady, 2022, p. 20). Phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics are a progression of skills students develop to reading skills. Within the task-based student interviews, I asked students to complete activities
that displayed their application of phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics knowledge. In the sections below, I lay out each skill linked with each task that students completed.

**Phonological and Phonemic Awareness**

For a task that exhibited phonological awareness, I wanted students to be able to hear the number of sounds within a word. I chose to use a Pop-It toy because this toy is currently popular and would be familiar to students. They would know how to manipulate the bubbles in order to represent the number of sounds in a given word. For a task that exhibited phonemic awareness, I wanted students to be able to represent the sounds that they heard within a word. I chose the Spelligator Activity because this literacy game came with letter tiles that represented sounds the students learned during their explicit phonics instruction. This activity also packaged the phonemic awareness activity within a fun and low-stakes environment.

**Pop-It.** During the task-based interview, one of the tasks required students to listen to a word and then use the Pop-It toy to segment the sounds in the given words. Each bubble in the Pop-It represented one sound in the word. I asked students to segment words with specific phonemes taught within the observed lessons, including the letter x; digraph sh; final ve; final, stable syllable -tle; and trigraph igh, as depicted in Table 4.4. This table also shows the phonemes that each student correctly and incorrectly identified.
### Table 4

**Pop-It Activity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grace</th>
<th>Steven</th>
<th>Casey</th>
<th>Chloe</th>
<th>Evelyn</th>
<th>Faith</th>
<th>Aaron</th>
<th>Jacob</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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<td>/h/ /a/ /v/</td>
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<td>/n/ /i/ /t/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* This table shows the sounds correctly and incorrectly identified through phoneme segmentation. Sounds in bold letters were correctly identified. Sounds not bolded and highlighted in gray were incorrectly identified. Words that were completely incorrect have the whole box shaded gray.

Six out of eight students correctly identified the number of phonemes in a CVC pattern word. Out of the two students who did not identify the phonemes correctly, one missed the final consonant, and the other could not correctly identify any phonemes. Six out of eight students correctly identified the number of phonemes in a word beginning with a consonant digraph and ending with a long vowel sound. Two students were unable to identify both phonemes correctly. Six out of eight students correctly identified the number of phonemes in a word ending in the /v/ sound. Two students were unable to correctly identify any phonemes in the same word. Six out of eight students correctly identified the number of phonemes in a word ending in a final stable syllable. One student could correctly identify this word's beginning and middle sounds but incorrectly identified the final, stable syllable. One student could not correctly identify any
phonemes in this word. Seven students correctly identified each phoneme with a medial long vowel sound. One student could not correctly identify any phonemes in this word.

Considering that six of the eight participating students could correctly identify each phoneme in all given words with specific sounds taught during the observed lessons, it is evident that most students could access the phonological awareness instruction provided during the explicit phonics instruction. For the other students who were unable to correctly identify the phonemes, they were unable to access the phonological awareness content during the explicit phonics lesson.

In addition, I obtained the quantitative data for each student from the district implemented curriculum-based measurements. This test requires students to listen to a dictated words and segment the phonemes in each word. For example, the teacher would say the word “cat” and the student would reply, “/k/-/ă/-/t/.” I gathered data from their baseline fall scores as well as their benchmark winter scores. I compared their scored with their score from the Pop-It activity to see if their application of phoneme segmentation differed or remained the same. This comparison of scores is displayed in Table 5.

Three out of eight students tested into the at or above the benchmark level in the fall and remained at this level for the winter measure. All three students increased their numerical scores by seven or more points. This shows that students were on their projected level in the fall and showed meaningful growth in their scores by the winter measure. All three students correctly identified the fourteen phonemes in the Pop-It Activity. Their quantitative data from the district matched the data observed during the task-based interview. Two out of eight students tested at the intervention level in the fall, but then tested in the at or above benchmark level in the winter. Both of these students increased their numerical scores by twelve points. This represents growth
that allowed those students to test into their projected level. Both students correctly identified the fourteen phonemes in the Pop-It Activity. Their quantitative data from the district matched the data observed during the task-based interview. One student out of eight students tested at the intervention level in the fall, but the tested in the on-watch level in the fall. This student increased their score by 19 points. Although the score represented a large gain in numerical points, it is still under the grade-level benchmark. This student correctly identified the fourteen phonemes in the Pop-It Activity. The quantitative data is inconsistent in this case. It is likely like time allotted or physical context played a factor for this student’s score. One out of eight students remained in the Intervention level from the fall measure to the winter measure, but did have a numerical score increase of four points. Although this is not the growth expected, it does show a small amount of growth. This student correctly identified seven out of fourteen phonemes in the Pop-It Activity. The quantitative data here does show that the student is able to segment some sounds. Time and phonics knowledge were likely factors in this student’s case. One out of eight students remained in the Intervention level with a score of zero from the fall measure, to the winter measure. This represents no growth in scores. This student did not correctly identify any phonemes in the Pop-It Activity. The quantitative data is consistent in this case and is representative that the student may not have been able to access the phonics instruction in class.
Table 5

CBM/Pop-It Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Fall Phoneme Segmentation Score</th>
<th>Winter Phoneme Segmentation Score</th>
<th>Pop-It Activity Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
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<td>7</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
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<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
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<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: This table compares each student’s numerical scores from both the fall and winter Phoneme Segmentation Curriculum Based Measures with their Pop-It Activity Scores.

**Spelligator Activity.** During the task-based interview, the second task required students to listen to a word and then use letter tiles to spell a word on a toy alligator, referred to as a spelligator (see image below). The tiles contained various letters. There were letters and sounds that were explicitly taught during the six-week period of phonics instruction. Some were during classroom observations, and some were not observed. I asked students to spell words with specific phonemes from those lessons, including digraph sh; final sh; floss rule words; digraph ck; and digraph oo. Specific words and phonemes are depicted in Table 4.6. When students seemed to struggle to the point of frustration, I stopped the Spelligator Activity.
Table 6

Spelligator Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grace</th>
<th>Steven</th>
<th>Casey</th>
<th>Chloe</th>
<th>Evelyn</th>
<th>Faith</th>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: This table shows each of the student responses from the Spelligator Activity. Bold letters are the correct responses. Highlighted and bold letters are incorrect responses. Italics and not bolded words are words that students were not given.

Two out of eight students could correctly identify all graphemes in each word. Three students made errors only on vowel sounds in three or fewer words. Two students stopped after two consecutive errors or various parts of the words. One student, Aaron, did not complete the Spelligator Activity due to the performance during the Pop-It Activity. The evidence from the Spelligator Activity shows that five students are able to apply most of the skills taught during the six-week period of explicit instruction. The application represented by students here depicts that they were able to fully access and apply the phonics instruction. The three remaining students could not apply the skills taught, so therefore they may have been unable to access or apply the content that was taught during phonics instruction.
Table 7

CBM/Spelligator Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Fall Phoneme Segmentation Score</th>
<th>Winter Phoneme Segmentation Score</th>
<th>Spelligator Activity Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>15/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>17/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>17/18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: This table compares each student’s numerical scores from both the fall and winter Phoneme Segmentation Curriculum Based Measures with their Spelligator Activity Scores.

In addition, I compared the quantitative data for each student from the district implemented curriculum-based measurements with the Spelligator Activity. This comparison of scores is displayed in Table 7.

The three students that tested into the at or above the benchmark level in the fall and winter measure correctly identified all graphemes in the Spelligator Activity. Again, their quantitative data from the district is consistent the data observed during the task-based interview. The two students that tested at the intervention level in the fall, but then tested in the at or above benchmark level in the winter, were able to correctly identify graphemes in the Spelligator Activity. One student correctly identified all eighteen graphemes, while one student identified fifteen graphemes. Their quantitative data from the district matched the data observed during the task-based interview. The student that tested at the intervention level in the fall, but the tested in the on-watch level in the fall, was only able to correctly identify three out of 6 graphemes in this activity. The activity stopped after three incorrect due to frustration. This shows that this student may not have been able to access the phonics content, but struggles with
representing beginning and ending sounds. The student that remained in the Intervention level from the fall measure to the winter measure, but did have small growth score was able to correctly identify seven out of nine graphemes. The quantitative data here does show that the student is able to segment some sounds. This shows that the student may have been able to access some of the phonics content, but struggles with middle and ending phonemes. The student that remained in the Intervention level with a score of zero from the fall measure, to the winter measure did not complete this activity due to the frustration level from the Pop-It Activity. Again, the quantitative data is consistent here and is representative that the student may not have been able to access the phonics instruction in class.

**Phonics**

For a task that exhibited phonics knowledge, I wanted students to represent the sounds they heard within words in a written format. I chose to use the *Words Their Way* Primary Spelling Inventory because this format provided both flexibility and clear evaluative directions. I was able to stop the assessment if students reached a frustration level. I was also able to analyze the student data within a provided data collection sheet.

**Primary Spelling Inventory.** The final activity students completed during the task-based interview was the *Words Their Way* Primary Spelling Inventory. During this activity, students listened to me dictate a word, and they wrote down the letters to match the sounds in the given word. The recommendation from *Words Their Way* for first-grade students is to call out 15 of the 26 words. If students are struggling with the first five, you may stop. I followed these guidelines throughout this spelling inventory task.

After analyzing the spelling inventory data, I found that three students scored within the Emergent Spelling Stage, two within the Letter-Name-Alphabetic Stage, and three within the
Within Word Pattern Stage. The information from the Spelling Inventory Feature Guide laid out which skills students were able to spell and which they spelling incorrectly as depicted in Table 8. With this data, I was able to pinpoint which features students correctly identified and which features they were unable to correctly identify. Most of the students correctly identified all initial and final consonants, while three students identified about half. The scores for short vowels and blends were less strong, which informed me that these areas needed more practice. According to this assessment, a teacher could create small instructional groups focused based on their Spelling Stages and focus directly on the features they need more practice in. This data represents the disconnect of application from the phonics skills being taught and what students are able to apply out of context. For example, one of the words in the Primary Spelling Inventory was “fright” and a lesson during observation covered the skill of trigraph -igh. Despite covering this skill during explicit phonics instruction, no students were able to apply this long vowel pattern.
Table 8

Primary Spelling Inventory Scoring Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spelling Stages</th>
<th>Emergent</th>
<th>Letter Name-Alphabetic</th>
<th>Within Word Pattern</th>
<th>Syllables and Affixes</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consonants</td>
<td>Short Vowels</td>
<td>Digraphs</td>
<td>Blends</td>
<td>Long Vowel Pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial</td>
<td>Final</td>
<td>Initial</td>
<td>Final</td>
<td>Initial</td>
<td>Final</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>3/7</td>
<td>1/3</td>
<td>3/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>3/7</td>
<td>0/3</td>
<td>3/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
<td>3/7</td>
<td>2/7</td>
<td>1/7</td>
<td>0/3</td>
<td>0/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>6/7</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>3/3</td>
<td>4/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>3/3</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>4/7</td>
<td>4/7</td>
<td>3/7</td>
<td>0/3</td>
<td>0/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>3/7</td>
<td>5/7</td>
<td>2/7</td>
<td>0/3</td>
<td>0/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>3/3</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: This table summarizes the Words Their Way Primary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide of each student. This data is based on the first fifteen words of the Primary Spelling Inventory that were dictated to students during the task-based interview. Those words included fan, pet, dig, rob, hope, wait, gum, sled, stick, shine, dream, blade, coach, fright, and chewed.

Additionally, the district curriculum-based measurements also tested student ability to read nonsense words. This test requires students to decode as many nonsense words that follow the CVC pattern in one minute. For example, they are required to read words such as “wix” or “lep” that are not real words, but they are able to sound them out as if they were real words. I gathered data from their baseline fall scores as well as their benchmark winter scores and compared it with their Spelling Inventory scores. This allowed me to compare their application of phonics knowledge. Each student’s scores are compared in Table 9.
### Table 9

**CMB/Spelling Inventory Comparison**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Fall Expressive Nonsense Words Score</th>
<th>Winter Expressive Nonsense Words Score</th>
<th>Primary Spelling Inventory Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21/38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20/38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6/38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28/38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30/38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10/38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11/38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>34/38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: This table compares each student’s numerical scores from both the fall and winter Phoneme Segmentation Curriculum Based Measures with their Spelling Inventory Scores.*

Three out of eight students tested into the at or above the benchmark level in the fall and remained at this level for the winter measure. All three students increased their numerical scores ranging from five points to nine points. This shows that students were on their projected level in the fall and showed meaningful growth in their scores by the winter measure. Their Spelling Inventory Scores ranged from twenty-one to thirty-four. These students were able to both read and write words on their projected level. This data shows that these students were able to access and apply most of the phonics instruction. One out of eight students tested at the on-watch level in the fall, and increased to the at or above benchmark level in the winter. This student increased their score by twelve points. The growth shown here increased their level to the on-grade level category. This student also scored at thirty out of thirty-eight in the Spelling Inventory. The data for this student show appropriate, on-grade level growth. This data also depicts that this student was able to access and apply most of the phonics instruction. One out of eight students tested at the on-watch level in the fall, and remained at the on-watch level for the winter measure despite increasing their score by six points. This student scored twenty out of thirty-eight in the Spelling Inventory.
Inventory. Although this represents growth, this is still a student who may need additional practice in phonics application. Three out of eight students scored in the intervention level in the fall and remained in the intervention level for the winter measure. Two of those three students scored a zero in both fall and winter assessments, while the remaining student increased their score of zero, to a four. These three students scored as emergent spellers which means they likely were unable to access the phonics instruction, making their experiences different than the students who were able to access and apply the content.

Summary

In this chapter, the results of the observations, interviews, and district data were explained and analyzed in alignment with the research sub-questions to answer the overarching research question: *In what ways do members of a first-grade class experience explicit phonics instruction?* Classroom observations revealed that students were engaged in phonics lessons and responded well to routines and the predictability of systematic instruction. These observations also showed that the teacher implemented a different sequence from the one provided in the curriculum. The teacher interview disclosed that time, classroom management, and student’s needs played a significant role in the decision to change the sequencing of the lesson. Student interviews displayed that over half of the participating students were able to recall and apply explicitly taught phonological and phonics skills. Some students were unable to recall and apply those same skills. District data was used as references to support the evidence found in both classroom observations and interviews.
Chapter 5: Discussion

In this study, I examined how a specific first-grade class experienced explicit, systematic phonics instruction. Phonics is the system for encoding a language’s spoken language into letters or symbols (Venezky, 1999). Some (Adams, 1990; Harris & Hodges, 1995; Stahl, Duffy-Hesters, & Stahl, 1998) have also referred to phonics as the teaching practice of the relationship between letters and sounds and how they are used to recognize words. Until 1990, educators used the terms explicit and systematic separately in relation to phonic instruction. It wasn’t until Adams referenced both terms, explicit and systematic, as recommendations after reviewing several studies (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005). Explicit instruction refers to the delivery of the lesson in which the teacher directly teaches the content to the students. The term systematic refers to the scope (what is being taught) and sequence (in what order). This study examined how both the teacher and first-grade students engaged with explicit and systematic phonics instruction in an actual classroom.

In this chapter, I will provide the following: (a) a summary of the study, (b) an application of the theoretical framework, (c) a discussion of the results with interpretations in alignment with relevant literature, (d) an explanation of study limitations, (e) a discussion of implications for future research, and (f) a discussion of implications for future educational practice.

Summary of Study

In this study, I utilized a two-phase qualitative case study design. In Phase I of the study, I collected observational data in one first-grade classroom during explicit phonics instruction to answer my overarching research question: In what ways do members of a first-grade class experience explicit phonics instruction? I observed the teacher and eight first-grade student
participants five times for forty-five minutes, over the course of six weeks, during explicit phonics instruction. I used the phonics curriculum teacher’s manual to guide my observations. I also took notes on teacher and student behaviors, interactions, and changes to the curriculum. The findings from these observations indicated that students were engaged in the delivery of the phonics lessons and were aware of the sequence of the lessons. This could be a result of the emphasis on classroom routines and the culture of learning developed by the teacher. The findings from these observations also indicated that the teacher deviated from the suggested lesson sequencing in the curriculum teaching script.

During Phase II, I collected qualitative data through interviews with the teacher and students to answer my sub-questions: *In what ways does a first-grade teacher engage in the delivery of explicit phonics instruction?* *In what ways do first-grade students experience explicit phonics instruction?* *How do first-grade students apply explicitly taught phonological awareness skills?* *How do first-grade students apply explicitly taught phonics skills?* I interviewed the teacher one time for 40 minutes and followed a semi-structured narrative format. My interview protocol consisted of questions regarding the teacher’s experiences, beliefs, and opinions about reading instruction as well as follow-up questions developed throughout the observations in Phase I. One theme that emerged from the teacher interview included the balance of expectations and personal experiences. Within this theme, Ms. Wilson noted how Balanced Literacy, the Science of Reading, as well as misconceptions and social media, play a role in her experiences with phonics instruction. Another theme that emerged from this interview was her use of professional discretion. With this theme, Ms. Wilson noted that she used her professional discretion due to time management, classroom management, and adapting to meet students’ needs.
The student interviews followed a semi-structured, task-based interview format and ranged from 15 to 20 minutes. My interview protocol consisted of general questions surrounding general phonics knowledge when it occurs in the classroom and their perceptions regarding phonics, intertwined with three tasks that allowed students to demonstrate their ability to apply explicitly taught skills. The tasks included an activity with a Pop-It toy where students popped out the sounds in each word, an activity with a plastic alligator and letter tiles called Spelligator, where students used the letter tiles to spell words onto the alligator, and the *Words Their Way* Primary Spelling Inventory where I dictated a list of words and students wrote each word. The themes that emerged from the student interviews included the first-graders’ definitions of phonics, both accurate and inaccurate, and first-graders’ metacognition regarding phonics instruction, including their emotional awareness and their awareness of the connection between phonics instruction and reading. In addition, I connected the qualitative data obtained from the student interviews with quantitative data from classroom curriculum-based measurements. This data allowed me to further support the evidence and findings from classroom observations and student interviews.

**Application of Theoretical Framework to Findings**

In Chapter II, I used a constructive approach to review the literature regarding reading curriculum and instructional methods in American education. Under the turmoil of the reading wars, I found the calling for a strong reading foundation for young learners in structured literacy and the role the teacher plays in its facilitation. Originally inspired by Scarborough’s *Reading Rope* (2001), I found myself closely examining the foundations of reading at the word-learning level. This research led me to intertwine the theories of Social Constructivism’s Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) and the Phases of Word Learning Theory (Ehri, 2005;
Ehri & McCormick, 1998). Using this theoretical framework to guide my research study, I found that these theories are both dynamic and fluid in regard to phonics instruction and individual students’ experiences and can be implemented within programs that provide stages, such as the *Words Their Way* Spelling Stages, to better adapt to students’ individual needs. This overlap of theory and program implementation is shown in Figure 6. In this section, I will connect these theories to the data I collected in my study and describe how both of these theories are relevant to my findings.

**Figure 6**

Application of Theoretical Framework

![Diagram](image)

*Note:* This image depicts the Theoretical Framework used for this qualitative case study which combines the Zone of Proximal Development, (Vygotsky, 1978) the Phases of Word Learning...
Theory (Ehri & McCormick, 1998) in addition to the application of the *Words Their Way* Spelling Stages.

**Zone of Proximal Development**

Vygotsky (1978) defined the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance of in collaborations with more capable peer” (p. 86). With this definition, he developed this theory as two different levels of development, namely, what a child can do independently and what a child can do with support from an adult or classmate. He specified that effective instruction must be tailored to the “child’s proximal level of development, or the upper threshold of instruction” (Moll, 1990, p. 158; Vygotsky, 1987, p. 211). This perspective indicates that there is a point where students are able to access instructional content on their own.

Within this study, I utilized a social constructivist lens to observe the first-grade classroom during explicit phonics instruction and task-based interviews to understand how they were experiencing instruction in their zone of proximal development. During Phase I of the study, I observed the class during their typical first-grade phonics instruction. The teacher used a scripted first-grade phonics curriculum provided by the Target District. The students engaged in the instruction as they typically would outside of the observations. Throughout the explicit instruction, the students participated in developmentally appropriate activities according to curriculum publishers, such as phoneme segmentation and isolation, blending words, and identifying new skills. Observing the whole group instruction with this theory in mind allowed me to recognize that although the classroom environment is generally the same for the students, their zone of proximal development differs based on their individual phases of word learning.
Phases of Word Learning Theory

The Phases of Word Learning Theory consists of phases that describe a student’s understanding and use of the alphabetic system when reading words and include (1) the pre-alphabetic phase, (2) the partial-alphabetic phase, (3) the full-alphabetic phase, and (4) the consolidated-alphabetic phase (Ehri & McCormick, 1998). Students in the pre-alphabetic phase typically range from preschool through kindergarten and use mostly environmental print and non-phonetic visual clues since they do not link letters with corresponding sounds. Students in the partial alphabetic phase typically range from kindergarten through early first grade and are able to use their letter-sound knowledge to read simple words such as those that follow the CVC pattern. Students in the full-alphabetic phase mastered the first two phases and are able to access decoding strategies to read familiar and unfamiliar words. Students in this phase also no longer need to decode each phoneme in words. Students enter the fourth or consolidated alphabetic phase when they can construct more mature phoneme units, such as prefixes or suffixes.

Within this study, I utilized the Phases of Word Learning Theory to understand how students are able to experience, engage, and apply phonics knowledge from their perspective. During Phase II of this study, I conducted individual student interviews that were centered around phonological awareness and phonics knowledge tasks. I embedded Phases of Word Learning within the Zone of Proximal Development to create my viewing lens for my student interviews. Using this framework while engaging with the task-based interviews allowed me to understand how the students were experiencing the tasks in front of them and then, in turn, their first-grade phonics instruction. I acknowledged that if students were unable to complete the tasks one-on-one during the interview, the explicit phonics instruction was not within their zone of proximal development. I also acknowledged that if students were able to complete the tasks, the
explicit phonics instruction was within their zone of proximal development or possibly within their comfort zone.

Findings from this study supported that the zones and phases within these theories are versatile based on individual students’ experiences and understanding. Furthermore, I adapted the original theoretical framework to incorporate student’s individual experiences with phonics instruction, with their phases and spelling stages in mind. As depicted in Figure 7, I placed each student within the zone of proximal development of the phonics lessons taught during the time period of this study. I determined these placements based on their phase of word learning and spelling stage from the data collected during student interviews. One student placed between the comfort zone and the zone of proximal development. I concluded that this student was able to access the phonics content with ease and potentially could access a high level of instruction. Four students placed within the zone of proximal development, which led me to conclude that they were able to access the phonics content with the appropriate amount of rigor. Three students placed within the frustration zone, which led to the conclusion that those students were unable to access the phonics content during the explicit instruction. For example, Aaron was unable to complete tasks during the interview and his district assessments showed no growth, so therefore I placed him in the pre-alphabetic phase/emergent spelling stage. Since this explicit phonics instruction was not geared to students in these phases or stages, it is likely that Aaron was unable to access the whole group phonics content.

This information within this theoretical framework is meaningful for teachers to understand the individual experiences of students during instruction and how students are able to easily access content, appropriately access the content, or unable to access the content. While varied levels of abilities and experiences within an authentic classroom environment is not a new
finding within this study, it does provide the significant information of how those varied levels impact the experiences and learning of a student.

**Figure 7**

*Student Placement in Theoretical Framework*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMFORT ZONE</th>
<th>ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT</th>
<th>FRUSTRATION ZONE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Grace:** Full Alphabetic/Late Letter Name
- **Casey:** Partial Alphabetic/Emergent
- **Evelyn:** Consolidated Alphabetic/Within Word
- **Faith:** Partial Alphabetic/Emergent
- **Steven:** Full Alphabetic/Late Letter Name
- **Chloe:** Consolidated Alphabetic/Within Word
- **Aaron:** Partial Alphabetic/Emergent
- **Jacob:** Consolidated Alphabetic/Within Word

**Summary and Discussion of Results**

This qualitative case study set out to answer the question: *In what ways do members of a first-grade class experience explicit phonics instruction?* To provide guidance for data collection and analysis to answer the overarching research question, the study used the following sub-questions:
1. In what ways does a first-grade teacher engage in the delivery of explicit phonics instruction?

2. In what ways do first-grade students experience explicit phonics instruction?

3. How do first-grade students apply explicitly taught phonological awareness skills?

4. How do first-grade students apply explicitly taught phonics skills?

Data from the classroom observations, teacher interviews, student interviews, and student baseline and benchmark data provided an extensive understanding of how members of a first-grade classroom experience explicit phonics instruction. The findings of this study concluded several trends throughout the data, including teaching with integrity instead of blind fidelity and a balance between teacher autonomy and accountability. In addition, I concluded with the data that students benefit from predictable classroom routines, instruction within their zone of proximal development, and student metacognition regarding phonics instruction.

**Integrity Over Blind Fidelity**

Within Phase I of the study, I observed the first-grade teacher conducting her typical phonics instruction five times over the course of six weeks. During those observations, there were deviations from the original phonics curriculum script in terms of lesson sequencing, omitted activities, alternative lesson language, transitions sequencing, and activity timing.

Following the six weeks of phonics instruction, I conducted a semi-structured interview with the teacher. I asked Ms. Wilson about the deviations from the curriculum. In the results, I found that she used her professional discretion to determine what she perceived ‘worked best’ for her specific students within the provided block of time in the school day. Her reasoning for the deviations from the curriculum included time management, classroom management, and adapting to meet student needs. She explained these modifications as “teaching with integrity...
instead of blind fidelity” (Teacher Interview). This perspective can be linked to adaptive teaching, which is the modification of instruction based on the teacher’s understanding of the students and content (Darling-Hammond & Bell, 2005). These changes to the instructional pedagogy are strategic in order to meet the various needs of the students, including social, linguistic, and academic needs (Gitmer & Bell, 2016). Although adaptive teaching is considered a characteristic of an effective teacher (Vaughn et al., 2021), there are several reasons why this pedagogy is considered scarce. Diamond (2012) accounted for increased educator pressures, including standardized testing, scripted curriculum, and increased teacher scrutiny. Despite using a scripted phonics curriculum, Ms. Wilson implemented adaptive teaching due to the knowledge of her students and the content.

The data revealed that there are various reasons why a teacher would need to deviate from a scripted curriculum. Ms. Wilson noted time management as one reason for her adaptive teaching. She expressed that the Target District and the Target School allot 45 minutes a day for phonics instruction but has selected a program that contains over 90 minutes of daily activities. Without general direction for what activities to prioritize, teachers are left to use their discretion or adapt their teaching to whether they should forgo instruction on elements of the curriculum or exceed the given time block for phonics instruction. While the National Reading Panel Report did not give specific guidelines on the length of time to be spent on phonological awareness or phonics instruction, Shanahan (2022) reviewed eighteen of the lessons used within the NRP Report and discovered that phonics instruction within those eighteen lessons ranged from fifteen to sixty minutes in length. Through this review, he summarized that the average phonics lessons in this meta-analysis lasted thirty minutes. The results from this case study indicate that when teachers are provided a window of time to implement a substantial curriculum with many
elements, they must teach with integrity over blind fidelity or implement adaptive teaching strategies to meet the needs of their students. While this data is insufficient to determine how most teachers implement adaptive teaching or if most teachers experience having to use their discretion, the qualitative interview with the teacher provided a perspective into this specific case that could be connected to teachers' overall experiences with various curriculums.

**Autonomy and Accountability**

During the teacher interview, Ms. Wilson explained her various reasons for deviating from the provided phonics curriculum script. The disconnect between the phonics program’s curricular elements and the school schedule allowed for her adaptations. It was evident that Ms. Wilson was provided the freedom by the Target School administration to implement adaptive teaching with her scripted phonics curriculum to flexibly meet her students' needs. This flexibility can be linked to teacher autonomy. Teacher autonomy “represents a teacher’s freedom to construct personal pedagogy which entails a balance between personality, training, experience and the requirements of the specific educational context” (Hoyle & John, 1995, p. 92). This perspective highlights the flexibility teachers may have within their own classrooms to implement adaptive teaching. On the other hand, there is teacher accountability which alludes to teachers being held “responsible for performing to agreed-upon terms” (Ornstein, 1986, p. 221). This point of view originates from a management perspective which creates a set of standards for employees to follow. Ornstein (1986) also noted the dimensions and evolving concepts of accountability, which are a matter of personal perspective and fluidity.

In this case, the teacher's administration gave her the autonomy to adapt the curriculum as she saw fit for her classroom and students, within reason. Considering teacher accountability, I want to acknowledge that Ms. Wilson did abide by the agreed-upon terms regarding phonics
instruction, such as adhering to the allotted time, implementing the provided curriculum, and following the scope and sequence under the guidance of the Target District. This case study provides a positive example of balancing teacher autonomy and accountability. Teachers, in other cases, should be given the same opportunity and freedom to make the necessary changes to curriculums, within reason, to meet the needs of students in their classrooms.

**Predictable Classroom Routines**

During the phonics instruction observations, I noted that students were familiar with the teacher's sequencing and appeared to be aware of each lesson's expectations and goals. Out of the five classroom observations, only one lesson involved a behavior redirection. Ms. Wilson exhibited positive and controlled classroom management throughout her instruction. During the observations, students raised their hands to participate in the lesson and provided correct verbal answers and reasoning. Students were accustomed to the activities and knew what the teacher expected of them. It was evident that classroom routines and procedures were implemented in this specific classroom. Explicitly taught classroom routines and procedures provide students with clear instructions or roadmaps that “permit instruction to take place in a focused, predictable, and fluid way” (Leinhardt et al., 1987, p. 135). Leinhard et al. (1987) also credited classroom routines with “[freeing] up cognitive processing space for both teachers and students” (p. 135-136). This perspective is pivotal to this specific learning environment because the classroom routines, the predictability of systematic phonics instruction, and the learning culture of the classroom allowed students to habituate the various activities embedded in the lessons. Most of the students were able to focus on the task at hand rather than questioning what was being taught, what was coming next, or what was expected of them. Consistency and predictability of the classroom and instruction created a safe space for students to learn. These
results highlight the importance of a positive learning environment along with predictable, engaging activities to facilitate learning. This combination allowed most of the students in this particular case to present growth in their fall baseline scores to their winter benchmark scores.

**Student Access Points**

In this research study, students were observed during explicit phonics instruction and then completed a task-based interview. During the observations of whole-group instruction, most students seemed engaged in learning and paying attention to their teacher. During the interviews, the students' abilities varied. Some students were able to complete all activities with minimal assistance or errors, while other students were unable to complete the activities or made a number of errors. All activities were in alignment with skills taught over the course of the six-week observational period. These results highlight that even though students presented to be engaged in the lesson and followed the predictable format, they may have been unable to cognitively access the content. This thinking is in alignment with the theoretical framework of this study, with Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (1978) and Ehri’s Phases of Word Learning Theory (1996, 2014). For example, one of the lessons included content regarding the final, stable syllable -tle, but one of the students remains in Ehri’s pre-alphabetic phase. The final, stable syllable content would be outside of their Zone of Proximal Development since their instruction should focus on letter-sound correspondences within the pre-alphabetic phase. In alignment with these theories, teachers are unable to build content on top of foundational skills that are not present, making it essential that teachers meet students where they are cognitively and provide them with content, they are able to access. Also, it is important for schools and districts to provide support for their teachers to know how to provide students with foundational skills at their point of access or within their zone of proximal development.
Student Metacognition

Students were interviewed in a semi-structured, task-based interview following six weeks of typical phonics instruction. I embedded questions about phonics and the classroom learning environment between phonological awareness and phonics tasks to answer sub-questions 2, 3, and 4 regarding student experiences and application of skills. During the analysis of this qualitative data, I realized that some students were aware of a working definition of phonics when it happens in their classroom and how it can help them become better readers. Flavell (1976) referred to metacognition as one’s understanding or knowledge of their own cognitive processes. These first-grade students presented metacognition when they correctly identified the concept of phonics, when that learning happens in their learning environment, and how it benefits them. This metacognition is important to note because all students who were able to answer those questions correctly were also able to correctly complete all three tasks during the interview with minimal errors. The students who were unable to identify what phonics is or when it happens in their class were also unable to complete the tasks during the interview. While this data is insufficient in understanding the correlation between phonics and metacognition, it does help us understand that there may be a relationship between students understanding what they are learning and why and applying that knowledge.

Limitations of Study

This study had limitations in terms of researcher bias, methodology, analysis, and generalizability. Possible limitations included the sample size, the inability to attribute data growth exclusively to phonics instruction, the need to make adjustments during qualitative data collection, and the inability to replicate a case study.
**Researcher’s Bias**

The first limitation of this study that I want to acknowledge is my own researcher bias. As noted in my positionality, I am in my tenth year of teaching first grade with an educational background in education and literacy. I am very familiar with the phonics program that was implemented during this study, and I acknowledge that I have prior knowledge and assumptions regarding phonics instruction in first grade. I also acknowledge the current distress in the reading instruction community regarding the topic of explicit phonics instruction, Science of Reading, and structured literacy. To minimize my researcher bias, I took measures to ensure there were minimal threats to internal and external validity. To ensure internal validity, I obtained qualitative data from the teacher, consenting students, and classroom observations while also collecting quantitative data from the district to support my findings. To ensure the external validity of this study, I selected a specific first-grade classroom that was diverse in race, gender, and socio-economic status. For my inclusion criteria, I extended the opportunity to all English-speaking students to allow for a full and complete understanding of their unique experiences with phonics instruction. To minimize my bias, I asked both teacher and student participants open-ended questions to highlight their perspectives.

**Limitations in Methodology**

Another limitation of this case study was the sample size. One teacher and eight students participated in a class of twenty students. Parent consent forms were sent home in paper and digital format with two additional reminders over the course of two weeks. Some families chose not to consent for their children to participate in this study, while others met the exclusion criteria.
The case study design allowed me to understand the unique and complex experiences of these particular first-grade students in this specific case. Despite gaining this perspective, with this qualitative methodology, I could not attribute each student’s growth directly to explicit phonics instruction specifically. This methodology enabled me to understand how these students engage with phonics instruction instead of whether phonics instruction helped or hindered their reading growth or progress.

Limitations in Analysis

The sample size and timeline of this case study influenced my data analysis. Originally, I planned to conduct all student interviews first, followed by the data analysis and coding. As I interviewed the first student, I decided to immediately transcribe the data following each interview due to the timeline. Based on that first student interview, I was able to make shifts in the moment during the following seven interviews. With each interview, I was able to adjust as needed based on student applications, abilities, and responses. Since I was comparing the data qualitatively and seeking each unique experience, I was able to adjust the sequence or level of difficulty for each task. For example, as I conducted each interview with each student, I became aware of which students were going to surpass or fail to meet the expectations of the task. Those in-the-moment adjustments caused limitations during analysis and coding due to the small variances within the interviews. All students were asked the same questions and completed the same activities. Adjustments included the number of words students were given in each activity and the sequence of questions.

Limitations in Generalizability

The design of a case study highlights the unique and complex experiences of the individuals within the context (Stake, 1995). While this is a benefit of case study research, it
leaves little room for replication. While the methodology, instruments, and tools could be replicated within another study, the results would vary, just as the individuals and exact settings would vary. Although this exact case study cannot be generalized, this research model could act as a framework for future research in various settings or topics in literacy.

**Implications of Future Educational Research**

Foundational literacy practices have frequently been discussed in the educational research community (Pearson, 2003). The debate over literacy curricula and instruction even gained the title of “the reading wars” while shifting its focus from the Whole-Language approach to phonics instruction to Balanced Literacy and Units of Study to following the Science of Reading to structured literacy. The buzz around the Science of Reading movement caused the latest resurgence of the reading wars debate following a global pandemic and virtual learning. With momentum from podcasts and social media, the Science of Reading movement quickly gained traction and was quickly linked directly to explicit phonics instruction and vilifying Balanced Literacy methods. Currently, clarifying misconceptions about the Science of Reading movement has been at the forefront of the educational research community (Tierney & Pearson, 2024).

Overall, the reading instruction community seems to agree with the essential instructional elements laid out in the National Reading Panel Report (2001), including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Differences remain in which elements of instruction are emphasized and how they are packaged.

Within this qualitative research study, I aimed to understand the experiences of a specific first-grade classroom during explicit phonics instruction. An additional goal was to highlight student voices and experiences in reading instruction research. I acknowledge that this study consisted of a small sample size for a short period of time. Future educational research may
consider conducting this study on a larger scale to compare the experiences of various cases and understand how different populations experience phonics instruction. I also acknowledge that this research study focused on a small element of reading instruction, phonics instruction. Future educational research may consider using the framework of this study on other elements of reading instruction, such as vocabulary instruction.

**Implications for Educational Practice**

Findings from this study indicated that teachers need the space for autonomy and adaptive teaching, while students best access content within their individual zones or phases. When considering reading curriculum, educators want to provide students with all of the necessary tools they might need to become successful readers. This research study considered the individual experiences of members of a classroom, which is a potential change for curriculum and educational practice. Currently, the Target District has implemented a shift in its elementary reading curriculum by changing its curriculum to one that implements the Phases of Word Learning Theory in reading instruction. When considering that students are best able to access the content at their specific phase, it is important to have a curriculum that supports both students and teachers in those efforts. This research aids in the conversations regarding meeting students where they are and giving them the proper tools to accomplish their goals.

**Summary**

This study examined the experiences of a specific first-grade class with explicit phonics instruction at an urban elementary school in the northeastern region of the United States. Classroom observations and interviews with the teacher and student participants were conducted as qualitative data collection. Quantitative student data collected from the Target District curriculum-based measurements were used to support the data collected during the task-based
student interviews. The data collected highlighted the varied individual experiences within one classroom while learning and applying the same phonics lessons and skills. While the teacher viewed the phonics instruction from a lens of educator experience and student need, students experienced and applied the phonics instruction from their own individual access points. The findings of this study will contribute to conversations surrounding phonics instruction, specifically research including student voices and experiences. As the reading wars continue on, researchers and educators should remember that students are at the center of this battle. Their voices, experiences, and education are what matter most.
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Appendix A: IRB Approvals

November 8, 2023

Ms. Haley Fry
West Chester University

Dear Ms. Fry:

Please allow this letter to serve as notice that The School District through the Office of Research and Evaluation’s (ORE) Research Review Committee, has granted you approval to conduct study “Experiences of First Grade Students During Explicit Phonics Instruction.” Your data collection must be consistent with the activities described in your proposal and you must adhere to the Standard Terms for Research Data License Agreement.

In addition, please note:

☐ This letter is not a data agreement. If you have requested administrative data as part of your RRC proposal, you will receive a draft data agreement to review with additional information including the data we can provide, the conditions for using the data, and the estimated cost. All student data must remain strictly confidential.

☐ Entry into schools is contingent on the principals’ approval. Once a principal has agreed to participate in our study, he/she must complete the Principal Support to Conduct Research Form. Please return completed forms to the Office of Research and Evaluation by email prior to commencing your project.

☐ All researchers working in schools must have completed FBI clearance, child abuse history clearance, and criminal record checks. All clearances must be submitted to ORE prior to entering schools.

☐ If during the course of your research activities you witness a case of suspected child abuse or sexual misconduct, you are required to report the incident to one of the following: the school principal, the Research Review Committee, or directly to ChildLine at 1-800-932-0313.

☐ You are required to provide a copy of your final report to ORE at the conclusion of your study.

Good luck with your project and feel free to contact us if you have any questions.

Best regards,

Director

Research Review Committee
Oct 5, 2023 1:39:24 PM EDT

To: Haley Fry  
Col of Education & Social Work, Ed Leadership & Higher Ed Adm  
Re: Expedited Review - Instal - IRB-FY2023-317 Understanding the Experiences of a First-Grade Class with Explicit Phonics Instruction: A Qualitative Case Study

Dear Haley Fry:

Thank you for your submitted application to the West Chester University Institutional Review Board. Since it was deemed expedited, it was required that two reviewers evaluated the submission. We have had the opportunity to review your application and have rendered the decision below for Understanding the Experiences of a First-Grade Class with Explicit Phonics Instruction: A Qualitative Case Study.

Decision: Approved

Selected Category: 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.  
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interviews, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects: 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Sincerely,
West Chester University Institutional Review Board
Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Student Participants Needed

FOR A RESEARCH STUDY INVESTIGATING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FIRST GRADERS LEARNING LETTERS & SOUNDS

What Is Involved?:

• Students will participate in regular first grade phonics instruction and reading assessments.
• Researcher will observe three classroom sessions and take notes about the curriculum and your child’s interaction with phonics. Researcher will review assessment data.
• After completing regular instruction and assessments, student participants will participate in an audio-recorded interview for 20 minutes outside of school hours about their lived experiences in the classroom while learning letters and sounds. Audio recordings will be destroyed after the researcher transcribes responses.
• Researcher will contact the parent/guardian directly via preferred method of contact, to set up a date and time for an interview with the student participant. Interviews can be in person at your desired location or on Zoom.
Benefits
There are no direct benefits to your child as the participant, but the benefits of the study will add to research in determining how students learn how to read. In addition, this study will provide information on the real classroom application of phonics instruction. The significance of this study would be that phonics positively affects reading from the perspective of a first-grade student. This research would also support the district’s pivot to following the science behind teaching students reading. Finally, it will help continue conversations involving student voices in reading research and their own academic success.

Risks
There are minimal risks to your child as the participant including: loss of confidentiality and mild discomfort during interview questions. Student participants will engage in the same assessments and instruction as non-participating students. Grades will not be impacted based on participation. If students experience discomfort at any time, they have the right to withdraw at any time.

For More Information
Contact:
Haley Fry
HF694125@wcupa.edu
Appendix C: Informed Parental Consent

Project Title: Understanding the Experiences of a First-Grade Class with Explicit Phonics Instruction: A Qualitative Case Study

Investigator(s): Haley Fry; Heather Schugar

Project Overview: Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Haley Fry as part of their Doctoral Dissertation to understand the lived experiences of a specific first-grade classroom during explicit phonics instruction. This study will add to the conversation surrounding the science of reading movement and the emphasis on foundational skills.

Your child’s participation will take about 20 minutes to complete one interview.

There is a minimal risk of mild discomfort with responding to the interview questions and loss of confidentiality.

There are no benefits to your child as the participant, but the benefits of the study will add to the science of reading the body of literature in determining how students learn how to read. In addition, this study will provide information on the real classroom application of phonics instruction. The significance of this study would be that phonics positively affects reading from the perspective of first-grade students. This research would also support the district’s pivot to following the science behind teaching students reading. Finally, it will help continue conversations involving student voices in reading research and their own academic success.

The research project is being done by Haley Fry as part of their Doctoral Dissertation. This study aims to understand the lived experiences of a specific first-grade classroom during explicit phonics instruction. This study will add to the conversation surrounding the science of reading movement and the emphasis on foundational skills. If you would like your child to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this consent form.

You may ask Haley Fry any questions to help you understand this study. If you don’t want your child to be a part of this study, it won’t affect any services from West Chester University and your child will continue to receive phonics instruction at school. If you choose to have your child be a part of this study, you have the right as a parent/guardian to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

1. **What is the purpose of this study?**
   - This study aims to understand the lived experiences of a specific first-grade classroom during explicit phonics instruction. This study will add to the conversation surrounding the science of reading movement and the emphasis on foundational skills.

2. **If you decide for your child to be a part of this study, your child will be asked to do the following:**
   - Complete one auto-recorded interview outside of school hours.
   - This study will take about 20 minutes of your child’s time.
The researcher will contact the consenting parent/guardian according to their preferred contact method to arrange an interview location and time (outside of school hours). Parents/guardians are responsible for bringing the child participant to and from the interview location. Parents/guardians will not participate in the interview.

Your child receives regular instruction and assessments on phonics during their first-grade classroom experience. The researcher will be observing class 4-6 sessions on phonics to learn about how phonics is taught by the teacher. However, they will only take notes about how your child works with phonics instruction and will only review your child's regularly collected reading assessment scores if you agree to participate.

3. **Are there any experimental medical treatments?**
   - No

4. **Is there any risk to my child?**
   - Possible risks or sources of discomfort include: mild discomfort with responding to the interview questions and loss of confidentiality/
   - Student participants will engage in the same assessments and instruction as non-participating students. Grades will not be impacted based on participation.
   - If you become upset with the study at any point and wish to speak to someone, you may speak with Heather Schugar.
   - If your child becomes upset and wishes to speak with someone, they may speak with their teacher (teacher participant)
   - If your child experiences discomfort during the interview, your child has the right to skip any questions or withdraw at any time.

5. **Is there any benefit to me?**
   - Benefits to you may include the following: There are no benefits to the participants because they will receive the curriculum and testing regardless of participating in the study.
   - Other benefits may include the following: The benefits of the study will add to the science of reading the body of literature in determining how students learn how to read. In addition, this study will provide information on the real classroom application of phonics instruction. The significance of this study would be that phonics positively affects reading from the perspective of a first-grade student. This research would also support the district’s pivot to following the science behind teaching students reading. Finally, it will help continue conversations involving student voices in reading research and their own academic success.

6. **How will you protect my child’s privacy?**
   - The session will be recorded.
   - Audio recording of interviews to allow for transcription
   - Your child’s records will be private. Only Haley Fry, Heather Schugar, and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
   - Your child’s name will not be used in any reports.
   - Records will be stored:
     - Password Protected File/Computer
   - Any personal information will be redacted and given a pseudonym upon transcription.
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- Records will be destroyed Three Years After Study Completion

7. **Do I get paid to take part in this study?**
   - No

8. **Who do I contact in case of research-related injury?**
   - For any questions about this study, contact:
     - **Primary Investigator:** Haley Fry at [REDACTED]
     - **Faculty Sponsor:** Heather Schugar at [REDACTED]

9. **What will you do with my child’s Identifiable Information?**
   - Your child’s information will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.

I, __________________________ (your name), have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if my child is uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

________________________________________  __________________________________
Subject/Participant Signature                     Date

________________________________________  __________________________________
Witness Signature                                Date
Appendix D: Teacher Informed Consent

Project Title: Understanding the Experiences of a First-Grade Class with Explicit Phonics Instruction: A Qualitative Case Study

Investigator(s): Haley Fry; Heather Schugar

Project Overview: Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Haley Fry as part of their Doctoral Dissertation to understand the lived experiences of a specific first-grade classroom during explicit phonics instruction. This study will add to the conversation surrounding the science of reading movement and the emphasis on foundational skills.

Your participation will take about 30 minutes to complete one interview.

There is a minimal risk of mild discomfort with responding to the interview questions and loss of confidentiality.

There are no benefits to you as the participant, but the benefits of the study will add to the science of reading the body of literature in determining how students learn how to read. In addition, this study will provide information on the real classroom application of phonics instruction. The significance of this study would be that phonics positively affects reading from the perspective of first-grade students. This research would also support the district’s pivot to following the science behind teaching students reading. Finally, it will help continue conversations involving student voices in reading research and their own academic success.

The research project is being done by Haley Fry as part of their Doctoral Dissertation. This study aims to understand the lived experiences of a specific first-grade classroom during explicit phonics instruction. This study will add to the conversation surrounding the science of reading movement and the emphasis on foundational skills. If you would like your child to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this consent form.

You may ask Haley Fry any questions to help you understand this study. If you don’t want to be a part of this study, it won’t affect any services from The School District of Philadelphia or West Chester University. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

1. **What is the purpose of this study?**
   - This study aims to understand the lived experiences of a specific first-grade classroom during explicit phonics instruction. This study will add to the conversation surrounding the science of reading movement and the emphasis on foundational skills.

2. **If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:**
   - complete one interview outside of school hours
   - This study will take about 30 minutes of your time.

3. **Are there any experimental medical treatments?**
   - No

4. **Is there any risk to me?**
Possible risks or sources of discomfort include: • Mild discomfort with responding to the interview questions • Loss of personal time • Loss of confidentiality.

If you choose not to participate, your job with the School District of Philadelphia will not be affected.

If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Heather Schugar

If you experience discomfort, you have the right to skip any questions or withdraw at any time.

5. **Is there any benefit to me?**
   - Benefits to you may include the following: There are no benefits to the participants because they will receive the curriculum and testing regardless of participating in the study.
   - Other benefits may include the following: The benefits of the study will add to the science of reading the body of literature in determining how students learn how to read. In addition, this study will provide information on the real classroom application of phonics instruction. The significance of this study would be that phonics positively affects reading from the perspective of a first-grade student. This research would also support the district’s pivot to following the science behind teaching students reading. Finally, it will help continue conversations involving student voices in reading research and their own academic success.

6. **How will you protect my privacy?**
   - The session will be recorded.
   - Audio recording of interviews to allow for transcription
   - Your records will be private. Only Haley Fry, Heather Schugar, and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
   - Your name will not be used in any reports.
   - Records will be stored:
     - Password Protected File/Computer
   - Any personal information will be redacted and given a pseudonym upon transcription.
   - Records will be destroyed Three Years After Study Completion

7. **Do I get paid to take part in this study?**
   - No

8. **Who do I contact in case of research-related injury?**
   - For any questions with this study, contact:
     - **Primary Investigator:** Haley Fry at [267-255-4147]
     - **Faculty Sponsor:** Heather Schugar at [610-738-0507]

9. **What will you do with my Identifiable Information?**
   - Your information will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.

I, _________________________________ (your name), have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if my child is uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at
any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

________________________________________  ______________________
Subject/Participant Signature                Date

________________________________________  ______________________
Witness Signature                            Date
Appendix E: Child/Minor Verbal Assent Script

Researcher: The goal of my project is to know how students practice becoming better readers in first grade when they are learning letters and sounds during phonics. The goal of our talk today is for you to share with me how you think and feel when you are practicing to become a better reader in your classroom. Do you have any questions about my project?

Child/Minor: [Yes/No] Answer questions, if any.

Researcher: Only you and I will know what you [say/do] here today. Your [parents, teacher and/or classmates] will not know what you have [said/written/drawn] today. It will not change your grades in any way. When I tell other people about my project, I will not use your name, and no one will be able to tell who I am talking about. If you do not want to answer my questions, that is okay. If you want to stop at any time, that is okay. There will be no bad feelings if you choose not to be in the project. Even if your parents gave their permission, you can still decide to stop at any time. Would still like to take part in my project today?

Child/Minor: [Yes/No]

Researcher: [If yes] Do you have any questions for me today? [Answer questions, if any]
I. ________________________________, understand that my adults at home have said that it’s okay for me to take part in a project about how I feel about learning phonics under the direction of Haley Fry. I am taking part because I want to. I have been told that I can stop at any time I want to, and nothing will happen to me if I want to stop.

________________________________________  ________________________________
Child/Minor Signature          Witnessed by (Parent/Guardian)
Appendix G: Teacher Interview Protocol

Questions: (including but not limited to)

1. What is phonics?

2. What does the term “science of reading” mean to you?

3. What does the term “balanced literacy” mean to you?

4. How has your perspective of phonics changed since you became a teacher?

5. How do you feel when teaching phonics?

6. What is your favorite part of a phonics lesson?

7. How have you found that your students apply their phonics knowledge?

8. Do you think your students enjoy learning phonics?

9. What phonics skills do you find students struggle most with?
Appendix H: Student Task-Oriented Interview Protocol

Questions: (including but not limited to)

1. What is phonics?
2. When do you do phonics in your classroom?
3. How do you feel during phonics time?
4. What is your favorite part of phonics?
5. Can you share something you have learned in phonics this year?
6. Do you think phonics makes you a better reader?
7. How do you feel when you correctly sound out a word?

Phonics Tasks: Three tasks were embedded within the phonics questions. The phonics skills addressed in this task were directly linked to the skills covered in the observed lessons.

1. Pop-It Task: The researcher dictated one word at a time, and the student used the bubbles to "pop" each sound on the Pop-It toy.
   a. Words dictated: mix, she, have, little, night.

2. “Spelligator” Task—The researcher dictated a word, and the student manipulated the letter tiles to spell the word on the spelligator.
   a. Words dictated: toss, ship, duck, broom, well, wish

3. Words Their Way Primary Spelling Inventory: The researcher dictated 15 words, one at a time, and students used paper and pencil to spell each word.
   a. Words dictated: fan, pet, dig, rob, hope, wait, gum, sled, stick, shine, dream, blade, coach, fright, chewed.