

AHEAD OF THE GAME: SUPPORT THAT CREATES POSITIVITY, PASSION AND PERSEVERANCE

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Abstract

The author implemented a Structured Literacy approach on a campus that had been replete of phonics implementation for at least five years. Teachers received training in the Science of Teaching Reading (STR) and job embedded support from the author as they worked to improve student literacy results. Additionally, systems on the campus such as the Master Schedule, RtI Implementation and data analysis changed to reflect literacy as the priority. Through passion, positivity, and perseverance, all stakeholders worked together to create change.

Keywords: STR, phonics, growth mindset, RtI, Instructional Leadership

Over forty years ago, Ron Edmonds, father of the Effective Schools Movement, pointed to the need for equity in education for all students (1979). Boykin and Noguera (2011), more than 30 years later, begged for the same recognition of the achievement gap. So, for many years, researchers have debated the effects of poverty, the government has tried to mandate a fix for the effects of poverty and other factors on school performance, and schools have worked to share the responsibility of breaking the harsh cycle set in motion by poverty through providing students the needed emotional, behavioral, and academic skills to help them move onward and upward in life.

Hart and Risley's 1995 study documented a more than 30-million-word gap as measured in prekindergarten children from poverty compared with those from professional families. However, although environmental factors like economic disadvantage can greatly impact many aspects of schooling, including reading, this is not always the case. Even more importantly, this is an area over which educators have no control and the focus on it detracts from an issue that research shows makes an important impact, namely, teacher effectiveness in reading instruction. Kilpatrick (2018) states that the lack of research-based instruction in foundational reading skills is one of the major causes of reading difficulties in children. Yet, Seidenberg (2017) points to a lack of teacher

effectiveness, which is the result of a lack of preparation in structured literacy during pre-service or in-service training. Seidenberg goes on to point out that the extent to whether a child experiences reading success or failure ties directly to how quickly the child receives needed interventions for deficits and whether the one providing the assistance was knowledgeable about research-based reading. Therefore, the problem points both to lack of appropriate teacher preparation to teach reading which then affects the quality of instruction students receive in foundational reading,

Moats and Tolman (2009) point to a strong relationship between initial reading achievement and later reading achievement as very high. Furthermore, the International Dyslexia Association's Knowledge and Practice Standards (2018) state that "classroom instruction that is informed by research and effectively addresses the strengths and deficits of students can prevent most reading difficulties, especially when children are provided with skilled instruction in the early grades." This study aimed to do two things: (1) train kindergarten through second grade teachers in Structured Literacy and (2) put effective structures in place within the school environment to support early and intense intervention.

Fletcher and Nicholas (2017) state that "principals need to be cognizant of the importance of reading as a success factor for...students" (p. 644). They go on to state that principals need to lead the way with their knowledge of

literacy and provide needed support to staff as they grow in knowledge of effective reading instruction if they are going to provide a strong lever for creating positive change. In today's era of accountability, there is a lot of pressure to close the gap for at-risk students. Dempster (2012) states that the "role of the principal in improving student outcomes is second only to teachers" (p. 50). Therefore, my aim in the study was to model engagement in the learning process and then, through observation and feedback, provide support for teachers' new learning in order to create a positive trajectory for student achievement on the campus.

Context and History

North Primary School (pseudonym) serves grades PK through second grades and is situated in a small East Texas town with a population of approximately 4,500. The total district student population is just over 1,200, with 379 enrolled at North. The enrollment fluctuated slightly over the past few years according to the Texas Academic Performance Reports (2019). In the 2017-18 school year, the following student demographic data were reported: White - 54.2%, African American - 23%, Hispanic - 11.9%, and other - 10.9%; 205 males (54.09%) and 174 females (45.91%). Special education students represented 13.23% of the student population. The percentage of economically-disadvantaged students was 83.6% and at-risk students made up 55.6%. The campus mobility rate was 21.9%. Additionally, there were 14 English language learners and 6 students in the gifted and talented program. The professional staff was 89.7% White and 96.6% female with 48.3% having 0-5 years of experience and 10.3% having 6-10 years of experience. On average, the teacher/student ratio was 1:16 (Texas Academic Performance Reports, 2019). Furthermore, in 2018, the federal government required a new report to be filed by districts called the Equity Report. This report showed that NPS was staffed by teachers with the least experience and served the most at-risk students in the district.

Additionally, the campus had had no research-based phonics program for the previous five years and reading scores had waned. In 2018, the teachers selected a new reading curriculum based on Balanced Literacy principles and devoid of research-based phonics instruction. Furthermore, since the previous administrator did not guide teachers to look at student data in reading, the staff did not realize anything was amiss on the campus academically.

Journey to the Problem

In the 2017-18 school year, I served the district as the director of state and federal programs and, although I was not responsible for curriculum choices on the NPS campus, I reviewed the Campus Improvement Plan for each campus in the district. I noted data included from the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) showed 67% of students scored Still Developing on the end of first grade state assessment, which was a much lower percentage than I had seen in my previous experience working on a campus that served 99% at-risk students. After discussing the data with my superintendent, she asked me to set a meeting with the campus principal to further probe the issue. After the initial meeting in which we discussed the data and curriculum used on the campus, my superintendent encouraged me to further investigate the literacy block, curricular options, and systems in place in regard to reading at NPS.

In response, the elementary instructional specialist and I studied NPS's master schedule and observed teachers in classrooms. I found a great deal of misused time within the master schedule due to lengthy transitions and no systematic phonemic awareness nor phonics instruction for kindergarten through second grade. At that point, I did not have the authority or presence on the campus to create a climate of accountability for change, but I did make recommendations for teacher training in structured literacy. However, the climate in the district grew very tense and the primary principal resigned effective immediately in February, 2018. In March, 2018, the superintendent approached me about taking over as principal for the 2018-19 school year. So, I quickly arranged for staff to participate in online LETRS training and Neuhaus Education Center structured literacy curriculum training during the summer of 2018 to solidify teacher knowledge of the foundations of reading theory and to ensure placement of a research-based curriculum.

Campus Organization and Grade Level Team Composition

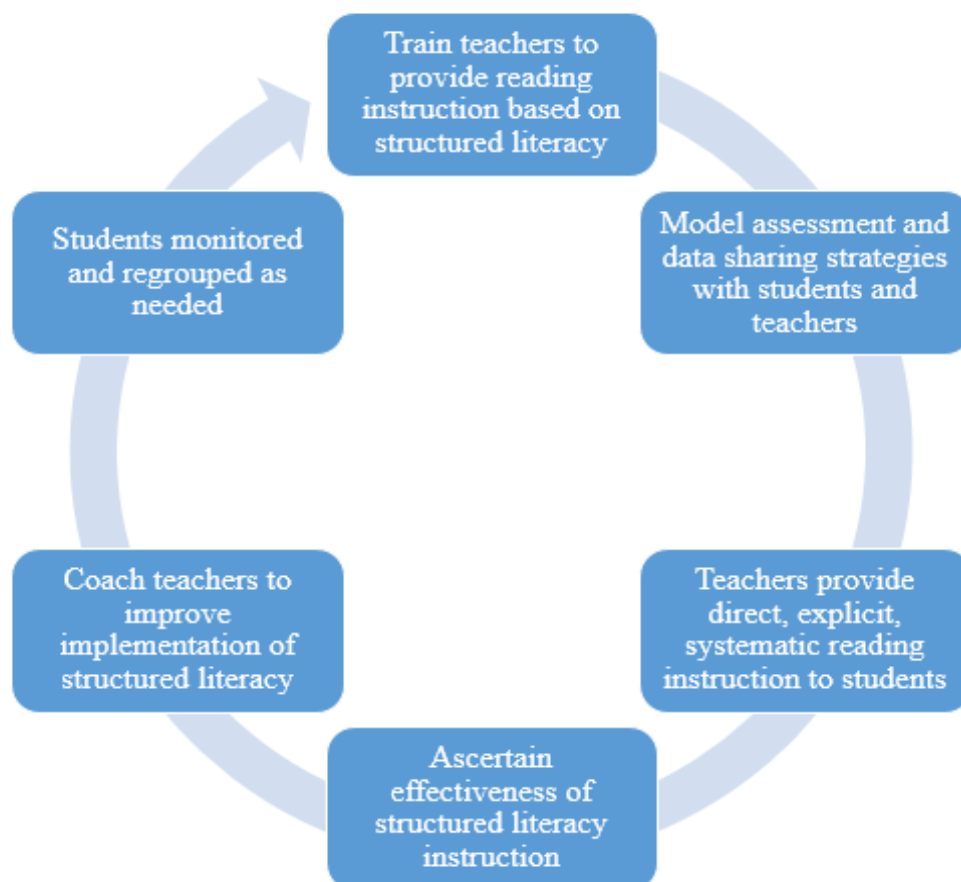
The campus is organized by grade level teams of five or six teachers each. The kindergarten team consisted of five teachers including a very negative, ineffective leader with 15 years of experience, two 2-year veterans who were easily influenced by the leader and lacked skill in reading instruction, and two teachers with zero and one year of experience who desired to provide appropriate instruction and were not easily influenced. The first grade team included four teachers, wholly entrenched in the balanced literacy methodology and no knowledge of the Science of Teaching Reading (STR) with three to four years of experience each, and one teacher who was in her initial year of teaching on an alternative teaching certification plan. She, too, had no knowledge of STR and aimed to do what was right for students while also maintaining the peace among her colleagues. The second grade team consisted of four experienced educators (10-25 years) and one newer (three to four years of experience), but highly effective, teacher. None had previous experience with STR, but all were open to doing whatever was necessary to close the reading gaps that were evident in their students.

Methodology

Moats and Tolman (2009) state that an instructional leader establishes goals and creates a context in which those goals can be achieved through mutual and reciprocal learning (p. 84). Therefore, in order to ameliorate the effects of years without research-based reading instruction, the following strategies were implemented: revise the master schedule to add specificity for reading instruction and Response to Intervention; find funding for professional development in structured literacy instruction; and give teachers support through ongoing feedback and modeling of research-based reading instruction, assessment, and data analysis. A visual representation of the way these strategies work together is seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of the Research Study



RQ1

To drive improvement of reading achievement on a primary school campus, I aimed to answer two research questions, each using its own data source and methodology. The first research question is as follows: Does student reading performance significantly increase due to the implementation of a structured literacy approach? The campus had not had a phonics curriculum in five years. Therefore, the principal/author arranged to provide Neuhaus Structured Literacy training to the Instructional Coach, the reading interventionist and classroom and special education teachers PK-2nd grade. The training provided not only a foundation in the principles of STR, but also guidance in implementation of the Neuhaus curriculum which is closely aligned to STR. I also provided all teachers training in the use and administration of the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI), Star Early Literacy and Star Renaissance Reading. Then, I scheduled data meetings to review data from these assessments after each administration in order to best place students in tiers for intervention.

RQ2

The next research question is as follows: Does teacher implementation of structured literacy improve due to accountability and continued feedback and training? To measure this, I performed observations and walkthroughs and also asked for input via a needs survey and regular feedback conversations. From the data gathered from each of these avenues, I offered periodic trainings based on pieces of the curriculum that needed enhancement overall, modeled lessons for individuals that requested that assistance, and also attended weekly planning meetings to support the grade levels that needed that type of support. In January, I led 1st and 2nd grade teachers to create a pacing calendar in order to plan toward a completion point for most students for the year.

Master Schedule Revision

The previous year's schedule had a transition time in place before and after every sequence of instruction as well as before and after recess, specials, and lunch. This reduced instruction time by 45 minutes daily. Therefore, since the goal was to raise reading achievement, the time required for reading instruction and collaborative planning needed to increase. The change also provided the extra block of time needed for a well-developed Response to Intervention program. Danielson (2002) emphasizes that the way time is

blocked off within the master schedule speaks to the priorities of the school. Therefore, I wanted to make sure the emphasis was on reading instruction and Response to Intervention, eliminating some of the waste found in generous transition times.

The master schedule and systems changes (testing, data meetings, Response to Intervention/referrals) were introduced to all staff members during the August 2018 professional learning days prior to the start of the 2018-19 school year. I first met with the staff as a group so that all would receive the information from me. I, then, followed up by meeting with each grade level to allow time for questions and clarification. At this time, I also elaborated on my expectations for the daily use of the Neuhaus curriculum beginning the second full week of school. All staff members were excited to see there was an extra planning period allowed for in the schedule.

Professional Development in Structured Literacy and the Science of Teaching Reading

Washburn et al. (2011) noted that professional development that provides training in basic language constructs related to word structure reaps great rewards for students' reading achievement for both in-service and preservice teacher groups. The National Reading Panel Report also stated that in-service professional development leads to improvement of teacher knowledge and practices and, as a result, has increased student achievement in reading (National Reading Panel, 2000). Furthermore, Concannon-Gibney & Murphy (2012) stated that the most effective type of professional development (PD) emerges from a shared campus vision and is designed with the specific setting in mind rather than copying what has worked in another school. Washburn and et al. (2011) further stated that to ensure professional development creates change for in-service teachers it needs to be ongoing so that it provides real time assistance as problems arise within each individual classroom. Therefore, the district provided federal funding which afforded all reading teachers who serve Prekindergarten through 8th grade students the opportunity to receive training in the foundations of research-based reading instruction through Sopris Learning's online LETRS over the summer. Furthermore, all North Primary School classroom teachers, the special education teacher, and the reading interventionist were trained in Neuhaus' Education Center's Structured Literacy curriculum which provides

explicit, sequential, and systematic phonics and phonological awareness instruction.

Neuhaus Curriculum Implementation

Teachers began the Neuhaus curriculum implementation the second full week of school in August of 2018. I provided teachers with a period of about six weeks to gain proficiency using the Neuhaus curriculum prior to observing in their classrooms. I also maintained an open line of communication for each grade level to request the help they needed to be successful, whether that meant planning support, gathering materials, or modeling. The kindergarten team quickly requested support during the hour they implemented small group instruction based on Neuhaus curriculum, and also, that I meet with them weekly to help plan lessons. So, I reshuffled the schedules of activity teachers to allow them time to serve in kindergarten classrooms for an hour daily. First and second grade teachers wanted time to implement the curriculum prior to observations but still asked for guidance as questions arose.

Supports Provided During Implementation

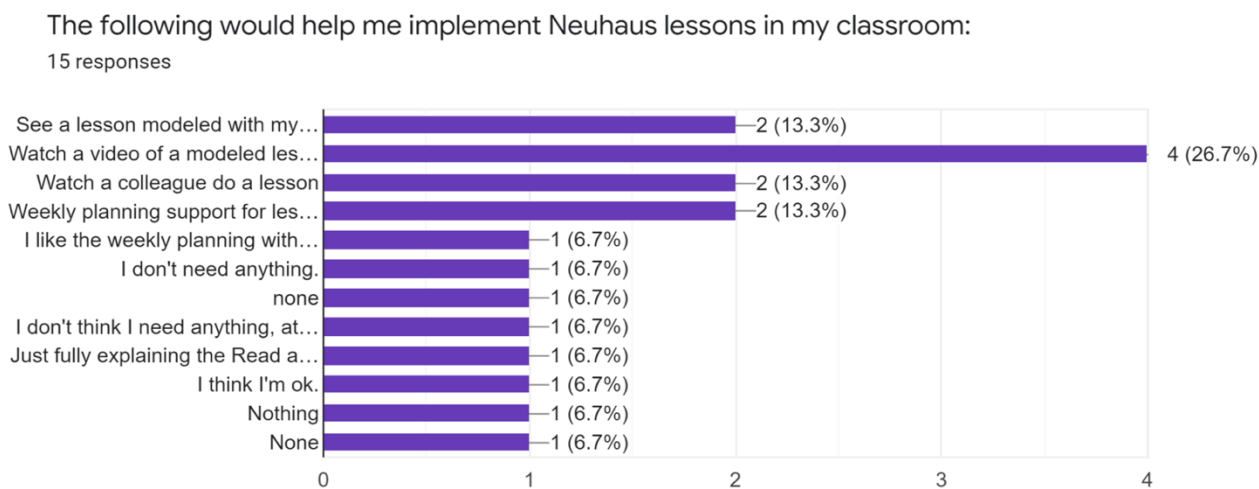
Ogenosky (2017) stated that a successful RtI and Structured Literacy implementation requires the following: program-specific professional development, continual job-embedded professional development, modeling changes desired, and a way to measure staff accountability. Therefore, in October and November, I observed each first and second grade teacher during their small group instruction time for 45 minutes each and followed up

individually, sharing feedback through email and in-person conversations. As I noted trends in implementation errors, we met as grade level teams to discuss misunderstandings and to allow me to provide more in-depth coaching in the areas needing improvement. I informally observed kindergarten teachers during walkthroughs completed during their small group times. Then, I gave feedback and coaching during our planning meetings as needed.

In December, I surveyed teachers' needs in a different manner just to see what type of specific help I could provide them to help them achieve fidelity of implementation. These survey results are found in Figure 2. Three teachers requested additional modeling of lessons during their reading blocks. I scheduled this assistance individually and then observed teachers' subsequent implementation and provided feedback. The instructional specialist for elementary accompanied me twice as I provided modeled lessons. She also videotaped portions of the lesson to provide a resource that she shared with teachers as a ready reference if they were struggling with a particular component. In addition to the mid-year survey, I scheduled group feedback sessions with each grade level to give teachers an opportunity to voice where they were struggling. First grade teachers were still struggling with the timing of doing all components of the lesson within the small group time while maintaining student engagement in other station activities. Therefore, we decided as a group that those teachers that felt this was an issue would teach portions of the lesson (oral language, new concept) to the whole group and then follow up with other components (reading practice, deck review, extended reading) with small groups during the station time. We agreed that

Figure 2

December 2018 NPS Teacher Survey to Gauge Support Needed for Neuhaus Implementation



teachers would try this method and then we would reconvene to provide feedback and adjust as needed.

Another concern for first grade teachers was having their on-grade-level students take the time to go through all components of the lesson in a small group when they already knew the material. So, we discussed the fact that providing the concepts and oral language practice in a whole group manner would allow these students to be presented with the concepts to make sure they did not have any gaps in knowledge. They could use the small group time to move quickly through other components and spend more time on extended reading. An additional request by second grade teachers was that I attend weekly planning sessions; so, I added this to my kindergarten meetings that started in the fall. This provided both a time for teachers to ask timely questions and for me time to give mini professional development sessions on upcoming content or misunderstandings.

I repeated the observations for first and second grade classrooms during January and February of 2019. Teacher response to the observations varied both according to grade level and within the grade level. As a whole, second grade teachers were very open to feedback and wanted to make sure their implementation was done with fidelity. The first grade teachers that were on the campus prior to my arrival were very entrenched in balanced literacy and, thus, were resistant to feedback and making the changes needed to implement a sequential, systematic curriculum. They liked the way the concepts were taught and wanted to use the script and incorporate it into the lessons they planned without following the scope and sequence of the curriculum. This change affected the effectiveness of the curriculum implementation as it contradicted the sequential nature of structured literacy that was built into the design. The one new first grade teacher was open to feedback and modeling and welcomed it as often as it was provided; yet, she also had to plan and stay on track with her colleagues, which made for a tough situation overall. Since I was not on the campus the previous year as an administrator, I am not sure of the level of transparency and openness that had been expected or developed between the staff and principal. This level of sharing feedback was new to the staff and, in retrospect, should have started with a data dig at the beginning of the year so we were all on the same page regarding the story the data told up to that point.

In January, I also asked each first and second grade teacher to create a pacing calendar to plan out what lessons

they hoped to complete with their students from January through May. This allowed them to plan for days that were dedicated to other things such as testing, assemblies, and shortened schedules and still see where they would finish with students at the end of the year. This also helped with conversations regarding future planning of the curriculum implementation.

Revision of Campus Response to Intervention Plan

Mellard (2017) defines Response to Intervention (RtI) as “a prevention-oriented, multi-tiered organizational framework that integrates timely assessments and data-based decision making with research-based interventions to support students’ learning, achievement, and positive behavior” (p. 11). RtI’s Tier 2 is supplemental and should well serve the 15-30% of students that may need extra small group instruction to close any gaps in learning. Additionally, Tier 3 is reserved for the 5-15% of students that need intensive intervention (University of Texas, 2005). If a greater percentage of students is being served in Tiers 2 and 3, then the Tier 1 instruction may not be rigorous enough to support learning of the grade level standards. When I first examined the TPRI data from the district lens, I knew Tier 1 was faulty as too many students were falling below standard for reading. However, it took a deeper dive into data and more data sources to discover all that needed change.

It did not take data to determine that the structure and resources currently used on the campus for RtI were not aligned to Tier 1 instruction and that the process for progress monitoring and movement through tiers of intervention was either non-existent or fragmented at best. Foorman and Torgeson (2001) stated that, regardless of the purpose of the instruction (whether Tier 1 for prevention or for intervention in Tiers 2 or 3), the components of effective reading instruction remain the same. Therefore, providing students with research-based, structured literacy, Tier 1 instruction and aligned tier 2 and 3 interventions would serve to increase students’ reading achievement. A study conducted by EdSource in 2003 (as cited in Moats & Tolman, 2009) states that “the introduction of a structured, systematic, comprehensive classroom program used throughout a school...usually accounts for substantial school wide gains” (p. 87) which was exactly the aim. So, the following components were revised at NPS: scheduling, curriculum, progress monitoring, and movement within the tiers as a result of data meetings.

Kindergarten teachers had a one-hour block daily for RtI within the classroom. Using data, they divided students into three groups that rotated through three different stations including 20 minutes of Fast ForWord, teacher table instruction based on Neuhaus's Reading Readiness curriculum, and skill instruction assigned by the teacher and led by an aide that helped facilitate student engagement at student desks and on the computers. After mid-year TPRI testing showed one fourth of kindergarten students were ready to move to structured phonics lessons, I pulled this group and began utilizing Neuhaus' Language Enrichment curriculum with them. Also, the very lowest students were pulled by the reading interventionist for more focused letter naming fluency and phonological awareness training.

RtI for first and second grade classrooms followed a similar structure which was very different from kindergarten. Tier 2 instruction took place in the classroom, led by the classroom teacher, while students in Tier 3 groups traveled to the reading interventionist's classroom and the Fast ForWord lab. Neuhaus's Language Enrichment curriculum was used during RtI, yet the pacing was adjusted during Tier 2 and 3 instruction to serve students who were struggling with the Tier 1 pace. Additionally, ESL, dyslexia, and special education services were all scheduled during RtI, so no students missed core class time. First and second grade students had two 30-minute assignments during RtI, whether it occurred within the classroom or a different setting. Additionally, as students met grade-level expectations in reading, they were moved to an enrichment class during the RtI block. This was a real incentive for students and helped many truly push for growth on assessments.

Measuring Growth and Discussing Data

Danielson (2002) notes that assessments have many purposes. For example, they measure the progress of students and the effectiveness of programs and/or teachers. However, the teachers on the campus had not been provided a model for how to administer the tests with fidelity and, thus, did not give much credence to administering the tests or providing feedback to students or parents. Because of this, the classroom teacher, the reading interventionist, and I all gathered in the lab to provide support to students and teachers, monitor their continual engagement with the assessment, and celebrate progress and success.

In August, all kindergarten and first grade students were assessed with Star Early Literacy, a 27-question, computer-adaptive assessment which, in large part, reads test content to students. Star Early Literacy assesses four of the five components identified as important by the National Reading Panel. Second grade students were assessed with Star Reading, a 34-item, computer-adaptive assessment which is read entirely by the student. The assessments start with content that mimics the grade level reflected by the student registration, and then goes up and down in rigor until the completion of the assessment. At that point, an overall scaled score is provided and percentile rank for each subskill is given. An Instructional Reading Level is assigned as well for those students taking Star Reading. The students that were classified as dyslexic, special education, or English learners were provided extra time as an accommodation. These tests were repeated on five subsequent occasions to provide progress monitoring for students and to allow for celebration of student success. Seventy-two kindergarten students and 78 first grade students were tested using Star Early Literacy, a product of Renaissance Learning. This assessment is almost entirely read aloud and is computer adaptive, providing an ebb and flow of content based on student responses until arriving at a normed score.

Seventy-three second grade students took the Star Reading assessment. This, likewise, is a product of Renaissance Learning and computer adaptive throughout but is read entirely by the student. Students who are English learners, are dyslexic, or receive accommodations through special education are provided extra time on the assessment (Renaissance Learning website, retrieved June, 2019). The same students, kindergarten through second grade, were once again assessed with the Star assessments in September, 2018 (a month after the first assessment) to ensure RtI and small group placements were made on the most accurate baseline data.

In Texas, schools are also mandated to implement an assessment from the TEA's list of K-2 tests that measure literacy. Additionally, in Texas, students in kindergarten through second grade must be assessed three times per year with an assessment from the Commissioner's List of Reading Instruments. The Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) fits that description, is used widely throughout the state, and has been used for many years at North Primary School. In years past, teachers were provided substitutes so they had the time and concentrated attention to assess their students. However, when I

discussed this process with the former principal and the instructional specialist for elementary, the principal recommended that we utilize a more standardized testing protocol to make sure the data were not inflated. Therefore, the superintendent asked that the reading interventionist, the instructional specialist for elementary, and I take over the TPRI. Then, at the end of September, the classroom teachers by grade level, the reading interventionist, the counselor, the dyslexia therapist, and I met to analyze the data from the two Star assessments and TPRI data and considered classroom observations and classwork in order to make the most appropriate initial RtI placements.

Danielson (2002) stated that “flexible grouping provided through RtI allows students to receive just-in-time help on particular topics guided by data” (p. 46). She went on to say that grouping and regrouping “sends the message that failure is not tolerated, and progress is expected” (p. 101). Therefore, after each assessment window, the aforementioned group of staff members gathered to examine the data, discuss student needs, and place or move students between RtI tiers. Moats and Foorman (2008) state that, “without structured team meetings and opportunities to interpret student data, teachers did not use it purposefully” (p. 99). Additionally, during first grade data meetings, we also discussed which students needed to be moved from Star Early Literacy to the Star Reading assessment, which requires students to read on their own. In March, I invited parents to meetings held to discuss reading improvements and test data to make sure they understood where their child was at the time. This was incredibly well received and attended by many.

Results

RQ1 Data

The initial research question examines whether reading performance would increase significantly due to the implementation of a structured literacy approach. In looking at data regarding this question, I examined the overall improvement in students’ baseline scores. This information is shown in Tables 1 through 4 for first grade students and 6 through 9 for second grade students. Each table looks distinctly at a grade level and a particular diagnostic assessment, charting the growth from the beginning-of-year assessment to the end-of-year assessment.

First Grade Students’ Data

Table 1 provides a visual of first grade student growth by percentages on the TPRI.

This table is provided for triangulation of data and comparison only but not to show statistical significance. The TPRI changes from a screener at the beginning of the year to a full assessment of skill by the middle of the year. Due to this change, these tables were included as extra data to provide continued historical comparison but not as the basis for statistical significance for growth.

Table 2 references first grade students’ numeric and percentage growth through the following Star reading levels: Early Emergent, Late Emergent, Transitional, and Probable Reader. Therefore, this table is also included only for comparison and extra information for discussion purposes. These first two tables are also what school administrators would more readily relate to if they were considering utilizing a similar approach on their campuses.

Table 1

Scores for 1st Grade Students Based on Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI)

Date of Assessment	# Students Assessed	# at Still Developing	% at Still Developing	# at Developed	% at Developed
September, 2018	77	39	50	38	49
April, 2019	84	53	63	31	37

Table 2

Scores for 1st Grade Students Based on Star Early Literacy

Date of Assessment	# Students Assessed	% at Early Emergent	% at Late Emergent	% at Transitional	% at Probable
August, 2018	78	15	58	15	10
April, 2019	84	0	10	46	44

According to Table 2, first grade students moved from 10% of the students functioning at a Probable Reader designation to 44% of students at Probable Reader. This stands as contradictory to the data presented in Table 1 from the TPRI assessments in September, 2018 and May, 2019. However, as mentioned previously, the nature of the TPRI assessment changes from a mere screening at the beginning of the year to a full assessment including a fluency measure by the end of the year. However, the Star Early Literacy assessment measures students' improvement on a continuum of literacy skills, adding new content as students show mastery of previously assessed skills. Also, teachers administered the September, 2018 TPRI assessment to their homeroom classes whereas I gave the end-of-year TPRI assessment in May, 2019. Therefore, the assessment results were more standardized in May, and the difference in test administrators could have caused reliability issues if used to prove statistical significance.

Table 3 provides the descriptive statistics for the paired samples t test done to show statistical significance of

growth in first graders' reading knowledge during the 2018-19 school year. Table 4 provides the results of a paired samples t test performed to prove statistical significance of growth for first graders during the 2018-19 school year.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for 1st Grade Paired Sample t Test

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	ESS	775.52	77	65.401	7.453
	BSS	602.92	77	111.214	12.674

Table 4

Data From 1st Grade Paired Samples t Test.

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	ESS - BSS	172.597	90.817	10.350	151.984	193.210	16.677	76	0.000

Tables 3 and 4 provide SPSS data for first graders. I conducted a paired samples t test which compared growth from the first Star Early Literacy assessment in 2018-19 to the final one done in May, 2019. These tables show n=77 whereas Table 1 lists n=77 and 84, and Table 2 lists n=78 and 84. The difference in student number is based on student mobility. However, students had to be present for both the beginning and end of year tests to be included in the results in Tables 3 and 4. The first test occurred during the second week of school and the final test was the first week of May, 3 weeks prior to the end of school. Therefore, based on 32 weeks of instruction in reading, the mean growth was 172.597 scale score points, which produced a 0.00 score for statistically significant growth. The Benchmark, Cut Scores, and Growth Rates chart available on the Renaissance Learning website shows that moderate growth for a first grader who is meeting benchmark expectations is 3.71 scale score points per week, which equates to 118.72 points in 32 weeks. The Renaissance Learning website also stated that, according to

national data for Star Early Literacy, 50% of the students at each level of growth shown on the chart (from the 20th percentile to the 80th percentile) were able to achieve the level stated as moderate growth (retrieved from renaissance.com on September 24, 2019). Therefore, NPS first grade students grew, on average, more than 50 scale score points above the expected rate for moderate growth during the 2018-19 school year.

Lastly, Table 5 shows the movement of first graders from the Star Early Literacy Assessment to the more rigorous Star Reading assessment. This is another table that does not provide statistical significance data but does provide more information that will be included in the discussion portion. First graders who were moved to the Star Reading assessment continued to take the Star Early Literacy assessment as well to maintain a continuous comparison of growth on one instrument throughout the year.

Table 5

Number of 1st Grade Students Moved from Star Early Literacy to Star Reading

	# Students Tested on Star in November, 2018	# Students Tested on Star in January, 2019	# Students Tested on Star in March, 2019	Grand Total Moved to Star in 2018-19 School Year
Teacher 1	3	0	4	
Teacher 2	4	1	3	
Teacher 3	3	3	5	
Teacher 4	1	4	2	
Teacher 5	4	3	4	
Total Students	15	11	18	44

Table 5 shows the number of students by classroom that were moved from the Star Early Literacy Assessment to Star Reading during the 2018-19 school year. As students progressed to approximately 700 scaled score points on the Star Early Literacy assessment, classroom teachers, the reading interventionist, and I discussed moving them to the Star Reading test for subsequent assessment windows. The teacher was given the final authority for moving a student to the Star Reading assessment. I encouraged teachers to share their informal and observational data to determine placement in the new test so they could also consider how the student functions

in class and not base the decision solely on Star Early Literacy assessment data. Star Reading requires that students have a 100-word vocabulary and they read the entire test by themselves whereas the Star Early Literacy was predominantly read to them. After the October, 2018 Star Early Literacy assessment was administered, teachers added 15 students to the list of those that would be administered the Star Reading test in November, 2018. This equated to 34% of the total moved to Star during the year. Only 44 students were moved by March, 2019, which equated to 52% of first grade students.

Second Grade Students' Data

Table 6 provides a summary of student growth as measured by the TPRI for second grade students. As mentioned previously, since this assessment moves from a

screeener to a full diagnostic assessment for students, it is included for triangulation purposes and to further the historical data trend understanding presented in the introduction of this study.

Table 6

Scores for 2nd Grade Students Based on Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI)

Date of Assessment	# Students Assessed	GK 3 or more* % D	WR 2 or more* % D	Story 1 Reading % D	Story 1 Comp. % D	Story 2 Reading % D	Story 2 Comp. % D
September, 2018	71	13	45	63.4	53.5	56.3	39.4
April, 2019	79	66	75	73.5	60.8	77.2	58.2

*Texas Literacy Plan Standards

GK = Graphophonemic Knowledge; WR=Word Reading; D= Developed; SD=Still Developing

Table 7 provides numerical and percentage movement through the following Star Reading labels: Pre Primer, Primer, 1.0-1.9 (below grade level Instructional Reading Level), and 2.0 and above (at grade level Instructional Reading Level and above). Just as mentioned for first grade data sources, this table does not provide statistical significance for growth, but instead provides a source of information that is easily understood by school personnel.

In considering the data for student achievement for second graders, I looked at tables 6 and 7 separately to examine progress on each assessment instrument and compared the results to see if consistent conclusions can be drawn between the data sets. Shown in Table 7, which summarizes the results of students on Star Reading, the number of students reading at a Pre Primer level (PP) decreased from 33 to 16, and the number of students reading at or above grade level increased from 13 to 53. In looking at Table 6 containing TPRI results, the percentage

of students scoring Developed (D) on graphophonemic knowledge (GK) tasks increased from 13% to 66% by April, 2019. Furthermore, the percentage of students scoring Developed on Word Reading (WR) tasks increased from 45% to 75%. The next area of the table details the percentage of students who successfully read story 1 and 2 on an independent or instructional level, which are proficient enough levels of reading that they do not significantly impede comprehension. Both story reading and story comprehension columns for stories 1 and 2 show increases. In fact, story reading and comprehension for story 2 show almost 20 percentage point gains for both areas.

Table 8 provides the descriptive second grade student statistics used for the paired samples t test, which was used to show student growth that occurred from the beginning of the 2018-19 school year to the end-of-year assessment.

Table 7

Scores for 2nd Grade Students Based on Star Reading

Date of Assessment	# Assessed	# at PP	% at PP	# at P	% at P	# at 1.0-1.9	% at 1.0-1.9	# at 2.0 and above	% at 2.0 and above
August, 2018	73	33	45	6	8	23	32	13	18
April, 2019	79	16	20	4	5	6	8	53	67

Table 8

Descriptive statistics for 2nd grade one-sample t test based on change value

Variable	n	Min. Scale Score	Max. Scale Score	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
						Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
BSS	65	66	500	171.15	97.535	1.095	0.297	1.171	0.586
ESS	65	71	559	325.15	128.545	-0.497	0.297	-0.526	0.586

BSS = Beginning of year scale score; ESS=End of year scale score

Table 9

Paired samples t Test for 2nd grade growth

		Paired Differences							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	ESS - BSS	154.000	89.437	11.093	131.839	176.161	13.882	64	0.000

Finally, Table 9 provides the results of the paired samples t test conducted to show the statistical significance for the growth that occurred from the beginning-of-year assessment to the end-of-year assessment during the 2018-19 school year.

Moderate growth for a second grader who is meeting benchmark expectations is 3.6 scale score points per week, which equates to 115.2 points in 32 weeks. The Renaissance Learning website also stated that, according to national data for Star Early Literacy, 50% of the students at each level of growth shown on the chart (from the 20th percentile to the 80th percentile) were able to achieve the level stated as moderate growth (retrieved from renaissance.com on September 24, 2019). Therefore, NPS second grade students grew on average more than 38 scale score points above the expected rate for moderate growth during the 2018-19 school year.

Therefore, upon comparing both tests administered to second grade students, significant growth in students' reading abilities is seen as a result of the structured literacy implementation, data meetings to discuss tier placement/movement between RtI tiers, and assessment/data analysis, coaching, and feedback.

RQ2 Data

Research question 2 looked at the effect that accountability had on teacher implementation of structured literacy. I used observation and feedback data, pacing calendar data versus end-of-year student data form information, as well as personal observation of student word attack while administering the TPRI test in January and May of 2019. Table 10 provides the comparison among all teachers in grades 1 and 2 pacing charts.

Table 10

Comparison of Teacher Pacing Chart Completed in January, 2019 with Actual Final Lesson Taught in May, 2019

Role	Grade Level	Pacing Chart Plan Estimate for Lesson to be Completed by May, 2019	Final Lesson Completed by May, 2019
Teacher 1	1	79	37
Teacher 2	1	78	42
Teacher 3	1	79	39
Teacher 4	1	79	44
Teacher 5	1	79	37
Teacher 6	2	90	92
Teacher 7	2	90	89
Teacher 8	2	90	88
Teacher 9	2	91	90
Teacher 10	2	89	89
Teacher 11	1 and 2	75	74

Bambrick-Santoyo (2018) states that “exceptional school leaders are very intentional about how they use observations and walkthroughs, placing the utmost emphasis, not on scoring, but on giving the right feedback and follow up to make sure teachers implement feedback” (p. 7). Thus, I felt extended observations with feedback afterward provided more support for teachers during their implementation of the curriculum.

After studying the data and comments from the December, 2018 midyear teacher survey, I realized that first grade teachers only provided structured literacy lessons four days per week and, instead, conducted level testing and Fun Friday activities each Friday. On the other hand, second grade teachers provided structured literacy lessons all five days and did not do level testing at all. As a result of the survey, I met with the first grade team during a January, 2019 professional development day and discussed their progress in the curriculum and the importance of providing structured literacy lessons all five days. We also adjusted their Friday schedule to ensure teachers had time to complete all activities. Furthermore, all teachers completed a pacing calendar to gauge where students would end in the curriculum in May if structured literacy lessons were provided to them 5 days per week. According

to their pacing calendars, first grade teachers were on track to finish around lesson 79, which is more than halfway through the first year of the Language Enrichment curriculum. However, as shown in Table 10, they finished around lesson 34.

In stark contrast, second grade teachers ended around lesson 90, and the reading interventionist that served both grades 1 and 2 ended at lesson 74. Therefore, putting in place accountability measures such as walkthroughs, surveys, lengthy observations with feedback, data meetings, and grade-level meetings had inconsistent impact between the grade levels.

Discussion

Results Analyzed by Research Question

RQ1. Does Student Reading Performance Significantly Increase after the Implementation of a Structured Literacy Approach?

When looking at the data in Tables 1 and 2, the picture seems contradictory for first grade students unless the structure of the TPRI assessment is considered. This is because, at the beginning of the year, a student can earn

Developed based on a screening only, but as the year progresses, the whole test must be completed. However, in looking at Table 4, the paired samples t test showed statistically significant growth. Also, as compared to the nationally normed Renaissance data, both first and second grade students experienced greater than moderate growth compared to what is expected to achieve a score that meets Benchmark standing. Furthermore, looking at the number of first grade students that moved to Star Reading by March, shows that all measures taken during the 2018-19 school year, including creating conditions for valid assessment, sharing data with students, and including phonics instruction through a structured literacy implementation, created the opportunity for many students to succeed at high levels.

The data in tables 6-9 show incredible progress for second grade students as well. In August, 45% of second graders tested at a Pre Primer (PP) level, but in April, only 20% were still at this level. Among these still at PP are students who were identified as needing special education and as dyslexic. Also, at the beginning of the year, 18% of second graders scored on grade level or above and, at the end of the year, 67% were on grade level or above. Furthermore, every area of the TPRI showed significant growth by second grade students. Table 9 shows that student growth was statistically significant and, when that growth is compared to Renaissance Learning's nationally normed data, the growth rate was almost 40 scale score points ahead of the norm.

RQ2. Does Teacher Implementation of Structured Literacy Improve After Accountability and Continued Feedback and Training?

This area of the results probably surprised me the most as it runs so contrary to my educational philosophy. Anderson et al. (2007) state that action researchers who work in schools are often ill-prepared for resistance (p. 51). I am a rule follower and change does not bother me as long as it has merit and will benefit student success. Furthermore, the last time I had to lead a change initiative, it was forced upon the district by a TEA audit. Therefore, everyone in the district was held accountable to buy into or at least go through the motions to make the change process a reality. Therefore, implementing change is very straightforward to me. If it is a research-based solution that is good for students and leads to increased achievement, it is the right thing to do.

The second grade team, along with the reading interventionist, responded just as I would have when presented with a curricular change or expectation. Trusting the research, they implemented Structured Literacy with fidelity. However, the first grade team proved to be resistors. Each grade level team meeting proved to be a heated debate over how to alter the system to fit in all they had taught before and Neuhaus lessons. Au and Scheu (1996) chronicled the attempt to make change a reality at Kamchemeha Elementary Education Program in Hawaii and found that, even after 5 years of working with teachers who were willing to learn and grow, change is still challenging to accomplish. Moats and Tolman (2009) state that, "if a faculty is divided by differences in philosophy, methodology or interpretive framework, then productive teamwork is nearly impossible" (p. 84).

Ridley (1990) identified four factors that cause teachers to resist change: a lack of understanding about a topic, unwillingness to change, a lack of resources, and uneasiness concerning accountability. For this current study, I believe that three of the four factors were at work. Teachers did not lack resources, yet there was resistance to change. I feel this resistance was caused by the tide of changes that had occurred over the last few years resulting in a general sense of mistrust in change itself. In a private conversation with one teacher, she stated, "I have been here for four years and every year we have done something different." That is certainly a valid point of which I was unaware at the outset. The first grade team's feelings surfaced first in November, which opened up some honest communication. However, their silent resistance had already caused a stall in student learning and impacted the culture among all stakeholders. Two other causes of resistance were the teachers' orientation toward activities rather than philosophy and the concern over accountability, both of which point to a lack of knowledge of structured literacy. Teachers were insistent that sight word testing and level testing were vital to student improvement, and they also felt driven to follow the scope and sequence presented in the TEKS Resource System. During a workshop on the new English language arts standards adopted for implementation during the 2019-20 school year, the English language arts consultant for the local Education Service Center stated that if a district purchases a structured phonics program such as Saxon Phonics, then the scope and sequence included with the program is what should be followed rather than the one presented in the TEKS Resource System (Callie Fortenberry, personal

communication, April 9, 2019). However, at that point, I was unaware of the fragmented manner in which the first grade teachers were implementing the Neuhaus curriculum. Bates and Morgan (2018) state that teachers' plates are already full. Thus, when new administrators introduce their "one more new thing", teachers struggle with where to fit it all into their schedules. Therefore, it would have helped for me to have taken the time to pause in November when the first concerns arose and guide them in doing a time audit of their schedules to prioritize curricular choices.

Reliability and Validity Concerns or Equivalents

Reliability

One measure of reliability was the nature of the assessments given. Star Renaissance assessments and the TPRI are both research-based assessments that measure essential components of students' progress toward becoming proficient readers. As previously mentioned, the original aim was to have one individual give all TPRI assessments to ensure they were administered without bias and in a standardized manner. In the past, teachers were provided substitutes for their classrooms and they gave the assessments to their homeroom classes. However, district administration suggested that the data gained in the past might have some bias. Therefore, an attempt was made to change this by hiring a recent retiree. Then, in September, that plan had to be altered and teachers gave the TPRI assessment in the fall. Then, in January, I administered the assessment to all first graders and the reading interventionist gave the test to all second graders. Therefore, we maintained the same grading standards for all students in each grade level from midyear to the end-of-year assessment without being subject to bias.

Another measure of reliability was the manner in which the Star Reading and Star Early Literacy were administered. Previously, teachers simply assessed students in their classrooms without much monitoring or test preparation preceding the examination. The procedure was different throughout the study in that students came into a computer laboratory setting with several adults who could monitor students' attention and engagement with the content. If the data seemed to prove less than accurate, the student was asked to retest with greater supervision to ensure the data truly showed the level of the student's knowledge.

Validity

The study was structured to provide several measures of internal validity. I provided the same monitoring and feedback throughout the study. We had data discussions about student placement in tiers as a group so that all were part of the discussion. We also tested students as a group to make sure we were achieving accurate data. One major validity concern was based on the first grade teachers' lack of faith in the validity of the Star reading assessments. This assessment was purchased for the campus in 2017, yet teachers received no training or coaching in how to administer the assessment with fidelity or how to interpret data from the assessments. Thus, this was a learning curve that I had to tackle during the study. Furthermore, although I had an inkling that I knew what the data would show, I refrained from making a solid judgment until I looked at all the data points in an organized fashion, which brought much greater clarity. Again, the fact that the study was set to have more than one way to determine an answer to a question provided more validity to the results.

Questions I Still Have

There are questions I still have in regard to improving implementation. For example, if I had started by researching Structured Literacy with teachers and looking at data more transparently, I am curious whether the results would have been more impressive. However, I could also agree with many other researchers before me that teacher professional development and school change can take many years to implement (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018). As for me, it is hard to sacrifice the important years when children experience literacy growth for the preferences of adults. Because of this, if I had the chance to do this process again, I would probably still approach the situation with the urgency that I did.

I also wonder if a different coaching or accountability approach would have caused teachers to more fully support direct, explicit, systematic instruction. When I presented the Language Enrichment curriculum to the kindergarten teachers in February, 2019, I approached it differently than I had with first and second grade teachers. First, I had teachers come observe me with the groups of kindergarten students who I had started teaching the month prior. I then taught the teachers the curriculum in small pieces, providing only what they needed to know for the upcoming week. Although there was still some resistance to doing things differently than they had always done, they were

more open to implementation than other teachers had been. Furthermore, I have pondered whether posting the scope and sequence of the curriculum outside the door with dates beside each lesson completed have improved my ease of monitoring? I received this suggestion from a Neuhaus coach in March, 2019, so it was a bit late for the current year. However, I feel it would increase the realization and expectation for teachers that they need to remain on track with instruction.

Personal Reflection

I learned several lessons from this study. The first is the importance of gaining initial buy-in from the top to the bottom stakeholders as early as possible. Due to my odd transition to the campus principal role, the departure of my superintendent in June, 2018, and the new superintendent's arrival in August, 2018, I was unable to gain full buy-in for my plan for improving reading outcomes for the campus at both campus and district levels. The new superintendent was supportive of my actions and plan but lacked full understanding of Structured Literacy and Neuhaus Education Center curriculum. In retrospect, although he had to tackle many other issues that needed his attention in August, I wish there had been an opportunity to sit with him or connect him to resources at Neuhaus Education Center to help him see the importance of the work from the beginning.

Another lesson learned that I would handle differently next time is presenting beginning-of-year data in a more transparent fashion. I am not sure this would have made a difference in the attitudes and actions of the first grade team as opposed to the second grade team, but it might have. In an effort to build a more positive culture and because we were moving forward with a new structure, I chose to simply start with emphasizing beginning-of-year data briefly and moving on instead of dissecting the reasons behind where first graders ended the previous year.

Lastly, through coaching kindergarten teachers in the spring, I learned how to coach teachers more effectively. I trained them to use the program and then came in weekly to present just-in-time help and modeling of concepts and activities that the teachers and students would encounter soon. This seemed to give teachers as much information as they needed without overwhelming them with the whole picture. I also allowed them to observe me teaching the program to their students a few times prior to their initial training. This allowed them to have a positive view of what

their students would be capable of just a few weeks into the program before implementing it in their classrooms. This approach did not totally ameliorate negative feelings of change, but it helped most teachers move forward confidently.

Conclusion

In August 2018, I was confident and excited about the student data-driven instruction that NPS would be utilizing for the coming year. I truly felt I had worked to examine things from a research-based perspective and, at the same time, not overwhelm staff by too many changes. I knew that, if we as a staff were going to improve reading achievement for students, it would depend on several factors working in tandem: well-trained staff members that teach utilizing structured literacy, meaningful data gained through progress monitoring and diagnostic assessments, and collaboration from all parties to ensure students are moved through the tiers of Response to Intervention to ensure all are given the opportunity to succeed at reading.

The student reading success that occurred during the year as a result of the changes instituted on the campus was nothing short of phenomenal. After the initial baseline Star Reading testing in August of 2018, 24 of close to 80 students qualified for Tier 3 assistance through scoring at a Pre Primer level. Feeling challenged but hopeful, I told my diagnostician, that I did not plan to refer all these students. My belief was that they had not had effective instruction and, when they did, we would sort out those that truly needed a referral for other services. My prediction was correct. The second grade teachers and reading interventionist began implementing Structured Literacy with fidelity, and by January, I was able to go back to my diagnostician and report that only 8 students were being served by Tier 3. This is the value of effective reading instruction. So, regardless of the current political shift regarding reading instruction in the district and the struggle to get a few teachers on board with research-based practices, these successful students' lives are forever changed, and that is worth it.

In conclusion, I agree with the International Dyslexia Association's belief that "inadequately prepared teachers place students, themselves, and schools systems at risk of failure" (International Dyslexia Association, 2019, p. 15). Researchers have known this for decades, and it was my hope to make a difference for the teachers and children on my campus. I believe that indeed occurred and, as a result,

my passion for structured literacy only burns brighter. Therefore, I will continue to stand with and work toward the IDA motto, “until everyone can read” because, as stated by Hessler and Morrison (2016), “our children are precious and are the most important stakeholders. When academicians, administrators, publishers, researchers, or

administrators of public policy lose sight of that, they inadvertently risk harming those they aim to educate” (p. 50). I plan to do my part to keep that from happening anywhere I can make an impact.

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