Struggling Readers in Saskatoon French Immersion Schools:
A Mixed Methods Study Examining Strategies for Support

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We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to find out the most effective methods and strategies to teach reading in Saskatoon French immersion schools and to learn how to implement them myself. In order to do this, I used a descriptive survey and followed the survey through action research. I surveyed my Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools colleagues about what their preferred strategies were for successfully teaching reading. From the responses, I pulled two of the most popular strategies and learned more about them. The two strategies were phonological awareness instruction and direct decoding instruction. I then implemented these strategies in a class of 25 grade one French immersion students, while doing action research. I used each strategy to teach reading for the duration of three weeks, and did pre-tests and post-tests for each. During the implementation, I kept field notes and a researcher journal in order to document my journey and my findings. My findings show that phonological awareness instruction is a very effective strategy for supporting students who are struggling read, and direct decoding instruction is also effective. They as well show that students who are struggling to read can be supported in the classroom in a Tier 1 setting.

Keywords: French immersion, struggling readers, phonological awareness, decoding
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Chapter One Introduction

In this first chapter, I will begin by offering a background of what a French Immersion program is, and my role as a teacher in a French Immersion school. I follow this by discussing some models of support for students who are struggling to read in French Immersion, and some issues that exist therein. I then offer reasons why a Response to Intervention model, which is similar to the Student Learning Model, is a solution to some of the aforementioned issues. I give an overview of Learning Sprints as a method of intervention, and offer my personal context and a statement of the problem. I end by stating my research question, giving an overview of my study, and offering some definitions of terms.

Background

In Saskatoon, there are two main school divisions that offer French Immersion programs. One is the Saskatoon Public School division, which has seven elementary French Immersion programs, in which the language of instruction is French beginning in Kindergarten. They as well have three late French Immersion programs, in which the language of instruction is French beginning in grade six. The other division offering French Immersion is the Greater Saskatoon Catholic School division. It currently has nine early French immersion programs.

A French Immersion program, regardless of type, is a bilingual education program where students who generally do not speak French as a first language, or at all, are taught in French. They are both directly taught the French language, and indirectly by delivering the content of the curriculum mainly in French, and by having their teachers communicate with them in French — thus they are “immersed” in the language. The students learn the language through explicit teaching as well as through experience and over time.

I am a French Educator in the Greater Saskatoon Catholic School division. I currently have two roles in my school: I am teaching release from Kindergarten through grade two, and I
am also a Learning Assistance Teacher (LAT). An LAT is sometimes also referred to as a Resource Teacher, or the Special Education Teacher. In my release teacher role, I teach literacy related subjects in two kindergarten classes as well as in a grade one and a grade two class. I also teach physical education to two grade one classes and a split class of grade ones and twos. My focus as LAT right now is doing reading interventions with struggling readers in grades one and grade two.

This study will focus on French reading instruction for those students who are in the Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools early French immersion program, as that is the program in which I currently teach. The action research portion will focus on French Immersion reading instruction in a grade one class at a school where I am currently teaching.

Support for Struggling Readers

Since reading is a foundational literacy and learning skill, there is extensive research on supporting struggling readers (Cavanaugh, Kim, Wanzek & Vaughn, 2004; Denton, Vaughn & Fletcher, 2003; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007; Wise, D’Angelo & Chen, 2016), resulting in a wide range of programs such as small group reading interventions (Buckingham, Wheldall & Beaman-Wheldall, 2014), one-to-one tutoring programs (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes & Moody, 2000) and various other programs. However, many of these programs have primarily been designed for reading in English, principally, with English first language speakers. Some interventions that were designed for English language learners can be effective for French immersions students, such as small group reading interventions or one-to-one tutoring. However, there needs to be a difference in delivery because French vocabulary and comprehension in lower grade level, French immersion students is still underdeveloped. Translating a literacy program meant for first language speakers into a program for second language speakers requires a difference in delivery
because of the major difference between teaching reading in a language the student is familiar with, and teaching a student to read in a foreign language which they are currently learning.

With our French Immersion students needing reading intervention in a second language, it is important to find out what strategies are effective in a second (or third, or fourth, etc.) language. There has been some work on interventions in French immersion, including phonemic or phonological awareness interventions (MacCoubrey, 2003; Wise, 2014; Wise et al., 2016). Phonological awareness is the ability to hear, understand and manipulate language at the word and syllable level; phonemic awareness is the ability to do the same, but at the individual sound level. Phonological awareness incorporates phonemic awareness within its umbrella, and these are important skills to have when learning to read. Reading Recovery is another reading intervention (D’Agostino & Harmey, 2016; Lip & Helfrich, 2016; Peurach & Glazer, 2016) which can be done in French, but again, it requires help and support from outside the classroom and is frequently done on a pull-out basis. A pull-out basis is when a student is taken out of the regular classroom for individual or small group help. When possible, following an inclusive model, it is best to keep students in the classroom. In general, more work is needed to extend the knowledge base for literacy interventions in French Immersion schools, and to find out what works well in common practice for French Immersion teachers in the classroom.

Several models are in place at my school when it comes to supporting struggling readers. In one model, the classroom teacher works with all students, including struggling readers, in small group guided reading and individually as time permits; sometimes an Education Assistant (EA) will be present to help the other students while the teacher is occupied. Students who are reading well below their grade level are supported by an LAT on a small group pull-out basis. EAs frequently assist struggling readers on a small group or individual pull-out basis. These
students are often involved in Learning Sprints, which will be explained shortly, and which EAs regularly support.

As mentioned in the above models, an adult frequently pulls many of the struggling readers out of the classroom in order for them to receive extra help. If they are not pulled out of the classroom, the struggling readers can be assisted within the classroom while the teacher has extra help. With continuing cutbacks in funding, and therefore in student support roles, such as Educational Assistants, Literacy Specialists and Learning Assistance Teachers, it is important to find strategies that can be useful to struggling French immersion readers, and which can be implemented in a classroom by the classroom teacher, with little outside support.

**Response to Intervention**

Reading interventions can be done within a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework in the classroom. RTI is not only meant to ensure that all children receive quality core instruction; it is also designed to catch students before they fall behind their peers. There is not yet one universally accepted definition of an RTI framework (Figure 1), but it is generally a framework that is implemented school-wide.

![Diagram of RTI Model](image)

*Figure 1.* The Three Tiers of an RTI Model. This figure demonstrates how an RTI model becomes progressively specialized (RtI models, 2018).
In RTI, there are three tiers of intervention that get progressively specialized. The general layout of RTI is as follows: tier one would be quality core classroom instruction which includes differentiation, tier two is targeted interventions for those not achieving within a quality core classroom curriculum, and tier three is targeted intensive interventions for those continuing to struggle after tier two interventions were implemented.

In the Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools, we follow a similar framework to the RTI framework, however, it is called by another name: the Student Learning Model (SLM) (Figure 2). The SLM has more levels than RTI, but they essentially follow the same path.

Figure 2: The Student Learning Model Framework. This figure illustrates the top down Student Learning model (GSCS, 2017).
The first level of the SLM is quality core classroom instruction; the second level is additional instruction in the classroom. These two together would be similar to tier one of RTI. The third level of the SLM is focused instruction and intervention; the fourth level is specialized instruction and intervention. These two levels would be tier two of an RTI model. Lastly, the SLM has the intensive needs level, which is akin to the RTI tier three targeted intensive intervention level. The SLM has, in essence, broken down what RTI is, into smaller more incremental steps. Since there has been more research done specifically on RTI, rather than the SLM, I will refer to RTI in this study. In addition, because the two models are substantially similar, I am working under the inference that the SLM has similar results to the RTI framework.

Wanzek and Vaughn (2007) looked at many studies of reading interventions within an RTI framework. They found that RTI reading interventions that were rich in both phonics instruction and text reading were the most effective at helping struggling readers progress in their reading. The National Reading Panel (2000) found that differentiating can be found within all tiers of RTI, not just tier two and tier three, and that differentiating instruction in tier one is beneficial as well. Differentiation is when a teacher makes an effort to respond to the different needs of students, and to individualize so that each student has the best chance for success. This individualization could be in content, instruction, the product, the environment, the assistance that is given, or a number of other ways (Brownlie & King, 2011). Most teachers do this at all levels, or tiers, of instruction. As Brownlie and King state, “Our goal is that children will honor their own strengths and needs, and the differing strengths and needs of those around them” (p. 31). Children will only learn how to do this if the teacher sets the first example in honoring the differences of each child.
The Response to Intervention model, which is widely held to be the “cornerstone of effective intervention for students who are at risk for learning difficulties, and to be a valid identification of students who need special services” (Denton et al., 2003, p. 201), has been shown by research to be effective in identifying and instructing struggling readers. Using a tier one RTI, or SLM, framework is beneficial as it begins at the ground level, with the facilitation of the classroom teacher, and has the potential to help all students. In a study by Otaiba et al. (2014), it was found that RTI is a good model to follow for early intervention because it starts as soon as students enter school, and captures all students within its framework.

**Early Intervention**

Early intervention is an important facet of reading intervention. Wanzek and Vaughn (2007) found that interventions that were done in or before grade one were more effective than those that were done after grade one. Even if the interventions were done soon after, in grade two, they were found to be less effective. Often in French immersion, reading interventions may be done at a later time than grade one, due to the initial lag in reading ability. Students need to learn the language and vocabulary before extensive French reading instruction and assessment can be done. This is the case in my school as well. As students are not capable of reading or comprehending much French, they do not receive much specific reading intervention in Kindergarten, or the first half of grade one. Extra help frequently begins in the second half of grade one, by which time, many students are already significantly behind grade level expectations and it is likely that the beneficial period for early intervention has passed.

There is now some research that has found that tests done in English “[…] can do a reasonable job of predicting later reading ability in both English and French in French immersion students” (Jared, Cormier, Levy & Wade-Woolley, 2011, p. 135). Wise and Chen (2010) also
found that using English as a basis for early identification and intervention worked. They found that the intervention could later be switched to French, when the students had a stronger grasp on the French language. In this way, the students were not missing too much French language instruction, yet could still be identified and get the help they needed in reading.

Although there is research supporting the use of English interventions, I completed my early reading intervention action research work with students in French, as per my division guidelines. However, I think that early English interventions may be something of interest for the Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools to look into for the future. Would it then be possible for GSCS teachers in the future to begin to offer interventions in kindergarten and grade one in English, with a switch to French later?

Learning Sprints

Learning Sprints is another method that my division uses to reach students who are struggling in the classroom. Dr. Simon Breakspear and Agile Schools have been working in partnership with the GSCS for the past few years, with the focus being “on improving student outcomes and growth in literacy and numeracy, as well as other valued educational outcomes leading to improved graduation rates” (Agile Schools, 2017). Learning Sprints (Figure 3) is the organizational approach with which Dr. Breakspear and the GSCS hope to improve student-learning outcomes.

Figure 3: The Learning Sprints model. The figure shows the steps used in implementing a learning sprint. (Agile Schools, 2018)
The first step in a Learning Sprint is to define what the goal is, what outcome to focus on, and on which students to focus. Next, the goal is to try to understand why the particular students are not progressing sufficiently towards the chosen outcome. Designing engaging research-based lessons to help the students’ progress towards the chosen outcome is the next step. After all these steps are completed, it is then time for the sprint. A sprint is a time of focused intervention ranging between one to four weeks, where the chosen students receive the extra designed lessons on a regular basis, in order to help them progress towards the desired goals. Once the sprint is completed, the process is reviewed, and then the teacher proceeds on to the next sprint.

There seem to be many benefits to the Learning Sprint method, one of them being the inclusion of research-based methods in practice. The main benefit of sprints that this study will be focusing on is how Learning Sprints can be used to “accelerate momentum through engaging in short, focused cycles of impactful work” (Agile Schools, 2017, p. 3).

**Personal Context and Statement of the Problem**

Students who struggle with reading will struggle with acquiring knowledge and achieving their maximum potential in school (O’Connor, Beach, Sanchez, Bocian, Roberts & Chan, 2017) and students who struggle to read early on in school will continue to struggle unless they receive intervention (Jared et al., 2010). The gap between the struggling students and their non-struggling peers will continue to increase over time (Mcnamara, Scissons & Gutknecht, 2011). Those students who read well will continue to improve as they progress through the education system, but those students who have difficulty decoding and comprehending will continue to have difficulty. As they continue through their education, the gap between their achievement and the achievement of those who are not struggling will only continue to increase. This is
commonly known as the Matthew Effect (Pfost, Hattie, Dörfler & Artelt, 2014); the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Additionally, students who have difficulty reading, regardless of language, are less likely to graduate and will have less employment opportunities in the future (Good, Simmons & Smith, 1998).

During one school year, I had a clear personal experience of seeing how reading, and lack of progress in reading, affected students over time. I had taught grade one for a number of years and subsequently moved to teach grade three. Half of my class consisted of my former grade one students; I was now teaching them in my grade three class. I could see in action what the above research has proven. Most of the students who had struggled to read in grade one were continuing to struggle in grade three. Most of the students who had learned to read well, or exceptionally well, were continuing to succeed or even excel in reading. My efforts in grade one, as well as the efforts of their grade two teacher, had not yet helped the students struggling to read to bridge the gap towards the success the other students were finding. I know I had done my best with the supports I had, and I know that the same can be said of their grade two teacher. We implemented a quality core curriculum, differentiated, and worked with the students to the best of our abilities.

Although the struggling grade three students were continuing to improve, they were not reaching grade-level expectations. Through talking with my colleagues, I had known this was often the case, but it was different experiencing it first-hand. As a teacher, I want the best for my students; I want them to achieve to the utmost of their individual ability. I know some students will not achieve grade level reading expectations for reasons outside of my control. I wondered, however, if there was anything else I could be doing to help the struggling readers that did have the ability to reach grade level reading expectations, but were not yet doing so. Unless some
strategy is found that could work for the struggling French immersion readers, and which could also be easily and effectively delivered in the classroom, this dilemma will persist. These observations seem to be supported by research on student success and retention in French immersion (Genesee & Jared, 2008; MacCoubrey, Wade-Woolley, Klinger, & Kirby, 2004).

To add to their dilemma, struggling readers in French Immersion schools not only face difficulties in reading, but also the possibility of being transferred to another school. When students are falling behind and failing to make gains in their reading ability, parents are faced with a choice: do they keep their struggling child in a French program, or do they move them into an English program? Most students would not want to change schools and leave their friends, however, “due to Special Education restrictions and funding constraints, low-achieving readers in early immersion are faced with limited options” (Wise & Chen, 2009, p. 2). Many parents end up making the difficult choice to move their children to an English program (Mannavarayan, 2001). However, research by Genese and Jared (2008) found that this movement to an English program was not always to the benefit of the student because, “academic difficulty and, in particular, reading difficulty do not distinguish students who can benefit from immersion education and those who cannot” (p.3). In light of all these facts, it is unfortunate that many of these students who are struggling to read may end up leaving French immersion by the end of elementary school, with most students leaving French immersion by the end of grade three (Obadia & Theriault, 1997). This is a lost opportunity for them, as they are then denied the benefits of a bilingual education, and the future opportunities it may afford.

Research Question

Learning to read is one of the main goals of a grade one French Immersion class. Whether or not they stay in French Immersion, how they read will affect their entire future
academic career and their future opportunities. Reading is of the utmost importance, therefore, through my thesis, I hoped to carry out research in order to answer this question:

“*How can I improve my reading instruction to better support struggling readers in an inclusive French Immersion classroom?*”

**Study Overview**

This was a two-part mixed-methods study. Firstly, I looked at what grade one to grade three French immersion educators are doing in Saskatoon, specifically what they are finding success with in teaching struggling French immersion readers. I used a survey to collect anonymous information from a number of educators who are implicated in the teaching of reading in early elementary French immersion. The survey also included questions about detailed qualitative data on the programs, strategies, and methods the teachers have found to be successful in increasing the gains of struggling French immersion readers. As well, some survey questions helped to identify common features of schools or classrooms that are finding success in teaching reading and in supporting struggling readers.

Secondly, I used action research to research and implement the top two reading strategies in my survey. Features that were identified in the survey as useful in teaching a diversity of learners were also included during instruction whenever possible. In addition, I did reading assessments before and after the implementation of each strategy. I kept a reflective journal for the duration of my study, and took field notes while working in the classroom.

The main goal of this study is to help, inform and improve my own practice, in order that I may be the best teacher of reading possible. This study will help me personally, as I journey towards work in the French immersion special education field. This study will also help my fellow educators know what methods their colleagues find effective in working with struggling
French immersion readers. Furthermore, this study will help to increase the knowledge of the Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools division on the methods and strategies employed by educators, and help enlighten the division on where there could be some new directions in policies, professional development, services, or supports for teachers or students. All of the above will ultimately be of benefit to the students in early French immersion who are learning to read, and those who are struggling to do so.
Definition of Terms

*Guided Reading.* A small group instructional approach to reading. Readers of similar level are grouped together and given a differentiated lesson with a teacher.

*Learning Sprints.* A specific organizational approach for small group differentiation.

*Peer Reading.* Students are taught the appropriate methods and strategies, and then are paired together to read.

*Reading Intervention.* A program that is in addition to the regular classroom reading instruction for the express purpose of increasing reading levels.

*Reading Recovery.* Intensive one-to-one lessons done by a trained teacher. This is intended for some of the lowest performing students.

*Response to Intervention.* A multi-tier approach to provide early, systematic and consistent support to all students, starting with quality core curriculum in the classroom.

*Student Learning Model.* A multi-tier approach to provide early, systematic and consistent support to all students, starting with quality core curriculum in the classroom.

*Small group reading interventions/Sprints.* Small groups of students with similar reading levels are given differentiated instruction with a teacher. This is sometimes done in the classroom, and sometimes on a pull out basis.
Chapter Two Literature Review

Regardless of whether it is done in a regular English school or in a French immersion school setting, learning to read is a vital part of an early educational experience with long-term consequences (Swanson, Stevens, Scammacca, Capin, Stewart, & Austin, 2017). Although the body of knowledge and research on the topic of literacy and struggling readers in French immersion is growing, there are not as many relevant and recent studies as compared to what is available for first language reading research. For this reason, I will review literature that addresses reading in a first language in addition to the literature that addresses reading in a second language. Firstly, I will offer an overview of how struggling readers can, and should be, identified early in order to get the support they require. Secondly, this review will give an overview of some of the language processes involved in reading. The crossover that may occur between a first and second language while learning to read is also addressed. This is a topic of interest for this thesis because struggling readers are often only supported in French in early French immersion in the Greater Saskatoon Catholic School division, as that is the language in which they are learning to read. This review will look at whether that is the most beneficial practice for students, how this may be done, and some possible alternatives.

Next, I will address strategies for planning for differentiation, and how this can be done within a Response to Intervention model. The two specific reading strategies that I used in my research will also be covered. Finally, the value of a French Immersion education for all students, including those struggling to read will be supported.

Identification of Struggling Readers in French Immersion

How to identify struggling readers in French immersion, and which language to use in their identification, has long been an issue. MacCoubrey et al. (2004) researched how to use
phonological processing variables as early identification tools for struggling French immersion readers. They endeavored to find a method of early identification of at-risk readers in grade one, using first language measures. They used predictive discriminant analysis procedures to find the most consistent predictors of reading achievement. The participants were from eight early French immersion program schools.

The researchers collected data using English measures. They collected data on sound isolation, phoneme blending, and phonological working memory. The finding from this study indicated that the use of English measures can be appropriate for predicting future reading difficulties in French or English. This is as well supported by a number of other studies which used English measures in order to identify struggling French Immersion readers (Jared et al., 2010; MacCoubrey, 2003; Wise & Chen, 2010; Wise et al., 2016). The study indicated that there was a strong cross-language transfer; therefore, students can be identified early in grade one by using English measures, and then they may have the opportunity to receive timely early intervention. There were a few misclassifications, or false-positives for at-risk readers but

… more students were misidentified as at-risk readers than as typical readers by a margin of approximately two to one. For educational purposes, this misclassification is more acceptable than the reverse: generally speaking, educators would prefer to identify typically developing readers as at-risk readers and provide extra support than to misclassify at-risk readers as typical readers and deny them access to effective early intervention. (MacCoubrey et al., 2004, p. 23)

One question this study did not address, however, is the language in which to do the intervention. Could there possibly be a benefit to doing an intervention in English until the French language basis is further developed?
Language Processes and Crossover

In order to best understand how to identify and help struggling early French Immersion readers who are learning to read in a new language while also learning to speak and understand that language, it is important to comprehend the underlying systems of language that are at play. How do phonological, morphological, and orthographic processes work while learning to read, and while reading in a second, if not third or fourth, language? Is the language of instruction for the processes relevant? Does it matter if it is done in French or in English? The following three studies look at different aspects of processing, such as phonological, morphological, and orthographic processing, which are parts of the building blocks towards reading. In these studies, the question of language will also be addressed.

Deacon, Commissaire, Chen and Pasquarellla (2013) inquired into whether French immersion students would show orthographic processing skills in both French and English and whether the students would have more skill where there were commonalities between the languages. They also studied whether the skills transferred within and across languages and whether orthographic processing and word reading were related for early French immersion students. They hypothesized that students would have more skill with orthographic features that occurred in both French and English, rather than just one language or the other. They also wondered whether children learning to read in two languages would experience a delay in developing orthographic processing skills in either language, though they did not think this likely.

Deacon et al, (2013) thought it likely that for children learning to read in two languages, within-language relationships could exist between orthographic processing and word reading even in the first year of formal schooling.
Orthographic processing might be related to word reading within-languages in readers younger than those included in prior investigations. Most models of reading predicted that children should begin to rely on orthographic patterns in their reading only at an older age (such as Ehri’s ‘orthographic’ phase from Grade 3). It is possible, however, that younger children also rely on such patterns in their reading, particularly given the evidence that monolingual children demonstrated orthographic processing skill as early as five years of age. (Cassar & Treiman, 1997, p. 1091)

Deacon et al. (2013) conducted the tests at a single testing point where tests were given in both French and English to both groups and individuals. The measures they used for the orthographic processing tests seem to be research based and valid. For the word reading, the French measure was created with help from the teachers in the school and based on words the students were taught and should know. Though this does not make the study an easy one to replicate, it is an effective measure for the students at that school. As well, some of the other weaknesses in this study are that the phonological awareness and vocabulary tests were done only in English, the sample size was small, and the test was done at only a single testing point.

The study found that the students did have orthographic processing skills in both languages, and the results also showed that the students had more success on those orthographic regularities that are shared between both French and English. The study also found that orthographic processing in each language was related to reading outcomes, and that there was some evidence of transference in word reading skill across languages especially with the language shared sub-lexical features.

This study is important to the field of reading in French immersion as it shows the importance of orthographic skills in reading, and it demonstrates that it could be useful to draw a
student’s attention to orthographic regularities at an earlier age than one would generally do so. Since there was evidence of improved skill and transfer when the orthographic patterns were shared by the languages, it also demonstrates that it would be important to focus on those regularities that are common to the two languages.

Morphological awareness is another area that has been researched when looking at reading development in French immersion. Deacon, Wade-Wooley and Kirby (2007) conducted a study which was concerned with whether morphological awareness contributed to reading development across languages in children learning to read in two languages. They had three questions: whether the role of morphological awareness in reading is found in bi-literate children, whether there is a crossover effect between morphological awareness in English and French, and whether the source and amount of contributions from each language will change over time. The researchers hypothesized that the cross-linguistic contributions would only emerge once a threshold was reached.

The participants were all from English speaking homes and going to one of six French Immersion schools. The research was taken from a larger longitudinal study which took place from grade one through grade three. The data was taken from tests done at the beginning and the end of grades one, two, and three.

The study found that morphological awareness does play a part in reading within each language and that there is a cross-linguistic transfer of morphological awareness to reading. Early on, English morphological awareness had more of an effect, and later on French morphological awareness had a larger impact. This supports the hypothesis that a threshold of knowledge has to be reached in a language before the morphological awareness has an impact on reading. One drawback of this study was the fact that only one measure was used to assess
morphological awareness, and that the reliability of the test of morphological awareness was low.

A study by Wise et al. (2016) focused on phonological awareness. It differs from the previous two studies in that it is not only measuring knowledge or a skill and finding a correlation or an impact, but it is also an experimental study. This study explored whether English phonological testing and training, along with letter-sound correspondences training, would aid in early identification and intervention with struggling readers, and if it would improve word reading abilities and acquisition in French. In addition, the researchers wanted to know if this ability would be maintained over time.

The participants of the study were students in single-track French immersion schools. The researchers used an English phonological awareness and word reading test in order to identify students who were at-risk for future reading difficulties. The researchers’ experimental group received phonological and letter-sound correspondence training, and the control group received vocabulary training. Both were done in English as the students’ verbal and receptive language skills in French were not yet developed enough for this to be done in French. The researchers had the same instructor for both groups, the groups received the same amount of teaching time, and each group used the same books for instruction. This was all done to minimize confounding variables.

Students were tested four times: there was a pre-test, post-test, delayed post-test (in grade two), and another delayed post-test (in grade three). The study found that students in the experimental group had significantly larger gains than those in the control group, which continued to be significant in the grade three post-test. This supported the hypothesis that
English phonological training can have a sustained and significant impact on French word reading.

The three studies above, discussing, respectively, phonological awareness (Wise et al., 2016), orthographic awareness (Deacon, Commissaire, Chen & Pasquarellla, 2013), and morphological awareness (Deacon, Wade-Wooley & Kirby, 2007), conveyed how complicated and diverse the processes involved in learning to read can be. Each of these processes affects developing readers in different ways. The three studies demonstrate how understanding the underlying processes can help to address the problems struggling readers have. By understanding how the connections between-languages and within-languages can affect the literacy acquisition process, educators will be more prepared to teach struggling readers.

In these studies, it was observed that there would be a crossover between languages in all three reading process. Morphological, orthographic, and phonological awareness were all found to be related between languages. The studies of morphological and orthographic awareness found an effect between languages, and the study which included a phonological intervention done in English saw a significant effect on French reading. This is important in that it demonstrates that early identification and intervention could be done in English, even in French immersion, if it were acceptable by policy. Often struggling readers are not identified until later, as they do not learn to read quite as soon as their peers in English schools. Knowing that there is significant interaction between languages could allow French Immersion educators to identify and intervene using English, until the students are able to understand and use French at an effective instructional level, at which time intervention could then take place in French. This is an important idea to address in my research as at this time, in order to adhere to my school division’s policy, all my intervention will be done in French. However, knowing that
intervention in English could be of additional benefit to some students, it would be interesting to see if this policy could change in the future.

**Response to Intervention, or the Student Learning Model**

The Greater Saskatoon Catholic School division employs the Student Learning Model, as mentioned in Chapter 1. Both the Student Learning Model (SLM) and Response to Intervention (RTI) have multi-tiered approaches that begin in the general education classroom and become more gradually specialized. Again, because of the research on RTI, I will refer to RTI instead of the SLM. Knowing that Tier 1 reading instruction and intervention is important, and since many of the students in my school do not receive help outside the classroom, I decided to conduct my research within the classroom, in a Tier 1 setting.

Denton (2012) conducted an overview of current research on Response to Intervention and early reading. She found a large body of literature which supports the use of a Tier One program which includes

- explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, and automatic recognition of high-frequency irregular words; instruction in making meaning from text, including an emphasis on vocabulary and the development of background knowledge; and many opportunities to read and respond to connected text to promote reading fluency and comprehension. (Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002; Ehri, 2004; Jitendra, Edwards, Sacks, & Jacobson, 2004; National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow et al., 1998; as cited in Denton, 2012, p. 234)

The research she compiled also found that using the previous strategies in a manner that builds up from easier to tasks to more difficult tasks is effective in the general classroom. Although this basis is sufficient for many students learning to read, those students who are
struggling to read will need more help (Swanson, et al., 2017). The students who are struggling to read can receive the help they require in the general RTI classroom, with the use of differentiation (Cuticelli, Collier-Meek, & Coyne, 2015).

**Approaches to Planning Differentiated Language Instruction**

In her book *Languages for All: How to Support and Challenge Students in a Second Language Classroom* (2013), Arnett addresses how best to plan for and support diverse learners in a second language classroom. She explains that there are three critical elements that need to be involved in lesson plan design. The first point is that the lesson needs to be designed and developed in advance, with an objective in mind. The author’s second point is that not all lesson plan designs will work equally well for each teacher, there is an element of personal preference and choice that needs to be respected. Lastly, she states that it is necessary to have “a clear plan for assessing and evaluating your students’ knowledge and skills” (p. 165) in order to be fair, and to be certain that the lesson plan is leading the students towards the learning objectives.

When developing lessons that work in an inclusive French Immersion classroom, Arnett recommended the following three lesson structures: “Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), Differentiated Instruction (DI) (Tomlinson, 2001), and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Council for Exceptional Children, 2005)” (as cited in Arnett, 2013, p. 145). The author suggested all of the above lesson structures as they all embody what the author states are the necessary elements for effective inclusive second language instruction. These elements are advance planning for differentiated instruction, scaffolding on prior knowledge, and consideration of the goal of the learning experience (p. 145).

Assessment is seen as the most critical construct in helping to make an inclusive second language classroom; it is through assessment that a teacher can see which students are struggling
and which students need enrichment (Arnett, 2013, p. 169). One useful type of evaluation is criterion-referenced evaluation. Criterion-referenced evaluation allows teachers to “see a student’s individual progress with a particular skill and in relation to a specific criterion” (p. 171).

Learning Sprints is another way of planning for differentiated instruction, including differentiated language instruction. Learning Sprints was developed by Agile Schools, which was founded by Dr. Simon Breakspear. The Agile Schools website explains that Learning Sprints is an organisational routine that can support the adoption of evidence-informed practices and develop the collective efficacy of teacher teams. The approach is aligned with the existing research evidence into the features of effective teacher professional learning and the science of behaviour change. It has been designed to be simple, relevant and manageable for already overloaded teachers and their leaders. (2018, p. 2)

When planning for a Learning Sprint, there are a number of steps to follow. This method begins by having the educator focus on what outcomes need to be improved, and then defining this focus on very small specific outcomes and a small group of students. Next, according to Agile Schools, the educator must try to understand why the student is not making progress, and then design a plan to help support the student progress and stay engaged. Finally, once the Sprint is completed, the educator assesses to check for progress, and then reviews and reflects on what they learned, and what the sprint should target next time. A number of educators in schools who have used Learning Sprints notice how using them made a tangible difference in both the educator’s instruction and the student’s learning (Birk, 2017).
Both Arnett (2013) and Agile Schools (2018) stress how important planning is in providing differentiated instruction. For my research, I have used the above-mentioned guidelines when planning for my reading lessons with students. Doing my research in a classroom that is not my own, it has been very important for me to plan in order to accomplish what was necessary within the allotted time. Knowing where the students are beginning in relation to the specific goals, having a clear plan, and finding out if the goals have been met are paramount when planning for differentiated instruction.

**Specific Strategies for Reading Instruction**

**Direct decoding instruction.** A meta-analysis of 110 studies, completed by Garcia and Cain (2014) explored the relationship between the ability to decode words and reading comprehension; they also explored a few variables that could moderate the above relationship. The two types of moderating characteristics that they looked at were characteristics of readers, and characteristics of reading assessments. They found that the correlation between decoding ability and reading comprehension was very strong. There were some factors that were found to moderate this correlation, such as age and assessment characteristics, but the correlation remained very robust regardless. These findings are also supported by other studies outside of this meta-analysis (Christensen & Bowey, 2005; Gellert & Elbro, 2017; Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Christensen and Bowey (2005) underline the significance of decoding instruction by stating the following:

…programs designed to provide explicit practice in the use of letter-sound relationships to decode unfamiliar words can significantly enhance children’s performance across a wide range of measures of reading and spelling. Additionally, for relatively early readers, a program that focuses their attention on individual phoneme–grapheme correspondences
and encourages them to analyze every grapheme in a word is superior to one that encourages them to focus on larger orthographic units, specifically rimes. (p. 347)

The findings of this meta-analysis, and the other supporting studies, are important to this thesis in that they support the importance of teaching decoding to early readers. Direct decoding instruction was identified in my survey as a strategy with which teachers in my division were finding success, and the research supports this. A limitation of the generalization of the above studies to this thesis could be that they were studies of English language learners reading in English. However, I found these studies to be relevant as there is a large overlap in language processes; I have found that the way in which students decode does not change significantly between French, and English. This overlap is supported by research: “Word reading development in both languages is remarkably similar for emerging readers in French immersion, despite acquiring word-reading skills in different contexts” (Chung, Koh, Deacon, & Chen, 2017, p. 149). The goal of reading is to comprehend what is read, and to that purpose, strong decoding skills will be a benefit and need to be directly taught regardless of language.

**Phonological awareness instruction.** Phonological instruction was another strategy which was identified in my survey, and which I used in my action research. The importance of phonological awareness in reading development has been widely researched and discussed (Carson, Gillon & Boustead, 2013; Lane, Pullen, Eisele & Jordan, 2002; Tyler, Osterhouse, Wickham, Mcnutt, & Shao, 2014). Lane et al. (2002) explain phonological awareness and its importance very succinctly:

Phonological awareness can be defined as conscious sensitivity to the sound structure of language. Children with strong phonological awareness can detect, match, blend, segment, and manipulate speech sounds. Such facility with the sounds of spoken
language enables children to learn more readily how to apply these skills to decode print. An understanding of phonemes, the smallest detectable unit of sound in spoken language, is essential to the understanding of grapheme-phoneme (letter-sound) relationships. (p. 101)

Carson et al. (2013) illustrate an example of how important phonological awareness instruction can be. In their study, it was demonstrated that “a short-duration, high-intensity, teacher-directed PA [phonological awareness] program can result in improved reading outcomes both immediately and up to 6 months after instruction” (p. 12). Their short duration intervention maintained its positive effects over time. A mere 6% of the students who were in the experimental group continued to struggle with reading after six months, as opposed to 26% of those who were in the control group, which received a different intervention.

Along with the research about phonological awareness in English programs, there is also an increasing body of research on phonological awareness in the specific context of reading in development in French Immersion (Chung et al., 2017; Haigh, Savage, Erdos, & Genesee, 2011; Wise & Chen, 2010; Wise et al., 2016). Wise et al. (2016) conducted a long-term study that demonstrated the longitudinal benefits of English phonological awareness training on French reading in French immersion. There continued to be benefits to the students’ word reading even after three years. These positive benefits mirror what was found in the above study on English reading. It seems apparent that phonological awareness training can benefit struggling readers. A limitation of the above studies, which are aimed towards reading development in French immersion, is that the phonological awareness training was done in English. For my thesis research purposes, the phonological awareness training was done in French, as that is the language of instruction in grade one in my school division.
Value of French Immersion Instruction

A study conducted by Lazaruk (2007) ran a survey of research on French as a Second Language education, and pursued the idea that French Immersion education offers benefits to its students in the linguistic, academic, and cognitive fields. In order to accomplish this, Lazaruk looked at studies, which had been completed over the 40 years preceding 2007.

Lazaruk found a number of studies which validated the hypothesis that French Immersion students would have an academic advantage over their single language peers (Swain, 1974; Turnbull et al., 2001; Bournot-Trites & Reeder, 2001; as cited in Lazaruk, 2007). In the review Lazaruk stated that there is evidence that “students who are taught subject material in French generally perform as well as or better than their peers in regular English programs on English-language mathematics, science, and history tests” (2007, p. 615). This was also evidenced in a study by Lapkin, Hart and Turnbull (2003) which found that French Immersion students were surpassing their regular English language stream peers, and that “students in immersion clearly outperformed those in the regular program on EQAO [Education Quality and Accountability Office] tests in reading, writing, and mathematics” (p. 20). This study also found that students in immersion even outperformed students in specialized enrichment programs that were delivered in English.

Lazaruk (2007) also found ample evidence that French Immersion offers cognitive and linguistic advantages. Students in immersion were widely found to have language skills that surpassed their English language peers, once the immersion students were introduced to English Language Arts in grades three or four. In the long range, Lazuruk found that “immersion programs facilitate access to a range of communicative, cultural, and economic opportunities unique to bilingual speakers in Canada” (2007, p. 624), and that “Students who become bilingual
enjoy access, on graduation, to a far wider range of national and international jobs than is available to monolingual graduates, including positions with airlines, import–export companies, and other international businesses in addition to domestic opportunities” (Lazaruk, 2007, p. 622).

**Value of French Immersion for Struggling Readers**

Learning an additional language has many positive benefits for almost all students, including those who are struggling to read (Allen, 2004; Lapkin et al., 2003; Lazaruk, 2007). A study by Kruk and Reynolds (2012) addressed the issue of how learning an additional language affects at-risk readers in the early elementary years. The benefits of early exposure to another language are many; however, the researchers were specifically interested in how reading is affected while learning in a French context. Do the benefits outweigh the cost? Is there a cost? They wanted to know how children at-risk of reading difficulties differed, in five different facets, between French immersion and English programs. They also studied the same five facets while comparing children at-risk in French immersion versus children not at-risk in an English program.

The researchers followed the participants — English and French immersion students who were identified as at-risk for reading difficulties — from grade one to the end of grade three. This was a correlational study, therefore the participants were individually matched. The participants were tested about every six months until the end of grade three, beginning at the start of their grade one year. The study found that the French immersion students did have higher final status in both phonological awareness and decoding, but there was no significant difference in comprehension. The study’s question of whether the benefits outweighed the cost was answered; there was significant benefit, but no cost could be found.
The study findings by Kruk and Reynolds (2012), as well as Lazaruk (2007), are interesting, and relate to this thesis in that they show the benefits of struggling readers staying in French immersion, not switching over to an English program. They will not achieve more by moving to English; they will likely, in fact, achieve less. “Results show that at-risk children typically achieve as well in immersion contexts as do matched at-risk children in non-immersion contexts” (Kruk & Reynold, 2012, p. 586). It is therefore imperative that French immersion educators are informed on how best to help these struggling readers while they stay in French Immersion. French Immersion is an option that should be open to all students, including those who are struggling to read. The benefits and opportunities of a second language education are too rich not to be accessible to all.

Conclusion

All of the studies covered in this literature review help pave the way for the current research as they demonstrate the gaps in practical knowledge that need to be filled. Now that it is understood that there is a large linguistic crossover between French and English at many levels, and that starting an intervention in English and moving it towards French later is effective, the language of intervention used within my division could be discussed. Using an RTI model for interventions can work effectively in teaching many struggling readers, when differentiated instruction is used. Lastly, the body of research outlined the importance of phonological instruction and direct decoding instruction in reading acquisition. I used all of this foundational knowledge while completing my research, which will be explained in the next chapter.
Chapter Three Methodology and Methods

Theoretical Framework

In working through this thesis, I have been working towards being the most inclusive and effective teacher of reading that I can be. I believe I am already a good teacher of reading, but I want to continue to grow in my knowledge and practice and become a responsive and excellent teacher. I have had a number of students struggle to read each year, and I want to be sure I am not missing out on some more ways in which I could support them. I want to be able to effectively teach readers, including those struggling readers, in a classroom setting, without relying on outside support. In addition, I want to help more students stay in French immersion; those that struggle to read often leave French Immersion and are consequently missing an amazing opportunity to learn another language. Reading is an immensely important skill, in any language. It is not only necessary for future success, but it can also bring great joy and the pleasure of reading. I hope to help even more students experience this success and joy in an inclusive French Immersion setting.

Methodology

This study was, at its core, an action research study, using a concurrent, mixed methods research design. The first part of the study was a descriptive mixed-methods survey, which helped to gather the data that would then be used in the implementation of the action research. “Descriptive studies are those in which I is interested in documenting the salient features (e.g., behaviors, events, processes, attitudes, beliefs) of the phenomenon of interest” (Rumrill, Cook & Wiley, 2011, p. 156). Mixed methods designs include both quantitative and qualitative data. Rumrill et al. (2011) “caution[s] against dichotomizing quantitative and qualitative method[s]. Although quantitative and qualitative modes of inquiry originated from different, sometimes
competing, schools of thought, we believe that it is I’s questions, not his or her ideological persuasion, that should be the primary factor in determining the scientific methods that he or she selects” (p. 152).

The first part of this study’s question on how teachers find success in teaching reading was a complex question; it could not be fully understood by only quantitative or qualitative means. Using both methods as appropriate gave a more thorough and clear explanation. This is supported by Green (2008) who “suggests that a mixed method way of thinking recognizes that there are many legitimate approaches to social research and that, as a corollary, a single approach on its own will only yield a partial understanding of the phenomenon being investigated” (as cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2013, p. 22).

I chose action research as the method of research for the second main portion of the study because personal action is at the center of action research. Action research seemed like a very useful and relevant way to approach my research topic. McNiff (2016) explains it to practitioners of action research in this way:

… it is not just any kind of action. It is action that is informed by your learning, so it is action to which you, the researcher, are committed by your personal and professional values; that is informed by your careful considerations about its appropriateness; and that is intentional and undertaken by you to achieve the goals you have set. (p. 149)

During the action research portion of the study, a mixed-methods approach was also used. Qualitative research was used because it “is designed to study school situations and events as they unfold naturally. The focus of the investigation is on the meanings of these experiences for the individuals and groups in these settings” (Efron & Ravid, 2014, p. 40). I was interested in
what meaning I was finding while completing my research, and on being a reflective practitioner during the experience. The focus of my study was on improving my own practice.

While completing my action research, I wanted to verify that what my colleagues had found to be effective was proving to be an effective teaching strategy for myself as well. For this reason, I included some quantitative research in the form of pre-tests and post-tests. I wanted to validate my own finding by using quantitative methods, so it could be used as “strong evidence” of success in the teaching strategies I was implementing (McNiff, 2016, p. 176).

Participants

Characteristics. The survey participants in my research were teachers from the French immersion educational field in the Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools (GSCS) division, which includes nine schools. The target population were those teachers involved in the teaching of reading to students in grades one through three. This included Classroom teachers, Learning Assistance teachers, Release teachers, and literacy specialists. They were of diverse age ranges, gender, cultural background, and years of experience in teaching. No one who fit the criteria of the target population was excluded.

As per the nature of action research, the main participant in the action research portion of the study was myself. As I worked through the action research, the students whom I taught were naturally included as participants. During the study, I worked with 25 students in a grade one French Immersion class. All of the students were either six or seven years old at that time. About six students were receiving extra help from an Educational Assistant in reading, and two students were also seeing the Learning Assistance teacher for extra help with reading. Fourteen of the students had given informed assent as well as informed consent by their parents. Only the
data from the students who had given assent and consent were used for my thesis; no students who were given consent had their data excluded.

**Teacher Recruitment.** The school division sent out an email to the French Immersion principals in my division, explaining the survey and its purpose. The principals then forwarded this email to their staff. It was explained to the teachers that the research aimed to improve my understanding around how struggling readers are being taught and supported, what programs are being used, what programs are effective, and how the programs are being implemented. It was further explained that this knowledge would then be used to help me in improving my own practice and that the results would be used in my thesis. The teachers were also informed that the study did not aim to change the teaching practice of the survey participants, but was only being done to inform myself and to help improve my own practice. Finally, it was explained that the knowledge gained from the research would be made available to be disseminated in order to let all teachers know what my findings are, in case they might find them useful.

**Student Recruitment.** The students that participated in the action research portion of the study were told about the study at the outset of the action research. It was explained to them, in an age appropriate manner, what I was going to be doing and why. An informational letter was then sent home to the parents. After the action research cycles had been completed, the students were reminded, again in an age appropriate manner, what I had done in my research and why. A parental consent letter was then sent home, with a blank envelope as well. If the students took the letters home and gave them to their parents that was taken as assent. In the letter, it was again explained what the purpose and the value of the study were. Parents were informed that consent was voluntary and optional, and that it would not change how their child was treated in class. They were told that all students had already participated, but only those students who had
consent would have their data used, anonymously, in my thesis. The parents were told to return the consent to the front office of the school, if they so chose, in a sealed envelope. The parents were also given an extra copy of the consent letter to keep and refer to, which included my contact information, in case they had further questions or concerns, and told that if they were interested, they would be sent a copy of my thesis so they would have the opportunity to see the results of the study.

**Ethical issues.** For the survey portion of the study, it was indicated that participation in the survey implied consent. The survey was anonymous, and all data was stored in password protected computers or in locked files. The answers on the survey did not involve any direct student data, but focused on the teaching strategies used and general comments about the effectiveness, as well as details about how the strategies were implemented and their context. No student data was to be reported. There are no known risks to the survey participants.

For the action research portion of the study, all field notes and notes in the researcher journal did not include any student data or information; it was all reflective and based on my own thoughts, ideas and impressions. In order to use pre and post assessment data documentation from student participants’ parents, their informed consent was collected. These consent forms were stored in the principal’s office. Only the data from the students who received consent were used. This data was anonymized before I received it, so I never knew who received consent and there was no chance of me treating the students differently. The data were all stored on a password protected computer or in a locked filing cabinet.

There are no known potential risks to the student participants. As I did not know who had been given consent, it was not possible that I would show preferential treatment or enact my power over them in some other way because of consent or lack of consent. The participants, or
the parents of the student participants, all have the opportunity to be given the findings of the research once it is complete, if they express a desire to receive it. They were thanked for their participation and were given my phone number and email in case of further questions or concerns.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

**Survey.** For the first portion of this research, an online survey was used. This survey was posted online for potential participants to access through a link that was emailed to them. The survey questioned what reading programs teachers were using (or had used) successfully, and questions around implementation, process, support, language, outcomes, and success for readers, including struggling readers, in these programs. The survey collected both qualitative and quantitative data, and was developed by the researcher. The responses were anonymous and stored in a secure Canadian online storage facility, as well as printed and secured in a locked file cabinet.

**Research journal and field notes.** During the second portion of the study, more qualitative data were collected. I used field notes and a research journal in order to record my thoughts, ideas, success, difficulties, new ideas, questions, emerging themes, and impressions I had while implementing the top two strategies as found in the survey. I used the research journal each day that I worked on my action research, filling it out after I had finished teaching and when I had time to reflect. The field notes were used as necessary and as convenient while in the field, teaching. I had guiding questions for both the field notes and the researcher journal.

**Student Assessments.** I also collected quantitative data during the action research portion of the study. All students were assessed before and after the implementation of the two strategies. The post-test of the first strategy was used as the pre-test for the second strategy,
making a total of three assessments. The students were individually assessed twice on their reading skills, using a teacher-made reading test, and once through Benchmarking using the GB+ system. These types of tests were used so as to not differ from what the students would normally be doing during the school year. The data gathered from these tests was used by the classroom teacher in the regular assessment of the students. Only the data from the students that gave consent were used in my study.

**Research Process**

The overall research question was: “How can I improve my reading instruction to better support struggling readers in an inclusive French Immersion classroom?” In order to answer that question, the following research questions and cycles were followed:

*Cycle One: survey about reading – “What are Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools (GSCS) teachers finding success with in teaching reading, including to struggling readers?”*

An explanation and recruitment letter (Appendix A), with a survey link, was sent by email to all GSCS elementary educators. The letter set out the participant parameters and asked for those who meet the parameters to complete the survey (Appendix B) if they so desired. The survey remained open for three more weeks after the email was sent.

*Cycle Two: Go through the findings and inform myself about two of the top strategies/methods/curricula as per the survey, and prepare to use them while considering the question: “What must I do to implement these strategies?”*

Once the survey data was collected and collated, I was able to find out what the top strategies were, as indicated by those who chose to participate in the survey. The strategies I decided to use were phonological awareness instruction and direct decoding instruction. The next chapter will address how these were chosen. I then did further research into each of these
strategies in order to be aware of their research base and to know how to use them effectively. I as well prepared the materials I would need to use during my instruction. Included in the survey answers were also suggestions of context and specific ways of giving instruction that had been found to be effective by my teacher colleagues. I coded these and was able to find themes that I could use in my own instruction. I gave all student in the grade one class the pre-assessment (Appendix C) before I began the first sprint.

Cycle Three: Use first method and collect pre, post, continuing data while considering the question: “Am I finding success in teaching struggling readers using this strategy?”

During the three-week implementation of my first sprint, which was phonological awareness instruction, I wrote in my research journal (Appendix D) each day I conducted research. I collected notes on what lessons I taught, as well as impressions and reflections of how the students and research were progressing. I took field notes (Appendix E) in class in the case that I wanted to remember something for my research. As per the Research Ethics Board’s specifications, none of these notes contained specific student quotes or data.

The classroom teacher, using the GB+ Benchmarking kit (Appendix F), assessed all students around the end of this sprint.

Cycle Four: Use second method and collect pre, post, continuing data while considering the question: “Am I finding success in teaching struggling readers using this strategy?”

I followed the same process as in Cycle Three, aside from the strategy that I implemented. The second strategy was direct decoding instruction; this sprint again lasted for a three-week period.
**Cycle Five: Collate all data and analyze the data while considering the question:**

“Which of these strategies did I find most effective in teaching reading to all readers, including struggling readers, and why?”

Once the two sprints were completed and I was done my research in the classroom and I sent out the parent consent form (Appendix G). I followed the process to ensure the assent and consent were anonymous, as explained previously in this chapter.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

The survey data was collected and analyzed using descriptive statistics. I converted the numbers to percentages, and looked for trends and themes in the data. This data gave a broad view of what was being used to teach reading in the Greater Saskatoon Schools French immersion programs, and what is proving to be successful in supporting struggling readers and increasing their reading skills. From this data, I pulled the top programs, or teaching strategies, for use in the action research. Some data was converted to charts, graphs, or numbers to help illustrate what had been found.

The action research data included a research journal and field notes. Both of these were coded so that meaning could be found in the data; it was coded into predetermined categories, as well as into categories that emerged from the data (Efron & Ravid, 2014, p. 173). These data were then examined in order to identify patterns and themes, which were used as a basis for the study findings and conclusions. The quantitative data from the action research were the student participant pre-tests and post-tests. Both quantitative and qualitative data were used in the action research for concurrent triangulation because “the purpose of concurrent triangulation designs is to use both qualitative and quantitative data to more accurately define relationships among
variables of interest” (Castro, Kellison, Boyd & Kopak, 2010, p. 344). I wanted to be sure that what I had found to be effective was accurately backed by evidence.

**Application of Understandings**

I will use the knowledge that I have gained in my study in order to improve my own professional practice, teaching reading in the classroom. I also hope to continue implementing these strategies in my ongoing teaching career. As I am moving into the role of a Learning Assistance teacher, I will also share the knowledge, experiences, and insights that I have gained, with the classroom teachers with whom I work. I will be able to help and support them in implementing these strategies effectively in their own classrooms. My study will be shared with my colleagues in other French Immersion schools, if they are interested, so that they may choose to learn more about these strategies and implement them themselves. I will also be open to helping or talking to anyone who is interested in what I have learned, or any other part of my action research journey.

**Limitations**

This study included a few limitations. The sample size for the survey was relatively small. Even if all GSCS early elementary teachers of reading participated in the online survey, it would not be a very large sample size, therefore findings are not generalizable outside of the context of GSCS. In addition, the data interpretation might be influenced by my own personal bias as a French immersion teacher of grades one, two, and three for slightly more than the last decade.

Another limitation of this study is that the action research is not generalizable. Part of the study was a personal research with a sample size of one, and my personal biases will be reflected in the data interpretation, though the triangulation may help to mediate that factor. However,
other teachers may be interested in my findings, and if they work in a similar context, my personal findings may be applicable to them.

Significance

The first portion of this study holds value, as it used broad-based quantitative data as well as qualitative data. There is a more comprehensive understanding now of what early elementary teachers are using, and finding success in using, in teaching French reading in grades one, two, and three. The qualitative data also gives insight into how and why they are using these methods.

The action research portion of this study holds much more personal significance. Through the cycles of action research, the journaling, and the reflecting, I learned a lot about my practice and it has helped me to focus myself deeply on what I am doing, why I am doing it, and whether it is working.

The action research has given me a story that I can now tell to my colleagues, with the consideration that the aim of storytelling is to understand and liberate rather than predict and control. People investigate their practices with others in order to understand and improve what they are doing for mutual benefit. Their shared learning can lead to the construction of collective knowledge. (McNiff, 2016, p. 193)

It is my hope that, we, my colleagues and I, will be able to construct some new ideas and strategies together. We can all share our stories and new learnings, and collectively work to be the best, most supportive, and collaborative teachers that we may be.
Chapter 4 Findings

Many students in French Immersion struggle to read, and French Immersion educators are continuing to look for ways to support these students, myself included. Not all students will receive help from an Educational Assistant or the Learning Assistance Teacher. The purpose of my research is to find a way to better support these students in a Tier 1 setting, in the classroom, and without relying on outside support. One way to accomplish this was to find out what my colleagues in other French Immersion schools were doing to find success.

I executed a survey of my early elementary French Immersion teacher colleagues in order to identify the strategies they were using successfully in the classroom. I then implemented two of the top strategies from the survey in a grade one classroom as part of my action research. By engaging in this action research process, I hoped to gain more knowledge of effective reading strategies, to improve and expand my own practice, and to help students struggling to read in the grade one classroom in which I am teaching. I also hope to be able to help my colleagues by sharing my experiences with them.

This chapter will explain the findings of my research, which I undertook in an effort to address the question, "How can I improve my reading instruction to better support struggling readers in an inclusive French Immersion classroom?" It will begin with an overview, and then go over the findings in chronological order. Action research contains a number of cycles, and the findings of my research is presented through the lens of the action research cycles that I undertook.

My survey indicated that phonological awareness instruction and direct decoding instruction were two strategies with which my colleagues were finding success in the
classroom. I was very pleased to see these as two of the top strategies, as they are well researched and supported strategies. For ethical reasons, if the top strategies were not strategies that I knew to be effective, I would not be able to use them. In implementing these two strategies, I decided to start with phonological awareness instruction, and follow it with the direct decoding instruction so that students could build upon each skill like a scaffold; phonological awareness being a skill upon which decoding ability relies.

I was very interested to use each of these strategies in both a whole class and small group setting. I used a number of ideas that come from Learning Sprints when I designed my interventions. Two Learning Sprints components that I focused on specifically were: (a) defining a very small goal, and (b) basing my instruction on research. I used both internal research, based on my colleagues’ knowledge; and external research, including peer-reviewed journals. As mentioned in previous chapters, action research includes a number of cycles, just like Learning Sprints. In my study, I went through a number of cycles during which I was consistently reflecting and adjusting if necessary. For the purposes of this research, I may refer to each instructional strategy cycle as such, or as a sprint.

At the end of the sprints, I asked students’ parents if they would consent for their child’s data to be used in my research. I also explained to the students what the note asking for consent was, and explained that if they gave the note to their parents it would be taken as assent. The completed consent forms were returned to the principal to open, and I gave all my student data to the principal as well. The principal then opened all the consent forms, and compiled the data for the students who had received consent from their parents. She anonymized the data, assigning each student a letter and removing the student name, and then returned the data to me in the anonymized form. In this way I do not, and will never, know
which students received consent. This was recommended by the Research Ethics Board in order to ensure that I do not give any students preferential treatment. I received consent for 14 students’ anonymized data to be included in my research.

After I had received all the data which I had consent to use, I compiled it into charts and graphs. In this way, I was able to look for trends and see concrete results. I also read my researcher journal and field notes, looked for themes, and coded them. I was then able to triangulate the qualitative and quantitative data that I had gathered.

Action Research involves a number of cycles, which may evolve and change during the course of the research. The cycles I used in order to answer my action research question, “How can I improve my reading instruction to better support struggling readers in an inclusive French Immersion classroom?” included the following:

- Cycle One: Conduct survey, compile data, and identify interventions
- Cycle Two: Prepare for the interventions
- Cycle Three: Weeks 1-3 – use phonological awareness instruction
- Cycle Four: Weeks 4-6 – use direct decoding instruction
- Cycle Five: Collate and analyze the data

**Cycle One – Conduct Survey, Compile Survey Data, and Identify Strategies**

To begin my action research, I constructed a survey (Appendix B) and submitted it to my school division. My division then sent the survey out to elementary teachers who are known or listed as teaching reading in grades one through three. This included LATs, release teachers, and literacy specialists. The survey questions focused on practices and strategies for teaching reading accuracy to the whole class, as well as to small groups in the class. Reading accuracy, for the purposes of my survey and research, referred to as a student’s ability to correctly read
letter sounds and words, without error. I included questions that would yield qualitative data, as well as questions that would yield quantitative data.

As well as enquiring which strategies worked for teachers and students, I requested details about how they implemented them, as well as how they knew they were successful. I wanted to find out what my GSCS colleagues were finding success with in teaching reading in the classroom, including to struggling readers. I received survey responses from 16 teachers. Three of the surveys were incomplete; the data that was provided is included in the total of 16.

The survey indicated that almost all respondents preferred to teach reading through a mixture of whole class, small group, and individual lessons. There was only one teacher who indicated their preference was to teach entirely through small group lessons. I assume that the teacher who chose this is in a position where they have the opportunity to easily conduct small group lessons. Most teachers do not have that option.

The survey indicated that for whole class reading instruction, there were three clear preferences (see Table 1): guided reading, direct decoding instruction, and phonological awareness instruction.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred Whole Class Strategy</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Teaching of Decoding Strategies</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided Reading</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Reading – Grade Alike Buddies</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonics Instruction</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phonological Awareness Instruction</strong></td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the question regarding small group instruction, the same three strategies emerged as preferences, though in slightly different amounts (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Preferred Small Group Strategy*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Teaching of Decoding Strategies</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided Reading</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter Formation</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Reading – Grade Alike Buddies</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonics Instruction</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonological Awareness Instruction</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound Boxes</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Work</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This left me with a dilemma. Guided reading was the top strategy for both whole class and small group instruction. However, the class in which I was doing my research was already receiving sufficient guided reading instruction from their classroom teacher, and the classroom teacher wished to continue to instruct them in this. Listing guided reading as a full class reading instruction strategy was a mistake on my part. Guided reading is a small group instruction strategy; therefore, it should not have been included in the first question. In addition, I was hoping to be able to do something different to supplement the students’ instruction, as well as to focus on and learn about a strategy that was more novel to myself.

Looking at the qualitative data, which was included when teachers answered about their preferred strategies, I saw that many teachers who answered *guided reading* then qualified by explaining what they do within guided reading. One strategy that they frequently mentioned was direct decoding instruction. For example, one teacher chose guided reading, and then went on to
explain how she directly teaches decoding within the guided reading model. Another teacher mentions how she uses the time to teach phonological awareness:

*Ensuring that students hear and distinguish beginning, middle and ending sounds of words, syllables, etc... through clapping and identification activities/games using visuals (ex. sound boxes)... Students who can hear and distinguish sounds are more easily able to identify and later produce them correctly in printed form.*

Looking at the data in this way, and taking into account what would be of most benefit to the students, which is my ethical obligation, I chose to do direct decoding instruction and phonological awareness instruction in my research, and leave guided reading to the classroom teacher. Though sound boxes were only chosen as a strategy on their own once, they were mentioned in the qualitative data, as shown above, a few times. Since I am attempting to implement strategies my colleagues had found successful, I used this qualitative data and incorporated the sound boxes method into my phonological awareness instruction.

In looking at my researcher journal, I can see that I was very excited while preparing to implement the sprints. I already had experience teaching both decoding and phonological awareness, but I was excited to delve deeper. I wanted to try some of the strategies that my colleagues had included as part of the qualitative survey answers; I was particularly interested in the use of sound boxes in phonological awareness instruction. Lastly, I wanted to find out more about the research around phonological awareness instruction and direct decoding instruction, and to teach these in a more focused way than I had previously done in a classroom.

**Cycle Two – Prepare for the Strategies**

In order to prepare for teaching the strategies, I began to research them. I researched the two instructional strategies that I would be using, both through looking at the survey data I had
gathered from my colleagues as well as in journals and books. I decided how I would implement my two strategies, and I began to gather and prepare materials.

For my phonological awareness instruction, I prepared sound boxes and coloured cubes. I was able to print out a template for the sound boxes and copy enough so that each student had their own sound box sheet. I then found some extra math manipulative cubes, and sorted them out so that each student would receive the same number and color of cubes. Lastly, I found high-interest books with appropriate vocabulary for the activities I planned on doing. I pulled words from the books, or related to the books, for when we did the phonological awareness activities. This was meant to make the activities and lessons more relevant and interesting for the students.

When preparing for my direct decoding instruction, I chose grade appropriate books. For whole class direct decoding instruction, I chose mid-level books that would be of interest to the students, and that would be helpful when directly teaching decoding. I scanned these books so I could use them on the Smart Board where I could directly teach and model the desired decoding strategies to the whole class. For working with small groups, I chose interesting books at the students’ levels that would work well with the targeted decoding strategies. I did not scan these books, as there was enough for each student to receive their own copy.

My reflections of this time indicate that I was excited to begin teaching the strategies. I also noted that it was quite time consuming. I had to find research about each strategy, read, understand, and prepare to teach it. I also had to find and prepare the books and manipulatives. Finding a way to store and transport everything was also a concern for me, as I was doing this in a classroom that was not my own. Eventually I decided on a small bucket that I could put everything in for transport to and from the class. It included the cubes, sound box templates, books, my word lists and notes, my field notes notebook and anything else I may need. I noted
in my journal that teaching this way would be much simpler for a classroom teacher, who would always have all the supplies easily at hand.

During this same time period, I took 15 minutes to explain and discuss with my students what I would be doing in their class (see Appendix H). The initial explanation did not take long, even though the students had a number of questions for me about university and about why I was going to school again. I answered all their questions and we had a nice discussion. Many students seemed excited to be helping me in my schoolwork. At the end of this, I gave the students a note to take home to their parents (Appendix I). The note explained what I was going to be doing, and let them know that I would be requesting consent at the end of my implementation phase.

The last element that I had to complete during this time was the creation and implementation of the student pre-assessment, which tested the students’ reading accuracy. It consisted of letters, groups of letters, and words. The students were expected to read it to me in French. All students completed the assessment, taking between two to five minutes for most students.

**Cycle Three - Weeks 1-3 – Use Phonological Awareness Instruction**

On the first day of the phonological awareness instruction phase, I took some time to introduce the students to some of the manipulatives we would be using and how we would be using them. I had prepared a Smart Board mockup of what their materials would look like. I demonstrated how we would use the cubes and the sound boxes by using my Smart Board cubes. This way, the whole class could see and hear what was expected. For the introduction, we used students’ names as our vocabulary words. We found the sound box that was the right size, and represented each syllable of the student’s name with one cube. Next, I had some students come
to the board and do some examples with me. The last step in our introduction day was to pass out the sound boxes template and the cubes (see Figure 4). We then did a few names together. The students were very engaged and enjoyed these activities, both on the Smart Board as a group, and individually with their cubes.

After the introduction day, I began my phonological awareness instruction in class. Three days a week, we did whole class activities for 15 minutes. One day a week, I had students engaged in an individual task while I worked with small groups; this block of time was 45 minutes. To begin with, we worked with syllables in words. An example of a sound box activity with this is that the students would represent the word *lion* (in French) with cubes; lion has two syllables, so they would use two cubes.

![Sound Boxes Supplies](image)

*Figure 4. Sound Boxes Supplies.* A picture showing some of the supplies I used while teaching the first sprint.

We also did other oral activities and games focused around syllables during this time, such as clapping and counting syllables. Near the end of the week, we deleted syllables from words orally. For example, we would say *lion sans –li* (lion without –li). My reflections of this time note that most students caught on to syllable segmentation and manipulation quite easily,
others took a few days before finding success. The small group work was very helpful for those that were struggling. Reminding the students to talk like a robot really helped them to segment the syllables, and they enjoyed it as well.

After working with syllables for about a week, we moved on to phonemes. A sound box example of this would be *koala* (*koala*); it has five phonemes, or sounds, so they would use five cubes. Again, we did not exclusively use sound boxes, as I wanted to keep them engaged and interested. I included other games and activities. We also worked on phoneme blending, segmenting, addition, and deletion orally. Working with phonemes was more difficult for the students, as I had anticipated, so I was glad to have two weeks for this part of the sprint. My reflections indicate that the students enjoyed speaking like a turtle now, and not missing any sounds. I also noted in my journal that there seem to be a great deal of improvement in a number of students. They were already able to segment syllables and phonemes much more successfully. When I worked with small groups, the students smiled often and I could see that they were proud of their achievement. Having the sound boxes and cubes seemed to help them slow down, take their time, and pay attention to the individual sounds, or phonemes.

The following chart (Table 3) shows the percent scores, out of 100, that the students received on the pre-assessment test versus the post-assessment test for the phonological awareness instruction. The last column shows the change in score from one test to the next.
Table 3

*Phonological Awareness Pre and Post-Test Results*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Test 1 Pre-test</th>
<th>Test 2 Posttest</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>+2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>+27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>+7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>+7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>+12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>+11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>+21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>+8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>+2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>+11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to focus on a few students and examine some trends, I have pulled out some individual data. Firstly, I will discuss those students who increased their scores by more than 10%. As you see below (Figure 5), both Student O and Student J increased the scores by 11%. Student G increased their score by 12%, while Student L and Student D increased their scores by 21% and 27% respectively. All of these students were the students with scores on the very low end of the spectrum to begin with. From this, I inferred that phonological awareness training was what these struggling students had needed. They had not gained this skill earlier in the year when many other students had, but now they were ready and so made large gains with this new skill.
As well as helping the struggling students, the phonological awareness instruction also showed a benefit for almost all of the students. The only three not to improve were two students who maintained their scores, and one student went down 1%. As you can see on the table below (Table 4), all of the students who made gains of 1% or less, already started with 90% or more, with the exception of one student who maintained their score of 89%.

**Table 4**

*Phonological Awareness Pre and Post-Test Results for Students B, H, and K*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Test 1 Pre-test</th>
<th>Test 2 Posttest</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All other students made gains between 1% and 10%. Most of the students who made these smaller gains started out at a higher level initially, with scores of between 80% and 90%,
so there was less of a gain for them to make. They already had some of these skills, and made small gains as they improved upon their previous skills.

Through my journal, I can see that I was feeling very good about what I was doing during this time. The students were learning, improving, and especially enjoyed using the sound boxes and cubes. There were a number of students who, during their spare time, would think of words on their own and work them out with the sound boxes.

**Cycle Four – Direct Decoding Instruction**

Again I began this cycle with an introduction lesson. I explained the purpose of what we would be doing, and shared examples of what we would do. We discussed decoding strategies that they already knew how to use, and established what they already knew about decoding. Many of the students were already aware of a number of strategies. We spoke about how it is important to try to remember and use the strategies they know, while they are reading. The students seemed pleased and excited to embark on this part of our learning.

I had scanned the first book we read together and I was able to show it on the Smart Board. In our first lesson, we worked on looking for the sounds we knew in words before we started to read, for example, \( o \) and \( u \) together make the sound “oo” like in the word “moo”. We would find those sounds and then circle them. We also looked for silent letters at the ends of words and crossed them out (see Figure 6).
Figure 6. An Example of a Smart Board Book Page. This page shows an example of a page from a book that was used for a lesson, including the sounds which were found and circled.

We worked through and read the book this way as a class. Each time I worked with a small group, we focused on the same strategies we had been using that week as a class. Although using picture and context clues were not strictly decoding strategies, we worked on those as well. They would help when the student was decoding and help lead to greater accuracy, which was the goal upon which I was focusing.

My reflections during this time show mixed feelings. I felt some of the students who were really struggling to read had been benefiting greatly from the consistent phonological awareness instruction, and were not quite ready to move on decoding. However, I had to move on to decoding in the class, as I had to follow my plan for my research. I quickly found, though, that when working in a small group, with a book from their level, the struggling students were able to follow along with the decoding exercises. They continued to need some help and direction, however, and I was there to provide it. Reading from the books made them feel like readers, and they enjoyed the pictures and discussing the stories. This allayed my worries significantly. As we continued to practice, they continued to improve in using decoding strategies more independently.
As you will see in the chart below (Table 5), there were less dramatic differences in scores between this pretest and posttest than there were from the first pretest and posttest. I hypothesize that this is because the students had already made large gains during the first sprint by filling in some large gaps in their knowledge. Once they had filled in those gaps, the learning curve would now be a slower, more gradual process. Typically, with more practice, the skills will continue to improve at a gradual rate.

Table 5

Direct Decoding Instruction Pre and Post-Test Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Test 2 Pretest</th>
<th>Test 3 Posttest</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>+3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>+3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>+18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>+6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>+6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>+2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One student to experience significant gains during the second sprint was Student G. As Figure 7 below shows, they improved 18% from pretest to posttest. This is a very significant gain, especially in comparison to their peers. If you compare Student G with the other students on the table above, you will note that Student G had the lowest pretest score coming into this
sprint. This is reminiscent of what we saw in the phonological awareness sprint, where those with the lowest scores had the largest possible gains to make. Student G had made significant gains in the first sprint (+12%); however, they had still had significant room for improvement.

![Student G's Assessment Scores](image1)

*Figure 7.* Student G’s Assessment Scores for all Pre and Post Tests. This figure shows how Student G’s scores continued to increase significantly.

Looking below at Student M, you will see that their score decreased 5% in accuracy from Test 2 to Test 3. However, from Test 1 to Test 3 there was still a small improvement overall (+3%). Inclusively, Student M’s scores are in the higher acceptable range, so it is possible that Student M had an off day for Test 2. Alternatively, it could be the format of Test 2. Tests 1 and 3 were letters and words on a paper, whilst Test 2 was words in a book.

![Student M's Assessment Scores](image2)

*Figure 8.* Student M’s Assessment Scores for all Pre and Post Tests. This figure shows how Student M’s score increased, followed by a decrease.
The other students who had no gains in their scores, or who experienced losses, are also shown below (see Table 6). All of these students, including Student M, began with scores in the higher average range. Sometimes an increase in ability is a slower process for those who are already achieving at grade level — it may take a month rather than a week to show an increase. Since their scores did not indicate that they were struggling, they are likely on a slow and steady path of improvement.

Table 6

*Direct Decoding Instruction Pre and Post-Test Results for Students M, K, H, F, and D*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Test 2 Pretest</th>
<th>Test 3 Posttest</th>
<th>Difference</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cycle Five - Collate and Analyze the Data**

Compiled and analyzed, the data shows a very positive trend. As you can see on Figure 9 below, all students made some upward movement, except for two. One student who made no upward movement was already at 100%, so there was no possibility of improvement on the tests. The other student, Student K, maintained 89% through the three assessments. As the data is anonymized, I am unaware of who this student is, I can say with fair certainty that although they did not show growth on the test, I am sure they experienced growth through our sprints. Having differentiated small groups is beneficial to both the students who are struggling, as well as to those who are excelling.
When I began implementing my instructional strategies, I did not expect to see such large gains from so many students. I had, of course, hoped that all students would show some improvement, as that is what is expected of them in school, regardless of sprints. As teachers, we expect students to show improvement in reading, especially in grade one. I had expected overall gains of about 5% for each student. However, the very large improvements a number of students experienced was unforeseen and very welcome.

**Conclusion**

This chapter explained my action research cycles. I began with Cycle One, a survey of my colleagues. The responses from Cycle One led me to the content of Cycle Two, the two strategies which I would be implementing. Cycle Three was the implementation of a phonological awareness sprint. This was followed by Cycle Four, which was a direct decoding
instruction sprint. I concluded with Cycle Five where I collated and analyzed all the data. I was able to draw a number of conclusions from my action research cycles.

From the data gathered through both quantitative and qualitative means, I can conclude without a doubt that my student participants, and myself, all benefited from this research experience. Overall, my researcher journal and field notes show that I had a positive and enriching experience. I gained deeper knowledge and insight about phonological awareness and direct decoding instruction. Additionally, I enjoyed the process of doing sprints, because having a focused goal and outcome in mind was beneficial for my personal organization and my teaching; it allowed me to concentrate on specific goals for short periods of time.

The student data clearly shows that the students benefitted from the sprints as well. Many students benefitted greatly, especially from the initial phonological awareness instruction. My field notes also indicate that there was a general positive student attitude during the entire process. In Chapter 5, I will make recommendations and discuss possible applications of my findings.
Chapter 5 Conclusions

This final chapter will restate the purpose of my study, as well as why I chose to use a mixed-method design, which included action research. I will address how the findings of my research are valuable and applicable to myself, to my colleagues, and to my field of work. I will also address how GSCS policy could be changed in light of current research, and where further research may need to be done. Lastly, I will discuss the possible limitations of my study and offer a conclusion.

Restatement of Purpose

After an initial lag, French Immersion students’ English reading and writing proficiency catch up to become similar or better than that of their peers from English language schools; this happens around grade six (Lazaruk, 2007). Additionally, there is a large body of research supporting the presence of enhanced academic achievement among immersion students. It suggests that students who become bilingual through an immersion system will have heightened mental flexibility, creative thinking skills, greater communicative sensibility, and a general cognitive advantage (Allen, 2004; Lapkin et al., 2003; Lazaruk, 2007).

Our school system is an inclusive school system, which means that all learners, including those struggling to read, should have the opportunity to reap all of the above benefits. Due to budgetary constraints, there is sometimes a lack of extra support for students in immersion who are struggling to read. This often leads to parents deciding to move their child to an English program, where they feel the school will be better able to support their child’s learning, and they think their child will struggle less (MacCoubrey, 2003).

I wanted to be sure I was doing all I could in order to support these struggling readers in a Tier 1 setting. Research has shown that early identification and intervention in Tier 1 can help
many students who would otherwise experience reading failure, to succeed (Catts, Nielsen, Bridges, Liu, & Bontempo, 2013). I wanted to put into practice some extra means of in-class support so the students who were struggling would receive effective early intervention that would prevent them from falling too far behind their peers. I hoped that through doing this, I would enrich my own teaching practices and be better able to support students. I also hoped that through my research, I would gain experiences and insights that I could share with other teachers in the future. In my role as an LAT, I cannot always see as many students as may require my help; I hope that by sharing my experiences, I can help teachers to be more confident in their support of their students in the class.

**Restatement of Choice of Methods**

I used a concurrent mixed-methods design for my research. I began with a survey because I wanted to draw upon my colleagues’ years of practical knowledge first. They are in similar situations as I am, and I wanted to find out what was working for them when teaching reading in inclusive French Immersion classrooms. I used their qualitative knowledge as well in order to add some detail and depth to the data I was seeking, since “qualitative research is conducted with a focus on the perspectives of people who are most directly affected by the phenomena under study” (Rumrill, Cook, & Wiley, 2011, p. 153).

I followed the survey with action research for the following reasons:

Action research is about evaluating your practice to check whether it is as good as you would like it to be, identifying any areas that you feel need improving, and finding ways to improve them. Through studying and working with your practice you can turn yourself into a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983), a critical thinker (Brookfield, 2013) and an agent for personal and social change. (Arendt, 1958) (as in McNiff, 2012, p. 14)
McNiff further explains that action research is a process, which goes beyond the bounds of good professional practice, in that it attempts to question the reasons and motives. I was pulled towards action research because I was interested in improving my practice, and creating knowledge, in a way that I could justify and support. Rather than thoughtlessly following the direction indicated by my division, I desired to find what would work for me personally in my particular, unique setting; I wanted to know the why of what I was doing. In order to do that, a systematic purposeful approach was needed (Efron & Ravid, 2014) to answer my research question:

“How can I improve my reading instruction to better support struggling readers in an inclusive French Immersion classroom?”

Value of My Study

My study is of value because even though it was a personal journey, the findings can be transferable to other educators in similar settings, especially early years French Immersion teachers in the GSCS. I hope to share what I have done and what I have learned through my research; both background academic research and action research. There are only six French Immersion schools in the GSCS, and sometimes we are disconnected between schools. We do not always know what our colleagues are doing in their schools, what they are finding success with, or what their struggles are. My study will help to inform my colleagues at other schools of what I have undertaken, as well as be of some help for those endeavoring to assist struggling readers in the classroom, with little outside support.
Recommendations

After looking at all the qualitative and quantitative data that I have gathered through my survey, researcher journal, field notes, and pre and post assessment, I feel confident in offering the following recommendations to other French Immersion educators.

**Phonological awareness instruction.** In chapter two, it was clearly demonstrated that the phonological awareness interventions can be effective in helping struggling readers (Lane, Pullen, Eiselle, & Jordan, 2002), even in a French Immersion context (MacCoubrey, 2003; Wise, 2014; Wise et al., 2016). The interventions in the above research, however, were done in small-group pull out sessions. My own research used the same instructional model as these interventions, but instead of small group pull out sessions, I used it in both whole class instruction, as well as small group instruction in class. In addition, the entire sprint for my action research was completed using French as the language of instruction.

Focusing on improving reading accuracy through phonological awareness instruction proved to be very effective in my setting. As demonstrated in chapter 4, a number of students made very large gains in their assessment scores. As well as making gains in scores, I could see improvement in their understanding and confidence. The students appeared to enjoy using sound boxes and cubes as well. Sound boxes are shown be effective in improving phonological awareness (Alber-Morgan, Joseph, Kanotz, Rouse, & Sawyer, 2016; Keesey, Konrad, & Joseph, 2015), and I found the students enjoyed using the manipulatives. I noted that having something to touch and look at helped a number of the students struggling to read in my class. I recommend that my colleagues ensure they are implementing whole class and small group phonological awareness instruction; it is not a building block that can be skipped over. I, as well, recommend
implementing it in a sprint format, the short period of focused instruction towards a specific goal yielded very significant results in my case, and I believe it could in others as well.

**Direct decoding instruction.** The second strategy that I used in my sprints was direct decoding instruction. Through the survey, my colleagues indicated that this was an effective strategy, and the research backs them up (Christensen & Bowey, 2005; Gillart & Elbrow, 2017; Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Though most of the research about direct decoding instruction has been completed in English, the reading processes remain the same over languages (Chung et al., 2017). Through my study, I found that focusing on decoding instruction in both a whole class and small group setting over three weeks was of benefit. The gains in student assessment scores were less than the phonological awareness sprint gains, however they were still significant. I found that the students enjoyed using books on the Smart Board as a large group, and having their own books in small groups. They were able to generalize the skills from one environment to the other.

I recommend that my colleagues implement direct decoding instruction sprints in both whole class and small group settings. I found that repeating the same activities and strategies helped to solidify their knowledge of them, and three weeks was a good period of time in which the students could remain engaged and interested.

**Policy.** My action research study took place in the second half of grade one because students would have a much larger understanding of the French language at that point in time, than they would have in the first half of grade one. For my research, I used French as the language of instruction for both whole class and small group instruction, and I found success in doing so. However, had I completed my research in the first half of grade one, or even kindergarten, I do not believe I would have found the same success.
There are a number of studies which support the use of English phonological awareness instruction in order to achieve effective early intervention (Chung et al., 2017; Haigh et al., 2011; Wise & Chen, 2015; Wise et al., 2015), as well as a number of studies which stress the importance of early intervention (Otaiba et al., 2014; Wanzak & Vaughn, 2007). I recommend that the GSCS consider allowing students in kindergarten or grade one to receive English phonological awareness screening and intervention.

Further Research

Further research could be done comparing the effectiveness of English versus French phonological awareness instruction. Though there is research on each, there is not a comparison study which can clearly show which is more effective, or what differences they may yield.

As well, further research needs to be done on Learning Sprints. There is research surrounding small-group interventions, targeted interventions, and using research based strategies. There is, however, not yet any research I could find which indicates that Learning Sprints are the most effective way to differentiate. I contacted Agile schools asking for citations so I could look at the research supporting Learning Sprints. They responded by saying they would gather some for me. Three months later, I got a follow-up email saying they were still gathering. I have yet to receive any citations or research.

Limitations

First of all, my study was completed through my own experiences, therefore, it is possible that another educator would not experience the same results as I, although I highly recommend engaging in an action research project. Secondly, the students in the class were also receiving instruction from their classroom teacher; therefore, it might not necessarily be my research that affected the students’ learning the most. Lastly, two of the student assessments
were teacher-made assessments while one was GB+ Benchmarking. Though they seemed to yield consistent results, it is possible the results could have differed if the assessments were all of the same format.

**Conclusion**

My action research project was a very personally and professionally improving experience. Through it, I was able to increase my knowledge base surrounding struggling readers in French Immersion, as well as the numerous languages processes involved in reading. I became a very reflective practitioner, and was frequently thinking about why I was doing what I was doing, how it was working, and what I could change to improve it. I am now in a better position to help other teachers teaching in inclusive French Immersion classrooms, which is important in my role as an LAT.

Through implementing the two strategies in sprint formats, I saw many students make great gains. As well as being very personally rewarding, it helped to highlight a very salient point. French Immersion is a place for all students. Some students with very severe needs will continue to need outside support, but as teachers, we are capable of supporting those students who are struggling to read in French Immersion classroom even in light of dwindling outside supports. Outside support will always be welcome, but through collaboration and the sharing of knowledge, we can persevere and help more students succeed, and thus continue to reap the benefits of a bilingual education.
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APPENDIX A: EXPLANATION AND RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Colleague:

As well as being a teacher with the GSCS I am also a student in the Master of Education in Special Education program at Vancouver Island University. I am currently conducting research to complete my thesis under the supervision of Dr. Ana Vieira. I am doing a mixed methods study with two components, the first component is the survey I am asking you to complete. This is a very short survey with a few questions about what you have found success with in teaching reading, including to students who are struggling. I will use the information I gather to then do the second component of my study, which will be action research. The link to the survey is below.

The survey is anonymous and completely optional. If you choose to participate, your participating in the survey and submission of the survey will be taken as consent. The first page of the online survey includes the letter of consent.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to help me out in my research. If you have any questions or concerns, please let me know.

Caileen McKeague

http://form.simplesurvey.com/f/s.aspx?s=198c77a1-23c2-4125-80e8-d4dc0b6d7000&lang=EN
French Reading Instruction

Thursday, December 21, 2017

1) Struggling Readers in Saskatoon French Immersion Schools: A Mixed Methods Study
Examining Strategies for Support  Principal Investigator  Caileen McKeague, Student  Master of Special Education  Vancouver Island University  caileen@ryanschmidt.com  Student Supervisor Ana Vieira  Department of Education  Vancouver Island University  Ana.Vieira@viu.ca  I am a student in the Master of Education in Special Education program at Vancouver Island University. My research is focusing on how to effectively teach reading to all readers, including struggling readers, in early elementary French Immersion classrooms. This survey will help me to know what my colleagues are doing that is working with struggling readers in French immersion in Saskatoon. This knowledge will then inform my action research. I will take two of the top strategies found in the survey, and implement them in a classroom. I will gather data about how the strategies worked for me, and will then disseminate what I have found. Research participants are asked to complete an online survey. There are questions concerning reading instruction in your classroom, or the classroom in which you teach reading. The survey data will be collected anonymously. The files will be kept on a password protected computer, and any paper documents will be kept in a locked cabinet in my home. All data will be deleted or shredded at the end of April 2021. The results of my study will be used in my Masters of Special Education thesis, and may as well be used in learning communities in the GSCS. The results will be shared with you if you are interested in the final product. You have the right to decline to participate in the survey. I have read and understand the information provided above, and hereby consent to participate in this research:

☐ Yes
☐ No

2) Do you teach French reading to students in grade one, grade two or grade three?

☐ Yes
☐ No

3) What does reading instruction usually look like for you?

☐ - whole class lessons
- small group lessons
- lessons with individual students
- a mixture of whole class, small group and individual lessons

4) What strategies for reading accuracy instruction do you find to be effective with most students? Please rate your top two choices that you use in the classroom, or add your choices in the next question, if they are not included here. *Reading accuracy, for the purposes of this survey, will refer to a student’s ability to correctly read letter sounds and words, without error.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice 1</th>
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<td>- guided reading</td>
<td>○</td>
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<td>- peer reading - grade alike buddies</td>
<td>○</td>
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<td>- peer reading - older student buddies</td>
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<tr>
<td>- phonological awareness instruction</td>
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<td>- phonics instruction</td>
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<td>- sound boxes</td>
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<td>- word work</td>
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<td>- direct teaching of decoding strategies</td>
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<td>- self-monitoring</td>
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5) If they were not included in the previous question, please add your choices here for the previous question (include number rating 1 and 2).

6) For your first choice in question four/five: please describe in context how you use the strategy, what resources you use, and any other pertinent information why do you consider this strategy to be effective, what results or evidence do you have that it is successful?
7) For your second choice in question four/five: please describe in context how you use the strategy, what resources you use, and any other pertinent information why do you consider this strategy to be effective, what results or evidence do you have that it is successful?

8) What strategies for reading accuracy instruction do you find to be the most effective in small group instruction when working with struggling readers? Please rate your top two choices that you use in classroom small group instruction, or add your choices in the next question if they are not included here. *Reading accuracy, for the purposes of this survey, will refer to a student’s ability to correctly read letter sounds and words, without error.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice 1</th>
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<td>-direct teaching of decoding strategies</td>
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<td>-self-monitoring</td>
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9) If they were not included in the previous question, please add your choices here for the previous question (include number rating 1 and 2).
10) For your first choice in question eight/nine: please describe in context how you use the strategy, what resources you use, and any other pertinent information. Why do you consider this strategy to be effective, what results or evidence do you have that it is successful?


11) For your second choice in question eight/nine: please describe in context how you use the strategy, what resources you use, and any other pertinent information. Why do you consider this strategy to be effective, what results or evidence do you have that it is successful?


12) Who do you have available on a regular (2 to 5 times a week) to help you during your classroom reading instruction?

☐ - an Educational Assistant

☐ - a Learning Assistance Teacher

☐ - a teacher colleague

☐ - none of the above
APPENDIX C: STUDENT SOUND TEST

a e i o u é y
l m p t s z n
h r ou on in ch
lo ip ma us
né te zu cho
Lola moto tulipe
plume sauté regarde
rouge mardi camion
APPENDIX D : RESEARCHER JOURNAL

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# APPENDIX E: FIELD NOTES

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</table>
Fiche d'observation individualisée  
Texte: L'avion de Vincent  
Niveau: 4  

Cette histoire parle de Vincent et de son grand frère Thomas. Vincent montre à Thomas que son avion peut voler.

Page :  
Texte :  
Erreurs :  
AC :  
Sstv :  

3  
Vincent dit à Thomas:  
— Viens voir mon avion.

5  
— Regarde, dit Vincent.  
Mon avion peut voler.

7  
— Mon avion monte et monte encore, dit Vincent.  

9  
— Oh non! crie Vincent.  
— Oh non! crie Thomas.

10  
— Mon avion est dans l'arbre, dit Vincent.  

13  
Vincent dit à Thomas:  
— Je ne vois pas mon avion.  
Vois-tu mon avion?

15  
Thomas regarde dans l'arbre.  
— Je vois ton avion, dit Thomas.

16  
— Tiens, Vincent, dit Thomas.  
Voilà ton avion.

Total :  

71  

L'avion de Vincent  
Niveau: 4  
Texte narratif  
Reproduction autorisée © Chevillère Éducation inc. pour l'usage personnel.
Dear Parents and Guardians,

As I mentioned in my previous letter home, I am currently a student in the Master of Education in Special Education program at Vancouver Island University. My research entitled “Struggling Readers in Saskatoon French Immersion Schools: A Mixed Methods Study Examining Strategies for Support” is focusing on how I can improve my knowledge even more on how to effectively teach reading to all readers, including struggling readers, in early elementary French Immersion classrooms. My hope is that my research will help me to widen my repertoire of teaching strategies and help me to continue to grow and learn as a teacher.

For the above purpose, I have been using two different teaching strategies to teach reading in the classroom as part of the normal curriculum. I have assessed students’ reading before and after this instruction time.

All students took part in this instruction as part of the normal school day, on the days in which I am in their class, for most of January and February. I am asking you, with this consent form, to be able to use the data that I gathered. The students who receive consent from their parents will not do anything different from their peers. Those parents or guardians who give consent are allowing me to use the reading test data I collected on their child during the research. Any of the data would be anonymized, no name would be attached to the data, and the student would have a pseudonym when I use the data in my Master’s thesis. This is entirely voluntary and there is no negative consequence to not giving consent.

I will not know who gave consent, or have access to the consent forms. The forms will be given in a sealed envelope to the office or [name]. A third party will find out who gave consent, they will anonymize the data for which consent was given, and then provide me with that data for which consent was given.

The results of my study will be used in my Masters of Special Education thesis, and may as well be used in professional development or learning communities in the GSCS. I will email a link of the final product to all those who give consent, if they wish, and will be happy to email a link to all others who express interest.
Consent and Conditions of Consent
I have read and understand the information provided above, and hereby consent for my child to participate in this research under the following conditions:

I consent to having my child’s data used anonymously in the products of the research  □ Yes □ No

I consent to having the final Master’s Thesis emailed to me using the following email:
____________________________________________________

Yes □ No

Child’s Name ___________________________ Date ______________

Parent’s Name ________________________ Parent’s Signature ______________

Commitment of Principal Investigator
I, Caileen McKeague, promise to adhere to the procedures described in this consent form.

Principal Investigator Signature ________________________________
Date ______________

If you have any concerns about your child’s treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Board by telephone at 250-740-6631 or by email at reb@viu.ca.

Parent copy/Researcher copy

Please keep this copy for your own records and information.

Please call, email or come see me if you have any questions or concerns.

Caileen McKeague
Mes amis, did you know that as well as being a teacher, Madame is also a student? I am going to university to learn even more about teaching. To help me learn, I am going to be practicing some different ways of teaching reading in this class. I would like to conduct research using your reading tests you will be completing before and after we practice reading in these different ways. If you don’t want me to do this, just don’t give the letter I’m passing out to you, to your parents. Or you may just tell your parents that you don’t want to do so. You don’t need to allow me to use your tests, it is your and your parents’ choice. You will still do the tests anyways, as they are part of school. I just won’t use your results, which is okay and is your choice. Does anyone have any questions?
Dear Parents or Guardians,

As many of you may already know, I am a teacher here at St. Gerard School. This year my role is that of Release Teacher and Learning Assistance Teacher. I am as well currently a student in the Master of Education in Special Education program at Vancouver Island University. My research entitled “Struggling Readers in Saskatoon French Immersion Schools: A Mixed Methods Study Examining Strategies for Support” is focusing on how I can improve my knowledge even more on how to effectively teach reading to all readers, including struggling readers, in early elementary French Immersion classrooms. My hope is that my research will help me to widen my repertoire of teaching strategies and help me to continue to grow and learn as a teacher.

I will be using two different teaching strategies to teach reading in the classroom as part of the normal curriculum. The students’ reading will be assessed before and after each strategy. They will be assessed using the sound tests and GB+ Benchmarking that the students generally receive, and they receive...
about one more test than students would generally receive at this time of year, depending on the teacher. I will be taking notes in class while I work with the students; these notes will be of a self-reflective nature and will not include student data.

All students will take part in this instruction as part of the normal school day, on some of the days in which I am in their class, beginning now and moving into the first part of March. I am sending you this letter so that you may be current on what I am doing in class. Near the end of the action research, in late February, I will be asking you to be able to use the data that I gather. I will do so with a consent letter which will be sent home to you.

The results of my study will be used in my Masters of Special Education thesis, and may as well be used in professional development or learning communities in the GSCS. I will email a link of the final product to all those who give consent, if they wish, and will be happy to email a link to all others who express interest.

If you have any concerns about your child’s treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Board by telephone at 250-740-6631 or by email at reb@viu.ca.

Please call, email or come see me if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you,

Mme McKeague

cmckeague@gscs.ca

306-659-7330