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**The Importance of Explicit Concept of Word Instruction in Kindergarten to Promote
Success as First Grade Readers**

University of Mary Washington

Ellie Kay

Advisor: Dr. Nancy Guth

April 30, 2019

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of direct and explicit concept of word instruction in a Tier Two setting for kindergarten students who had not met the University of Virginia (UVA) Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) benchmark for concept of word in September 2018. This study took place in an elementary school in Northern Virginia. The participants included boys and girls in kindergarten who had not met the concept of word Benchmark cut-off. Data was collected using the Fall PALS-K and Mid-Year PALS to select participants for the study as well as establish a baseline to monitor progress. The UVA PALS K Form B – Spring 2019 was used to assess concept of word at the end of the study. The findings from this study will aid primary teachers in building concept of word in their students.

Keywords: Concept of word, Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS), rhyming words, letter-sound knowledge, alphabet knowledge, syllabication, phonemic awareness, emergent reader

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Introduction

Most Virginia kindergarten and first grade students are assessed three times a year using the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) developed by Invernizzi, Swank, Juel and Meier (2003). This assessment was designed to help teachers easily identify students at risk for reading problems. The PALS assesses kindergarteners for phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, concept of word and grapheme-phoneme correspondence. At the end of May, 2018, a number of kindergarten students in my school located in rural central Virginia, did not make benchmark on the PALS for concept of word (COW). Concept of word is when children match their spoken words with memorized written text. As of September 2018 these students were among the lowest readers in their first grade classes and three were identified as at-risk while twelve more did not meet the 2018 Fall PALS concept of word benchmark. In October 2018 thirty-three out of fifty-nine kindergarten students were identified as not having met the PALS benchmark for concept of word. This was a concern because the research shows that concept of word in text is a watershed moment in learning to read. Morris (2003) states that having ownership of concept of word comes before and may aid in the full development of phonemic awareness. Through this study I explicitly taught concept of word skills, as well as implemented and shared strategies with the kindergarten team that helped close the gap in the kindergarteners' concept of word skills.

Research shows that concept of word results in kindergarten are a good predictor as to how children will perform in first grade reading classes (Blackwell-Bullock, Invernizzi, Drake,

and Howell, 2009). Blackwell-Bullock et al. (2009) state that it is important to identify where on the concept of word continuum the students are and to implement daily concept of word instruction to enhance the students' skills. My goals for this action research project were: (1) to remediate the first graders I now work with on a daily basis; (2) provide explicit concept of word instruction to the identified kindergarten students; (3) meet with the kindergarten teachers prior to and during the implementation of this study in order to discuss their understanding of concept of word, and to share my rationale and collaborate with them.

When I started this research study I had no idea how much I would learn and grow as a teacher as a result of working with thirteen energetic, joyful and eager kindergarteners. The students came happily into my classroom ready to learn and play with the poems we were working with each day. Through the use of traditional nursery rhymes I was able to explicitly teach letter-sound knowledge, alphabet knowledge, rhyming words, phonemic awareness, syllabication and concept of word in just twenty minutes a day. Each new poem was met with anticipation and excitement, and previous rhymes were not forgotten. By encouraging and allowing the students to be active learners I feel I fostered a love of poetry, rhyme, and literature as well.

Research Questions

A solid foundation of concept of word is necessary for first graders to become successful readers.

- Does explicit concept of word instruction help below benchmark kindergarten students reach PALS concept of word benchmark by the end of their kindergarten year?
- When Kindergarteners receive small group, explicit concept of word instruction as well as daily large group lessons, does it lead to more success in concept of word acquisition?

Literature Review

Introduction

The importance of concept of word in text is not understood by all classroom teachers, and has not been researched as much as other early literacy concepts such as phonological awareness. (Gately, 2006). Gately (2006) hypothesizes that because concept of word is easily achieved by most students it has not received as much attention. Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax and Perney (2003) hypothesize little attention has been paid to concept of word because researchers themselves have spent little time actually observing children learning to read. They state that until someone observes a child struggling to match oral words to print, it is easy to pay little attention to this important developmental skill. Teachers understand the importance of students being able to identify letters and their sounds as a solid predictor of future reading success, however, many do not make the connection between a child's ability to match spoken word to print by pointing as another valid predictor. According to Morris, Bloodgood, and Perney, (2003); and Warley, Llandrum and Invernizzi, (2005) research shows that demonstrating an understanding of the concept of word in text is a reliable indicator of future reading success. Blackwell-Bullock, Invernizzi, Drake, and Howell (2009) state that more attention needs to be focused on identifying where on the concept of word continuum a child is and then delivering daily concept of word instruction.

What is Concept of Word in text?

According to Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax and Perney (2003), concept of word in text is "an awareness that spoken words match to printed words in the reading of text" (p. 306). This can be a rather daunting prospect considering when children enter school, most are unaware of what a 'word' is. Steven Pinker (1994) has written, humans are hard-wired to speak without

having to think about it. Children learn to speak and listen in order to understand meaning, with no attention to separation between words. Other research on children's awareness of words in speech shows that most children entering school are not able to divide oral language into distinct words (Flanigan, 2006). In Flanigan's paper, "Daddy, Where Did the Words Go?", he writes about his son trying to point to the words of a favorite memorized poem and discovering he had run out of words because he lacked concept of word and was confusing syllables for words. According to Marie Clay (1991, 2001), children need to discover what the word units are that make up speech. They need to be explicitly led to break down a phrase such as - *letmehaveitnow* -into words, *let me have it now* before they can try to match their spoken words to words in print. Clay was one of the first to stress the importance of concept of word, or "reading the spaces" (1991, p. 165) in which children could match their speech to written words. According to Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton and Johnston (2008), concept of word is being able to point to words in print while reading a memorized passage, poem or sentence. It is the moment that suggests a child is ready to move from the emergent stage of reading development to the letter name-alphabetic beginning stage of reading.

Concept of Print

Concept of word is not to be confused with concept of print. Marie Clay (1991) wrote that children who are read to at home and come to school with a love of books have had valuable preparation for learning to read. Clay wrote that concept of print is what emergent readers need to understand how print is used to represent language. These concepts include: how to hold a book, understanding the difference between pictures and captions, turning pages correctly, identifying the front of the book from the back, and finding the title. Also a child with concept of

print understands that we read the print from left to right and from top to bottom (Barone, and Mallette, 2013).

Schwanenflugel and Knapp (2016) state that these important skills, also known as conventions of written language, can be developed through the use of shared reading experiences which will help all children reach this important concept. Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton and Johnston (2008) stress the importance that children need more than just talk and modeling to achieve these skills they need hands-on practice. The use of finger pointing with familiar memorized text will ultimately lead to the development of concept of word.

Developing Concept of Word

Blackwell-Bullock, Invernizzi, Drake and Howell (2009) feel that the definition of concept of word is more than the understanding of matching speech to print. They state that concept of word in text is not a case of you either have it or you don't, instead it is part of a developmental continuum starting with developing concept of word on the left which leads to rudimentary concept of word and finally a firm concept of word located on the right. See Appendix A for more information. According to Blackwell, Invernizzi, Drake and Howell (2009), children in the developing concept of word stage know fewer than twenty letters and sounds. They may have rhyme, but do not differentiate between words and syllables. These children may point at random letters and/or words and do not touch under each word while reciting a poem. Some of these students may point to some words, but get confused by multisyllabic words. Children at this stage identify zero or few words both in and out of context. According to the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) website Kindergarteners

scoring between 0-3 on the words in isolation word list are considered to be at the Developing Concept of Print Stage.

Rudimentary Concept of Word

Students in the rudimentary stage of concept of word know most letters and sounds, but frequently lack automaticity. They can identify the number of syllables in words and are starting to include some beginning sounds in writing. At this stage students can point to words and self-correct when confused by multisyllabic words. They are able to identify most words in context, but cannot identify as many words out of context (Blackwell, Invernizzi, Drake and Howell, 2009). According to the PALS website kindergarteners scoring 4-6 on the words in isolation word list are considered to be at the rudimentary concept of word stage.

Firm Concept of Word

Students who have achieved a firm concept of word can consistently recognize letters and sounds as well as break words apart and blend sounds together to make words. When writing, these students use both initial and final consonants as well as some correct medial vowels. These students accurately point to all words in text and can identify all words in context as well as identify most of the words out of context. Blackwell-Bullock, Invernizzi, Drake and Howell, (2009) state that what sets students with a firm concept of word apart from those who don't is the fact that they can identify the words in isolation. They do caution, however, that recognizing these words in isolation is temporary. To really own these words they will need to continue to see and work with them in context, and not as flashcards. Research has shown that a child who has a firm concept of word has more success working with the phonemes within words, and that the ability to break apart the phonemes of a word follows this accomplishment (Blackwell-

Bullock, Invernizzi, Drake and Howell, 2009). Flanigan (2006) refers to Morris's (1993) research in his article, *Daddy, Where Did the Words Go?*, when he states that acquisition of a firm concept of word "plays a pivotal role in early reading acquisition that bridges a primitive form of phoneme awareness (i.e., beginning sound awareness) with a more sophisticated form of phoneme awareness (i.e., full phoneme segmentation)" (Flanigan, 2006, p.41).

Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening

The Virginia Assembly established the Early Intervention Reading Initiative (EIRI) in 1997 to identify children who were in need of additional intervention. To reach this goal the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening – Kindergarten (PALS-K) was developed. Since then both the PALS-PreK and PALS 1-3 have been added. Most Virginia kindergarten and first grade students are assessed three times a year using the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) developed by Invernizzi, Swank, Juel and Meier (2003). This assessment was designed to help teachers easily identify students at risk for reading problems. The assessment assesses kindergarteners for phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, concept of word and grapheme-phoneme correspondence.

The PALS-K COW assessment consists of: (1) students memorizing a short poem, four lines, using pictures; (2) teacher reads text while pointing under each word; (3) child reads words while pointing under each word. Child scores one point if he orally matches each word in print with his finger. The teacher then asks the child to identify two words per line. A child scores one point per correct word identified. Finally the child is asked to read ten words taken from the text and shown in isolation. One point is awarded per correct word read. The fall benchmarks are pointing-2, words in text-2, and word in isolation-0. Mid-year Benchmarks only include words

in isolation 3-10. The spring benchmarks are pointing-5, words in text-9, and words in isolation-7 (PALS, 2018).

In their longitudinal study of the developmental steps in learning to read, Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax and Perney (2003) used an assessment similar to the PALS assessment with a couple of differences. Instead of just having the students memorize and finger point a short poem, they first assessed the child using a sentence reading task consisting of a three-page story, each page showing a picture and simple sentence. The examiner would tell the child to watch closely, as he pointed to and read each word, and the child was then asked to do the same, followed by the examiner asking the child to identify a specific word. The child's attempts were rewarded with one point per correct attempt at pointing and one point per correct word identification. The poem reading activity was similar to the PALS COW assessment except the poem consisted of only two lines and there was not a words out of context element.

Pool and Johnson (n.d.) in their paper, *Screening for Reading Problems in Preschool and Kindergarten: An Overview of Select Measures*, evaluate nine assessments including the PALS-K. The PALS-K was the only assessment that included a concept of word component.

Invernizzi, Justice, Landrum and Booker (2005) feel that the PALS-K provides teachers with a clear idea of their students' strengths and needs, however, they stress the fact that it is up to the individual teachers to ensure that their students receive "balanced, comprehensive, and flexible instruction that is needed for children to become truly literate" (2005, p. 496).

Emergent Readers and Concept of Word

Flanigan (2006) based his research on concept of word in text on a study done by Morris (1993). Flanigan attempted to replicate Morris's study of his model of the development of

reading development. According to Flanigan, an important idea coming from Morris's work was that concept of word in text is a developmental skill bridging a child's ability to identify beginning consonant sounds with the ability to fully segment simple words into phonemes. Flanigan's research showed that a child who did not have concept of word could not constantly break apart one syllable words into their phonemes. Flanigan's research also found that phonetic spelling and sight word acquisition could not take place until after a child had developed a firm concept of word. Flanigan wrote that he could only identify five studies from the previous decade that explored the relationship between phonological awareness and concept of word in text. According to Flanigan (2006) these studies demonstrate that a child's firm concept of word is tied in with the development of both phonemic awareness and spelling in a reciprocal manner. (Ehri & Sweet, 1991; Morris, 1993; Uhry, 1999, 2002; Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax, & Perney, 2003). Emergent readers need to focus on building their beginning sound awareness as well as working to move along the concept of word continuum. According to Flanigan (2006) when a child can hear the beginning sounds of words he can use that information to try to match spoken words with printed text. Flanigan (2006) also stresses the importance of not just 'telling' a student about beginning sounds and pointing at words, but to allow him/her to explore and practice what he has been told with support throughout the day.

According to the PALS website (2016), concept of word can be attained through numerous opportunities to see and work with words in text as well as attending to beginning and ending sounds in words. They stress the importance of integrating these skills with poetry, songs, big books and the child's writing. They emphasize that this important work is not accomplished using flash cards. The PALS website states that children are able to make progress traveling from left to right on the concept of word continuum because of the simultaneous

occurrence of: support of memorized text; continued work learning and practicing letters and sounds; and being able to combine and use letter recognition and letter sounds while pointing to the text. The children also need to be able to read words in context and out of context in the form of a word list.

Best Practices to Achieve Concept of Word in Text within a Balanced Literacy Curriculum

In his study, Flanigan (2006) prefers the use of a balanced approach to literacy where children are explicitly taught skills, but then are allowed and encouraged to use these skills within the context of varied and meaningful text readings. Flanigan envisions a model that provides teachers of kindergarten and first grade a developmental map to help them find their way through a balanced literacy program. While learning to identify and name letters as well as make associations between letters and sounds children need to be exposed to multiple experiences of finger point reading of familiar poems, songs, finger plays, nursery rhymes and dictated stories. While engaging the children in these whole group activities the teacher needs to be actively explaining how the pointing matches the words being spoken. She can also use this time to bring attention to the beginning sounds of some words and later ending sounds. For example, 'I know this word is moon because I see it begins with m.' Work in small groups will help children move along the continuum to develop a firm concept of word.

Flanigan (2006) also urges teachers to involve children in writing because this will ultimately fine-tune their concept of word in both writing and reading. In her article, *Predictable Charts an Effective Strategy to Engage and Impact Learners*, McClure (2015), discusses the use of Cunningham's predictable charts as a way to integrate reading and writing that supports instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, concepts of print as well as concept of word and

recognition of high-frequency words. The predictable chart model involves introducing a topic that is timely and relates to either literature currently being read in the classroom or current topics taking place in the school environment. The teacher models a sentence starter and her own sentence. She takes the time to count the words in her sentences before writing it down on the chart paper. While writing the teacher is thinking aloud and uses the word wall and associated letters and sounds to demonstrate strategies the children can use. The teacher explicitly demonstrates where one word ends and where the next begins. She then takes dictation from half of her students, including their names in parentheses after each new sentence. The process of rereading and finishing the dictation continues the following day. Some of the students' created text are copied onto sentence strips and then cut apart so the students can use them to rebuild their own sentences. At the end of the week each student's text is copied onto a blank sheet of paper which the children illustrate and the teacher puts together into a new class book. According to McClure (2015), the use of predictable charts is an engaging strategy that can successfully become part of a balanced literacy program that helps children meet standards in an appropriate and interactive way.

According to Bear, Negrete, and Cathey (2012), students who have not acquired concept of word cannot learn and retain sight words and phonics. They are concerned when a child has not achieved concept of word by the end of kindergarten or by the second month of first grade. Bear, Negrete and Cathey (2012) suggest using language experience writing as well as guided reading to teach concept of word. They go on to explain that some children experiencing trouble establishing concept of word need to work with repeating tapping patterns and clapping syllables and rhythmic word patterns. Mesmer and Williams (2015) hypothesize in their research that a child's attentiveness to syllables in words helps a child gain concept of word.

“Direct instruction teaching methods have been found to promote the acquisition of literacy in developing readers. Equally important, learning strategies that allow children to construct knowledge through active participation increase their motivation for reading and writing” (Keaton, Palmer, Nicholas & Lake, 2007, p. 229). According to Keaton et al., (2007) teachers who agree with this assertion should provide their students with many experiences where they can actively take part in constructive learning through hands-on activities. The results of the study showed that most of the students’ motivation to attend to the direct instruction was enhanced by the lively and happy learning environment (Keaton et al., 2007).

Large Group Instruction

Much of the literature states that making use of the morning message, shared language experience writing and daily read alouds to model and explicitly teach finger word pointing while allowing children to actively participate will help many children achieve concept of word (Flanigan, 2006; Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008; Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2001; Zucker, Ward, & Justice, 2009). Zucker, Ward, and Justice (2009), highly recommend using print referencing during read alouds in order to explicitly call attention to print by asking questions about the words themselves, requesting a child to find something in the text, making comments about the text to draw attention to specific details, and pointing to each word. The goal of print referencing is to get emergent readers to talk about the print itself and to help them “foster metalinguistic awareness” (Zucker, Ward & Justice, p. 63). During large or small groups Flanigan (2006) encourages teachers to scaffold their lessons for the children who need extra support by using the following strategies: echo reading – adult reads one to two sentences while pointing to the words and the students echo read in reply; choral reading – adult and child

point and read together; partner read – adult reads one page and student reads next; buddy reading – a stronger reader is paired with a weaker reader.

Intervention Ideas

According to the PALS website students who have been identified as being in either the developing or rudimentary concept of word stage need to receive extra intervention in order to gain this important emergent literacy skill. Flanigan (2006), Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton and Johnston (2008), the PALS website as well as other websites, Reading Rockets (2018), The Measured Mom (2018), Play to Learn Preschool (2018), The Comprehension Connection (2018) and The W.I.S.E. Owl (2018) all discuss and describe similar strategies to use for intervention for both small groups and individual children. All of these sources emphasize the importance of the children memorizing the short poems, songs or passages first using pictures before introducing the text and demonstrating how to finger point and read the words. Children who are in the developing stage should begin with two sentences and as they acquire a rudimentary level of concept of word, they can move on to four or five lines per activity. Flanigan et al. (2006) suggest introducing activities during a small intervention group that can be used in a concept of word center while working with a teaching assistant.

Segal-Drori, Korat, Shamir and Klein (2009) noted a limitation in their research on the effects of electronic and printed books on emergent readers; the researchers and **not** the kindergarten teachers implemented the interventions. They found studies that supported their chosen method; however, they found other research that states that interventions provided by outsiders may have only a short-term impact. Segal-Drori, Korat, Shamir and Klein (2009) state

in their paper that the goal is for teachers to gain the knowledge and skills needed to instruct their students and be able to implement these strategies and interventions throughout the literacy day.

Justice, Weber, Ezell and Bakeman (2002) in their paper, *A Sequential Analysis of Children's Responsiveness to Parental Print References During Shared Book-Reading Interactions*, discuss the importance of encouraging parent involvement at home in order to promote a child's understanding of print and words. In their Literature Review they cite Ezell and Justice (2000) who state when reading to young children adults should reference the text in order to enable the children to actively engage with the letters and words.

Conclusion

The research shows that Concept of Word plays a very important role in the development of readers. Children need a firm concept of word before they are expected to learn and remember sight words in kindergarten (Bear, Negrete, and Cathey, 2012). The research also shows that concept of word connects a child's developing phonological awareness consisting of identifying beginning sounds and some ending sounds, with a more developed phonological awareness which leads to being able to segment the phonemes of a word (Flanigan, 2008). Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax and Perney (2003) believe that most children exposed to a thoughtful mix of concept of word instruction and guided practice will develop concept of word, however they suggest that those who don't, need to be provided small group instruction several times a week, and that the instruction be focused on learning letter sounds, word pointing and writing using invented spelling. They emphasize the need for "careful, systematic teaching, along with adequate review of the concepts taught" (Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax and Perney, p. 322).

Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine if explicit concept of word instruction could help below benchmark kindergarten students reach the PALS benchmark by the end of their kindergarten year, thus enabling them to enter first grade with the necessary skills needed for a positive and successful reading experience. This study analyzed student growth in concept of word skills through the use of materials developed by the University of Virginia PALS office as well as other books, songs, and poems tied into the kindergarten program, and the use of print referencing (Zucker, Ward, & Justice, 2009). The concept of word skills covered by the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening assessment included word pointing, word identification, and reading a list of words taken from the text. The students were assessed using the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) three times during the 2018-2019 school year, in October, January and May. The PALS screening is mandated and I gave it per my school district's general requirements. The goal of this study was to determine whether explicit concept of word instruction could help struggling kindergarten students reach a firm concept of word by the end of the school year.

Research Design

Setting

The research for this study took place in my elementary reading resource classroom located in rural/suburban northern Virginia, where I pulled two small groups of four students and one small group of five students for twenty minute sessions, five times a week, for six weeks, as part of their Language Arts block rotations. In the 2018-2019 school year, the school's enrollment was 398 and 59 students were divided between three kindergarten classrooms, each containing a teacher and instructional assistant. The school's ethnic make-up is: 78.7% white, 7% Hispanic, 7% two or more races, 4.2% black, 2.6% Asian and 0.5% Native Hawaiian. 8.6% of the student population is identified as economically disadvantaged and 3.4% of the population is identified as English Language Learners.

Participants

The participants of this study included thirteen out of thirty-three kindergarten children who did not meet the PALS concept of word benchmark during the fall 2018, testing period. The study included five girls and eight boys. The study group's ethnic make-up was: 62% white, 15% Hispanic, 15% Asian, and 8% two or more races. Of the participants, 23% were identified as English Language Learners and 15% had behavior plans in place.

Procedures

All kindergarteners were given the PALS in September, 2018. Thirty-three kindergarteners did not meet the PALS concept of word benchmark at that time. After the Mid-Year PALS I analyzed the concept of word scores to determine who had not scored within the

PALS concept of word range and determined where they fell on the concept of word in text: developmental continuum (Blackwell-Bullock, Invernizzi, Drake, and Howell, 2008). After collecting and analyzing the data, thirteen children scoring lowest on the PALS concept of word assessment were selected for this study. These children were all identified as being in the developing concept of word stage according to the concept of word continuum. The participants had displayed trouble pointing to words and were confused by multisyllabic words. They were only able to identify zero to three words in and out of context. I met with the kindergarten team to explain the study and offered to share all strategies and information utilized. I planned to meet with the three teachers once a month to discuss our shared students. My intent was for the teachers to integrate some of the strategies into their own large and small group instruction. Study participants were pulled in groups of four or five for twenty minute sessions, five times a week, as part of their Language Arts block rotations. Quantitative data was collected during this study using the PALS concept of word data from the fall 2018 assessment, mid-year assessment and spring 2019 assessment. PALS Quick Checks, criterion-referenced measures, were administered as part of my small group sessions every one to two weeks as a formative assessment to measure progress and to check for effectiveness of instruction.

Concept of Word in Text Lesson Plan Template – Developing COW

Day 1:

- Using picture cards introduce the poem – build background knowledge by discussing pictures – ask who and what questions
- Recite two lines of poem to group while touching pictures – have children count words they hear – count syllables in some of the words
- Recite the first line while touching picture and have students echo – repeat
- Recite line together (choral reading) – repeat as needed
- Children recite sentence independently

- Unifix cubes – one cube per word – Model breaking a cube off per each spoken word – repeat
- Children recite sentence breaking apart a cube for each word – count cubes
- When children demonstrate mastery repeat with second sentence
- If time choose one of the Concept of Word Games/Activities or read short book

Day 2:

- Review sentences from Day 1 – use picture – echo read – choral read – independent practice
- Children recite sentence breaking apart a cube for each word – practice saying lines while touching cubes – emphasize keeping finger on multisyllabic words
- Introduce text of poem written on chart paper – model pointing under each word using a pointer – call on volunteers to try – let them choose pointer to use
- Pass out text – use Comic Sans – 36 to reproduce text
- Read and finger point
- Students echo read and finger point – repeat as needed – provide picture if needed
- Students choral read and finger point
- Children are given opportunity to read independently - observe for correct finger pointing
- Repeat with each sentence
- Read all sentences
- If time choose one of the Concept of Word Games/Activities or read big book

Day 3:

- Pass out sentences from yesterday – Children read chorally while finger pointing
- Children choral read and finger point – repeat
- Use unifix cubes if necessary
- Children will identify and match 1-2 word cards in sentence.
- Repeat with each sentence
- Give each child one sentence strip
- Demonstrate how to cut sentence strip apart between each word and lay words in order on table
- Children cut sentence strips and lay their words out – Children will touch and say each word in sentence – repeat
- Demonstrate how to scramble words and then put them back in order and finger touch and read
- Observe children – if necessary provide an intact sentence strip they can match one to one with – Repeat with other sentence if time allows

Day 4:

- Pass out cut up sentences and intact sentences
- Children will independently read and finger point the sentence – read chorally if needed
- Children will match cut up words with text
- Collect word cards and allow children to identify them and match them up again
- Repeat with second sentence
- Let them teach each other – ask what is this word?

Day 5:

- Choral and finger point read poem
- Pass out word cards and ask children to identify them out of context
- Let them refer to sentence strip if needed
- Assess each child individually for pointing and ID words in context
- Children will draw picture to go with sentences – depending on their skills they can either dictate a sentence or try to write the sentence on their own

Knowing that children in the developmental concept of word stage do not know all of their letters and sounds yet, I included some letter/sound review daily. I also used the words in the sentences to work on phonological awareness – ex. What other words start like books? To keep interest up and help memorize the poem I integrated movement with each poem. Going to and from my room we spent time walking/stepping for each word in the current poem.

Concept of Word in Text Lesson Plan Template – Rudimentary COW

Day 1 - 5

Same as Developing COW lesson plan template except use four to five sentence poems.

Flanigan et al. (2006) suggest introducing activities during a small intervention group that can be used in a concept of word center while working with a teaching assistant. I planned on

trying to integrate some of these activities into my intervention groups throughout my study, however I only used *Unifix Words* and *Cut-up-a-Sentence*. These ideas were shared with the kindergarten teachers in February and hopefully some were integrated into their classroom planning. These activities are listed and described in Appendix B.

Data Sources

Pre-Assessment

To assess concept of word at the beginning of the year, the University of Virginia Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) K Form B – Fall 2018 was given and data was analyzed and noted. This information was used to choose participants as well as provide a base-line as to where the study participants were on the concept of word continuum at the beginning of kindergarten. The PALS – Fall 2018 assessment was used as the pre-test for my research purposes.

Mid-Year PALS

Used to assess updated concept of word skills data and to choose students for study. A PALS benchmark score is not given for the mid-year PALS assessment. Instead a mid-year range based on grade-level progress is used to indicate progress being made and to help with planning purposes. The mid-year concept of word data cannot be used as a pre-test because of the lack of benchmark information given.

Post-Assessment

Used to assess concept of word at the end of the study, the University of Virginia PALS K Form B – Spring 2019 was given. The PALS K Form B – Spring

2019 concept of word (COW) assessment was used as the post-test data for this study.

Results for the 2018-2019 PALS COW assessments can be found in Appendix C.

PALS Quick Checks

Given at one to two week intervals during study. Data was used to track students' progress and make changes to instruction as needed. The Quick Checks were used to provide updated data between the pre-test and post-test. Quick Checks consisted of assessing the participants COW skills after memorizing a poem.

Reflection Journal

I kept a journal in which I wrote reflective notes throughout the study. This qualitative information was used to update and revise strategies, as well as plan future professional development opportunities for the kindergarten team.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data obtained from bi-weekly PALS Quick Checks was used to plan for the up-coming week as well as determine when children were ready to move from the developmental stage to the rudimentary stage. The spring PALS-K COW data was compared with the fall PALS-K COW data. Once the data was analyzed it was used to determine whether the explicit direct concept of word instruction has helped the students move along the concept of word continuum in order to meet and exceed the concept of word benchmark.

I analyzed and compared the qualitative data I gleaned from my reflection journal as I looked for changes in my kindergarten teachers' attitudes, knowledge and feelings about concept of word and their kindergarten students' concept of word growth.

Timeline

Timeline for Research

Weeks 1-2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mid-year PALS assessment given and data analyzed to determine participants for study• Parent information and permission letters sent home• Initial informal teacher meetings
Weeks 3-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meet with small groups and follow up with PALS Quick Checks every one to two weeks
Weeks 4 & 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meet with teacher team
Week 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Spring 2019 PALS K-Form B is given and used to assess growth from the beginning of the study

Results

Quantitative Findings

Results from the quantitative findings of this study are shown below. Though the data presented shows growth for all students involved in the study, the results varied student to student.

Pre-Assessment and Post-Assessment Data

Results from the Phonological Awareness Literacy Assessment (PALS) concept of word pre-assessment and post-assessment are shown in Table 1 below. The data shows that all of the participants demonstrated growth over the six week study. In the word pointing post-test assessment 92% of the participants were able to point to words in sentences with 100% accuracy. In the word ID post-test 69% of the participants were able to identify 10 out of 10 words in context, 15% of the participants identified 8 out of 10 words, just missing the benchmark. None

of the participants achieved the combined concept of word benchmark on the post-test because they did not meet the word list benchmark.

Table 1

Concept of Word Pre & Post-Test Scores

	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Pre-Test	Post-Test
	Pointing	Pointing	Word ID	Word ID	Word List	Word List
Student #						
1	0	4	0	4	0	0
2	0	5	0	10	0	2
3	0	5	0	10	0	3
4	2	5	1	6	0	3
5	0	5	0	8	0	2
6	0	5	2	8	0	3
7	0	5	3	10	0	3
8	2	5	1	10	0	6
9	0	5	5	10	0	3
10	4	5	1	10	0	2
11	0	5	1	10	0	4
12	0	5	5	10	0	5
13	0	5	7	10	0	5
Benchmark	2	5	2	9	0	7

Quick Check Data

Quick Checks were used to assess participants’ growth throughout the study. After working with a poem for five days, the participants were asked to demonstrate their ability by pointing to the text of the memorized poem. The Quick Checks differed from the PALS-K concept of word assessment in that a rubric was used to assess the word pointing skill giving more information to use for future planning. See table 2

below. This information was used to verify when the participants had moved from developing concept of word to rudimentary concept of word.

Table 2

Concept of Word rubric used with PALS Quick Checks

0 Points	No left to right finger movement
1 Point	Finger movement left to right, but no noticeable pointing to words, letters, etc.
2 Points	Points to different letter for each word said
3 Points	Points rhythmically to beat or syllables
4 Points	Points to words – gets off track on multisyllabic words
5 Points	Points to words – may get off track but self-corrects
6 Point	Points to each word correctly

Note. Adapted from PALS Quick Checks on PALS website. Retrieved from:

https://pals.virginia.edu/pdfs/download/QC_COWa.pdf.

Table 3 below shows the participants' Quick Check finger pointing and word identification scores for each poem. Poems were introduced in their entirety and the children chose to work with all of the lines as the week progressed.

Table 3

Quick Checks – Weekly Poems - Word Pointing and Word Identification Scores

Participant #	Poem 1		Poem 2		Poem 3		Poem 4		Poem 5		Poem 6	
	WP	WID										
1	0	2	0	0	4	0			0	0	3	0
2			2	3	2	3	4	5	4	7		
3	3	5	2	8	4	8	4	7	4	8	4	8
4	3	6	4	4	1	4	3	8			4	6
5	1	3	4	6	3	3	3	3	2	7	4	7
6	1	3	0	3	0	2	3	7	1	4	1	5
7	3	8	3	8	4	7			4	7	4	8
8	4	7	4	8	4	7	3	6	4	8	4	8
9	4	7	4	6	4	7	4	6	4	8	4	7
10	4	6	4	8	4	8	4	6	4	6	3	8
11	2	5	4	8	4	6	4	7			4	6
12	4	6	4	7	4	8	4	7	4	8	4	8
13	2	5	4	6	4	5	4	8	4	8	4	8

Note. WP refers to word pointing and WID refers to word identification.

Table 4 below shows the participants’ mean scores for both pointing and word identification in context from COW Quick Checks.

Table 4

PALS Quick Check Results – Mean Scores for Pointing & Word ID

Student Number	Mean Pointing Score	Mean Word ID Score
1	1.40	0.40
2	3.00	5.25
3	3.60	7.14
4	3.66	5.70
5	2.83	4.33
6	1.00	4.00
7	3.60	7.60
8	3.86	7.43
9	4.00	6.83
10	3.83	7.00
11	3.60	6.40
12	4.00	7.43
13	3.67	6.67
Total points per rhyme	4.00	8.00

Qualitative Findings

A reflection journal was kept throughout the study where anecdotal notes were kept consisting of comments made by both students and kindergarten teachers as well as personal notes reflecting the researcher’s thoughts, questions and ideas for change.

The participants’ kindergarten teachers were all enthusiastic about their students participating in the study. At the beginning of the study all three teachers’ general knowledge about concept of word centered on the idea that their students had concept of word when they could point correctly to the spoken word. They all wrote a daily message and emphasized the letter and sound correspondence of the written words as well as modeled using words around the room. The teachers emphasized the blank space between words, but did not explicitly work with

word syllabication until I focused on it later in the study. Although the kindergarten teachers were given copies of the small group activity ideas presented in Appendix B, only one acknowledged using *Dictated Captions* and *Sentence Strip Word Awareness* during the study. Two of the three teachers expressed frustration that they didn't have the time to do the small group explicit concept of word instruction and asked for help implementing a concept of word center for use during the daily Language Arts Block. After our discussion about the connection between concept of word and the ability to learn sight words, one teacher was observed asking her students to go on word hunts looking for familiar sight words in the leveled texts in which they were working and then encouraged them to take turns writing them on a word wall. At the end of the study all three teachers noted the progress their students had made as a result of the small group setting. They all commented on the participant's sense of confidence and increased participation in a large group setting, as well as the progress they had made in their writing. Some samples can be found in Appendix D.

The study participants were eager to learn new poems and actively joined in throughout the study. At the beginning of the study, the participants were unable to finger point with accuracy or consistency. Through the use of explicit think alouds, modeling and instruction as well as active involvement of the participants, 70% of them were able to successfully finger point with 100% accuracy and 54% of them could identify six to eight words within the text by the end of the third week of the study. Although ambivalent at times about identifying words within the sentences, the participants used different strategies that worked for them. Many would return to the beginning of the poem or line to point and read the words until they came to the targeted word and excitedly identified it. Some were able to immediately identify the target word

with confidence. Student #5 was heard to comment, “This is hard”, before she correctly identified six words and looked at me with a huge confident smile.

Discussion/Limitation

The purpose of this study was to determine whether explicit concept of word instruction would enable the participants to develop a solid concept of word needed to become successful first grade readers by closing the gap in the participants’ concept of word skills. In order to achieve this goal it was important to collaborate with the classroom teachers to ensure carry over and consistency in concept of word acquisition.

Although none of the thirteen participants met the PALS concept of word benchmark by the end of the study, they all demonstrated growth according to their PALS pre and post-test scores. I fully expect that most will reach the benchmark by the end of the school year. According to the PALS website a child has not reached a firm concept of word unless they can identify seven words on the words in isolation word list. However, Blackwell et al. (2009) caution that recognizing the words in isolation is temporary and in order to own the words they need to continue to see and work with them in context and not as flashcards. Unlike the PALS concept of word assessment, Morris et al. (2003) developed a similar concept of word assessment that did not call for identifying words out of context in a word list. Adjusting the results of the given PALS concept of word assessment to not include the word list resulted in 70% of the participants achieving a firm concept of word identification.

Earlier in this study I mentioned Mesmer and Williams’ (2025) hypothesis that a child’s attentiveness to syllables in words helps a child gain concept of word. I tested this hypothesis by explicitly showing the participants how words were made up of word parts. We would physically

put our hands under our jaws in order to feel the jaw drop for each syllable in a word. From there the participants learned to physically tap the number of syllables in a word. Before presenting a new poem in print the children would use unifix cubes to represent each word in a line of a poem making sure to place one cube for each word and not each syllable. Next the participants would recite the poem touching each cube keeping it there for each word, multisyllabic or not. Doing this also made it fun for them to memorize the poems. Once the text was presented the students would take turns putting and touching cubes under the words in a sentence on a large copy of the poem, before individually touching under the words in their own text. Based on the results in both the PALS post-test concept of word assessment as well as results on the Quick Checks I feel that focusing on a student's awareness of syllabication is necessary to accurately point to a memorized text while reading.

Previously I referred to Flanigan's (2006) research in which he wrote that Morris's work stated that concept of word in text is a developmental skill bridging a child's ability to identify beginning consonant sounds with the ability to fully segment simple words into phonemes. Flanigan's research showed that a child who did not have concept of word could not consistently break apart one syllable words into their phonemes. Flanigan's research also found that phonetic spelling and sight word acquisition could not take place until after a child had developed a firm concept of word. I saw evidence of these results in my own study. After several weeks one student was consistently observed using his sound-letter awareness to sound out words out of context. Most of the children were thrilled when they could locate and read sight words that had been presented in their classrooms and were contained within the weekly poem.

I found it very important and productive to keep the participants actively engaged throughout the study. According to Keaton et al. (2007) teachers should provide their students with many experiences where they can actively take part in constructive learning through hands-on activities. Their study demonstrated that most students' motivation to attend to direct instruction was enhanced by the lively and happy learning environment. These results were replicated in my study as well. The participants were eager to continue working on memorizing a poem while walking back to their own classrooms touching head and shoulders for each word of the new poem.

I've noted in this research that while collaborating with my teachers they expressed frustration with not having the time to implement small group concept of word activities. This is a concern because in their study Segal-Drori (2009) note that a limitation in their research was that the researchers and not the kindergarten teachers implemented the interventions. They found studies that state interventions provided by outsiders may have only a short-term impact. I realize that I was not a complete stranger to the participants, but I agree that for a long-term impact the goal should be for teachers to gain the knowledge and skills needed to instruct their students and implement these strategies and interventions throughout the literacy day (Segal- Drori et al. 2009).

I would argue here, although all of the participants may not have reached the firm concept of word stage, according to the PALS concept of word benchmark, they are well on their way to reaching this goal. With continued work focusing on concept of word in both their large and small group instruction and interventions they will reach them shortly.

While working on this research I discovered some limitations which affected the outcomes and results. One of the biggest limitations was time. The study had to be shortened to six weeks because of a delay getting the okay to work with the children. Also there were several snow days and many children missed school because of illnesses. The post-test was given several weeks earlier than normal in order to meet the time constraints of this study. Another limitation affecting the outcome of the study was gaining cooperation from all of the kindergarten teachers involved. The time factor was an issue for them as well because they felt pressure to cover their curriculum and didn't feel they could do it all during their small group times. They did not want to take time out of their already busy days to attend any explicit professional development that I offered to provide. Instead I needed to make due with quite a few quick conversations while dropping off students.

When looking at the Quick Check data I found that there seemed to be some inconsistency week to week when it came to finger pointing. On closer reflection I realized that this correlated with the inclusion of more complex multisyllabic words and drew more focus and attention to them in the coming weeks. The biggest limitation to this study was the fact that the PALS concept of word assessment consists of a different format than the one I had been using with the children. The study participants had been working with a single sheet of text along with a single sheet of pictures whereas the PALS concept of word assessment was in booklet form, one sentence and picture per page. In the future I will make sure that the students work with both formats. If a child truly has a firm concept of word this probably would not matter, but I think it did have an effect on the final outcome on the PALS post-test.

Conclusion/Summary

The purpose of this research was to study whether explicit concept of word instruction would help children gain this crucial skill needed to progress from having the ability to identify beginning consonant sounds to having the ability to fully segment simple words into phonemes. (Flanigan, 2006). I think that this study helps support others' research that children need a strong concept of word in order to become successful and competent readers in first grade. The gap that some children experience in their concept of word skills can be closed by explicit and direct instruction on a daily basis. As long as students have an opportunity to build on their knowledge base and skill sets in a hands on and interactive approach they will make gains. I am confident that with continued work most of the students who participated in this study will have the concept of word skills needed to become competent first grade readers.

I have concerns about two of the participants who are still very much in the developing stage on the concept of word continuum. However, I realize that concept of word is a developmental skill and when the time is right it will click for them. In the mean time they will continue to work on these skills while enjoying the rhythm and fun of the poems we work on.

Although time was a factor in the outcome of this study, it led the kindergarten team to request that I provide more planned professional development prior to the start of next school year in order to ensure an opportunity for all of their students to be exposed to these proven strategies. They realize the study participants have all made progress and want to learn more by watching me work with their students. I plan on sharing McClure's (2015) predictable charts as an easy way to grow their morning message routines and help build concept of word skills in a large group setting. In order to provide all kindergarteners with small group experiences working

with concept of word, I will collaboratively work with the kindergarten team to show them how they can take the poems they already use to create Brain Gym activities similar to the ones I use.

Although the participants receiving explicit concept of word instruction have not yet met the end of the year PALS benchmark they have made great strides along the concept of word continuum and with continued work will be successful first grade readers. Teachers who are well informed about concept of word will ensure the success of their students when they incorporate these important skills into their daily literacy programs.

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Appendix A

Concept of Word in Text
Developmental Continuum

COW-T Stage	Developing	Rudimentary	Firm
Speech to Print Matching COW Pointing	Directionality not firm; Pointing not accurate	Accurately points to 1-syllable words; Gets off-track on multisyllabic words; Self-corrects	Accurately and consistently points to memorized text
Word Recognition in Context COW Word ID	Identifies no or few words in context	Identifies many words in context	Immediately identifies words in context
Word Recognition in Isolation COW Word List	Identifies no or few words in isolation	Identifies few to some words in isolation	Identifies many to most words in isolation

Note. Adapted from PALS. Retrieved from https://pals.virginia.edu/resources/COW-T_Continuum_Ranges_Benchmarks.pdf

Appendix B

Concept of Word Games and Activities - taken from the following resources: Flanigan (2006), Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton and Johnston (2008), the PALS website as well as other websites, Reading Rockets (2018), The Measured Mom (2018), Play to Learn Preschool (2018), The Comprehension Connection (2018) and The W.I.S.E. Owl (2018)

GAME/ACTIVITY	MATERIALS	PROCEDURES
Cut-up-a-Sentence	Sentence Strip, Scissors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adult copies familiar sentence and cuts - stressing breaks between words 2. Student puts words back in order 3. Provide second copy of sentence to use as a model if necessary
Buy My Sentence!	Pennies & Pictures	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Each child thinks up a sentence to go with picture 2. Each student counts words in sentence as teacher buys their words with pennies 3. Students lay pennies in front of them – repeat sentence – tap each penny as they say a word
Be the Sentence	Sentence Strip, scissors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Write familiar sentence on sentence strip 2. Cut and give each child a word 3. Mix children up – they need to put themselves back in order 4. Another child rereads sentence
Dictated Captions	Paper & pencils	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Write dictated caption under child’s picture 2. Read each word to child & highlight individual letters and sounds 3. Model appropriate finger pointing 4. Practice reading and pointing with children
A Sentence A Day	Plain white paper, pencils & crayons	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Start a class story by sharing and writing an opening line, for example “You won’t believe what my dog did this morning.” 2. Each day ask one child to add one sentence to the story. 3. Once all children have added something to story, type each sentence on a separate page for children to illustrate.

		<p>4. Publish and read the book to the children modeling finger pointing. Ask how many words in each sentence? Let them read and point to their own sentence words. Copy sentences onto word strips and cut up and let them put back together</p>
Sentence Sleuth	A familiar sentence from poem or song, blank cards	<p>1. Place one blank card on rug or table for each word in sentence. Review sentence then point to each card as you say the sentence 2. Say a word and invite a child to touch the card that represents the word. 3. Say sentence again but change one word – sentence sleuth touches card for word changed.</p>
Sentence Strip Word Awareness	A long and short sentence strip for each student	<p>1. Talk about how long and short words feel differently when saying them and look different when reading them – for example rat vs elephant 2. Ask students to hold up sentence strip that best fits elephant then which one best fits rat – continue in this way – clap syllables as well</p>
Unifix Words	Unifix Cubes	<p>1. Each child thinks up a sentence 2. Give them one unifix cube for each word in sentence 3. Have children build their sentences by connecting unifix cubes. Explain that multisyllable words get only one cube.</p>

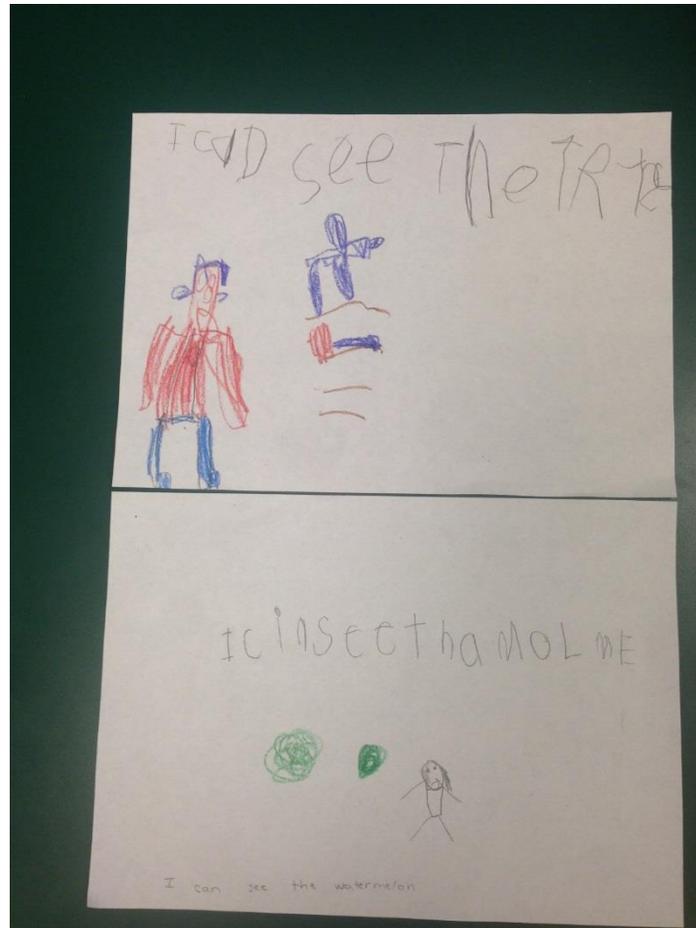
Appendix C

Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) for Concept of Word – 2018-2019

Student #	Fall			Mid-Year			Spring		
	Pointing	Word ID	Word List	Pointing	Word ID	Word List	Pointing	Word ID	Word List
#1	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	4	0
#2	0	0	0	0	2	1	5	10	2
#3	0	0	0	1	2	1	5	10	3
#4	2	1	0	1	3	0	5	6	3
#5	0	0	0	0	4	1	5	8	2
#6	0	2	0	3	2	1	5	8	3
#7	0	3	0	1	3	3	5	10	3
#8	2	1	0	3	2	2	5	10	6
#9	0	5	0	3	2	2	5	10	3
#10	4	1	0	2	4	1	5	10	2
#11	0	1	0	3	4	1	5	10	4
#12	0	5	0	4	5	1	5	10	5
#13	0	7	0	4	6	2	5	10	5

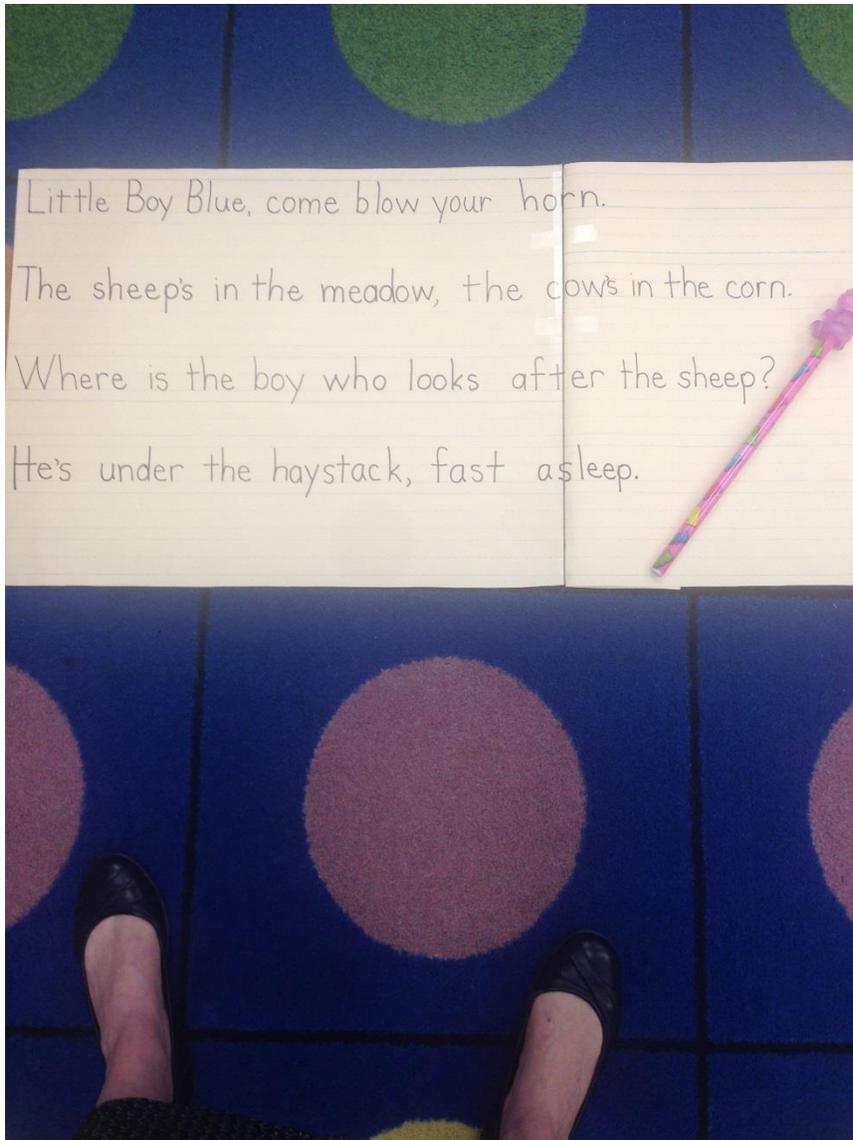
Appendix D

Student writing based on McClure Predictable Charts



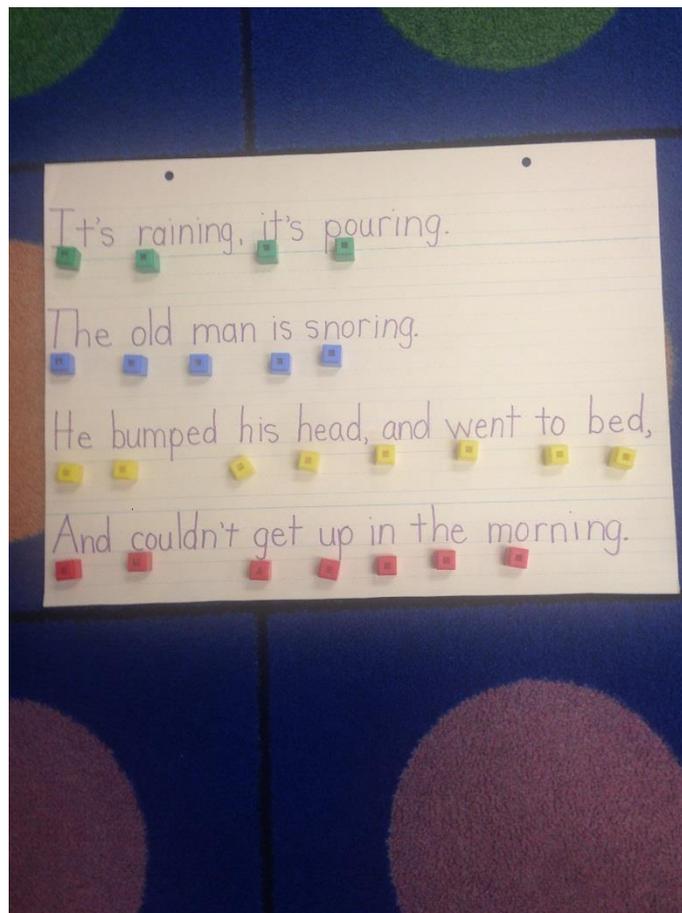
Appendix E

Concept of Word Poem and Pointer



Appendix F

Concept of Word Poem & Unifix Cubes



Appendix G

Concept of Word – Cut up Words

