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You've Got Mail: Using Personalized Authentic Reading Experiences to Increase First Graders' Oral Reading Fluency

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You've Got Mail: Using Personalized Authentic Reading
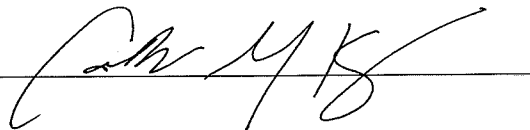Experiences to Increase First Graders' Oral Reading Fluency

An Action Research Report
By Krysten Halek

You've Got Mail: Using Personalized Authentic Reading Experiences
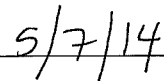to Increase First Graders' Oral Reading Fluency

By Krysten Halek

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Advisor: _____   Date: __5/7/14__

Abstract

Fluency is an essential component in learning to read. This research focused on exploring the impact of personalized authentic reading experiences on oral reading fluency and reading attitudes. Participants were six first-grade students enrolled in an urban public elementary school that were assessed as reading at a lower level than the majority of their classmates. Pre- and post-intervention data collection included measures of fluency (accuracy, automaticity, and prosody), comprehension, and reading attitudes. The four-week intervention involved three 20-30 minute group meetings per week where students received and read personalized *Pixar* movie postcards. Results showed student increases in all dimensions of fluency, suggesting that the inclusion of personalized authentic reading experiences in reading instruction may benefit students' reading fluency. While surveys of reading attitudes were somewhat inconclusive, observations suggest that the specific features of this intervention may have positive applications for a variety of reading interventions.

First grade is a year marked by many milestones, big and small. This was evident from the beginning of my student teaching experience in Ms. Poppy's first grade classroom at May Elementary (all names of people and places are pseudonyms). Developmentally, this group of six-year-olds was still learning to master shoe tying and the tooth fairy was making regular visits to the nearby neighborhoods. I observed students navigating new friendships and juggling the balance between desiring and being challenged by increased independence. Their enthusiasm for learning and having new experiences was contagious – who knew that sifting sand and rocks could be so fun! First grade is also a year when between Labor Day and Memorial Day students are expected to make particularly great leaps in reading.

May Elementary was a public elementary school located within an affluent neighborhood in a Midwestern Metropolitan Area. Student enrollment at May Elementary was approximately 550 students, with typical classroom sizes ranging from 25-30 students. At the time of the study, there were 30 students in Ms. Poppy's classroom. The student population was predominately white (>85%) and a small percentage of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. It was common practice at the beginning of each school year that May Elementary students' instructional and independent reading levels were assessed using the *Fountas & Pinnell (F&P) Benchmark Assessment System* (Heinemann, 2014).

The F&P Benchmark Assessment System is comprised of a series of texts that are used to identify a student's current reading level. The texts are "leveled" on a continuum from A-Z and text levels are based on factors related to the level of support and challenge that a reader encounters in the text. A student's 'independent level' identifies what level

material that child can read and understand without support. Identifying a student's 'instructional level' (typically one or two levels above a student's independent level) helps the teacher select materials that will best promote learning with instruction and support (Heinemann, 2014). In Ms. Poppy's class, students were placed in guided reading groups based on their F&P instructional levels.

Twenty-six of the twenty-seven regular education students in Ms. Poppy's first grade classroom were found to be at grade level for reading, with F&P instructional levels ranging from C-M. According to F&P guidelines, students are meeting grade-level reading expectations if they are reading at a level D at the beginning of the year, and at least a level J by the completion of first grade (Heinemann, 2014). Recognizing that nearly all the students were assessed as being on target, I became curious about aspects of reading that were not being fully captured by the assessments. For example, in determining a student's reading level, the F&P assessments do not take into consideration the amount of time it takes a student to read the text or whether or not the student is reading with any type of expression. I found myself drawn to exploring these aspects of reading – elements of fluency – that were absent in the students' reading assessments.

A complete definition of fluency includes three critical elements: accuracy, automaticity, and prosody (Rasinski, 2004). *Accuracy* is the measure of a reader's degree of correctness in decoding words. For comprehension to be possible, a reader must be able to identify words with ease and sound out words with minimal errors. If students are not accurately reading words, it will make comprehension difficult and may lead to misconceptions about the text (Hudson, Lane, & Pillen, 2005). The second component of fluency, *automaticity*, encompasses both the rate and smoothness of reading (Zutell &

Rasinski, 1991). LaBerge and Samuels' (1974) theory of Automatic Information Processing helps explain why automaticity is so important in reading. They suggested that readers have a limited capacity for processing and if all of one's cognitive energy is depleted by laborious word decoding, there will be nothing remaining for the higher order processing of comprehension. Students with limited automaticity read slowly, often in one or two word chunks. Not only is automaticity important for comprehension, it has also been shown that slow readers often lose interest in school, are less likely to read for pleasure, and fail to complete their work (Moats, 2001). *Prosody* refers to reading with expression (Rasinski, 2004). Prosodic reading requires the reader to make accurate decisions about phrasing and know where to place emphasis. Without attention to the appropriate use of punctuation, it is unlikely students will understand the text (Rasinski, 2004). Further, prosodic reading allows the reader to infer information about the text that is not explicitly stated (Rasinski, 2012). Finally, although *comprehension* is not technically a facet of fluency, it deserves a place in the conversation: "In its fullest and most authentic sense, fluency is reading with and for meaning, and any instruction that focuses primarily on speed with minimal regard for meaning is wrong" (Rasinski, 2012, p. 517). When the reader is struggling with fluency, comprehension is difficult, if not impossible (Hudson et al., 2005).

The important multi-dimensionality of fluency can sometimes be forgotten. The easily quantifiable counting of how many words a student can read in a minute can result in a narrowed, incomplete definition of fluency. Instruction focused on speed sends the message to students that how fast they can read is what is most important, creating readers who may excel in automaticity but have no idea what they just read (Rasinski,

2012). In Ms. Poppy's class, it appeared students had developed misconceptions about what makes someone a "good reader." I observed several students inaccurately and critically comparing their reading abilities to their peers who they noticed were reading faster than themselves. While speed is an important component of reading, it is just one of the pieces to being a successful reader. Literacy instruction should be careful not to inadvertently overemphasize reading speed.

Successful literacy instruction, and ultimately students' experiences and engagement with reading, are dependent on a combination of factors. The teaching of a specific reading strategy or skill, such as fluency's automaticity, accuracy, and prosody must be considered within a context of other influences on student learning. This action research project will focus on several of these key aspects including motivation (discussed in terms of reading attitudes, beliefs, and self-efficacy) and the use of materials that are meaningful and relevant to the life of a first grade student. The role these factors play in a child's reading experiences are explored below.

Fluency Instruction

In 2000, the National Reading Panel report identified fluency as one of the five pillars of reading instruction along with phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). We know that children who struggle with fluency may become frustrated, disinterested, and may fail to make necessary gains as readers (Rasinski, 2006). When considering then how to address fluency in the classroom, Rasinski (2006) advocates for integrated instruction of all the elements of fluency; to parse out accuracy, automaticity or prosody to be taught in isolation would be counterproductive and an unnecessary waste of

valuable instruction time. Successful fluency instruction is grounded in providing students with both wide and deep reading experiences (Rasinski, 2012). Wide reading is what we commonly see in a classroom where instruction and discussion center on a student reading a text only once. This process is then repeated with a new text, exposing students to a larger volume of books. Deep reading is often referred to as repeated reading. Repeated reading is just as its name implies – students read a single text multiple times until they reach the desired level of fluency (Rasinski, 2012). Repeated reading is one of the most-studied approaches to increasing reading fluency, targeting all areas of fluency – accuracy, automaticity, and prosody (Rasinski, 2004; Hudson et al., 2005; Rasinski, 2006; Faver, 2008). But why would someone want to read the same text repeatedly? As will be discussed in more depth, interest and motivation play key roles in students both engaging in and developing a sustained relationship with reading (Gambrell, 2011). With that in mind, Rasinski (2006) suggests that students will be more likely to engage in repeated readings when there is a meaningful purpose for doing so, such as rehearsing for a performance. This requires using texts that are meant to be performed: play scripts (which lend themselves to an instructional strategy known as Readers Theatre), monologues, dialogues, poetry, song lyrics, and letters. The use of repeated readings in this way has resulted in students making gains in their expressive reading, speed, and general enthusiasm for reading (Rasinski, 2006).

Authentic Reading Materials

Every day we are surrounded by written language, reading for purposes of survival, learning, and/or pleasure (Berardo, 2006). However, in the classroom, students may experience a narrow view of reading where reading only feels like a means to learn

how to be a better reader. If that is a student's primary association with reading, it is easy to see how motivation and engagement may diminish with time. Using materials that are authentically part of students' lives, and which directly relate to the needs/experiences of children (e.g., Lego or game instructions), can help students recognize why reading is important, subsequently increasing their interest in reading. "Real life" texts that we may encounter in our everyday lives are known as authentic materials. Authentic materials can help children become aware of and understand how language is used in the "real world." Conversely, in non-authentic texts the language feels artificial and not reflective of how language is really used (Berardo, 2006; Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006; Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, & Igo, 2011). Using authentic materials increases motivation by giving the reader a purpose for reading that extends beyond school. The types of authentic materials available are broad and varied and can include newspapers, magazines, song lyrics, and letters (Berardo, 2006). In the context of oral reading fluency instruction, Rasinski, Homan & Biggs (2009) define authentic materials as those that are meant to be read aloud (e.g., song lyrics, speeches, plays). All of the above definitions fit with Duke et al.'s (2006) assertion that "to be considered highly authentic, a literacy activity must include an authentic text read or written for an authentic purpose" (p. 346). As with any reading materials, authentic texts need to be selected with the reader in mind. Efforts will likely fail when the wrong type of text is chosen, resulting in vocabulary or text structures that are too challenging (Berardo, 2006).

Attitudes, Motivation and Self-Efficacy

The act of reading often begins with motivation. We can help students learn to use a wide variety of reading strategies, but without an internal drive or desire to engage in

reading students may never reach their full potential as readers. *Motivation* is multi-dimensional and difficult to operationalize. Broadly, Gambrell (2011) defines motivation as the likelihood of engaging in reading or choosing to read. In general, motivation falls into two categories: extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. Students who are extrinsically motivated to read engage in reading for rewards, grades, or some form of recognition. Conversely, intrinsic motivation involves being curious and interested in reading for the sake of reading. Intrinsically motivated students find value and/or enjoyment in reading (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). In addition, those who have higher intrinsic motivation are more likely to engage in reading (Gambrell, 2011; Wigfield, 1997). *Self-efficacy* is a belief about one's ability to accomplish a specific task or activity. When we think we can successfully accomplish a task, we are more likely to choose to engage in that task, put forth effort, persist when challenged, and ultimately complete the task (Bandura, 1977). Zimmerman (2000) concluded, "students' self-beliefs about academic capabilities do play an essential role in their motivation to achieve" (p. 89). In the context of reading, it is important that a student believes that s/he can read. Believing in oneself and seeing the purpose for doing something fuels motivation and increases the likelihood of engagement (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). In this action research project, I was particularly interested how social interactions with peers and me (the student teacher) could begin to build reading self-efficacy and foster intrinsic motivation for students.

This action research project took into consideration what we know from the research: (1) fluency is an essential component to being a successful reader; (2) one of the best methods for increasing oral reading fluency involves using text that lends itself to being read aloud; (3) to be engaged students need to be interested, motivated, and believe

that they can experience success; and (4) the use of authentic materials provide students with opportunities to experience how language is used in the "real world" and often increases students' interest and motivation. Last but not least, reading should be enjoyable and fun. With all those elements in mind, I designed an intervention to answer the question: What is the impact of personalized authentic reading experiences on first graders' oral reading fluency and reading attitudes?

Description of Research Process

The educators at May Elementary monitor their students' progress in reading by administering the F&P Benchmark Assessment System at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. As previously discussed, the F&P Benchmark Assessment System assigns students independent and instructional reading levels between A through Z. These F&P levels correspond to grade level reading expectations, indicating whether a student is reading at grade level or if the student may need additional intervention to achieve grade level reading expectations. At the beginning of first grade, students are expected to be reading at least at an instructional level D. First graders are expected to be reading texts at the instructional level J at the completion of the school year. For the purposes of this study, students who were not experiencing the greatest reading challenges, but who were assessed as reading at a lower level than the majority of their peers were selected for this intervention. Given the brief timeline for this action research project, the students with the greatest word decoding challenges were excluded (e.g., F&P levels C and D). The six students at F&P level E (4 boys and 2 girls) were selected to participate.

In October 2013, I met individually with each of the students to explain the project and to collect pre-intervention data. After a discussion of what his or her

participation in the project would involve, each student was asked if s/he would like to be a part of the project. Prior to meeting with each student, his/her parent had also signed a consent form indicating their child could participate.

Students' attitudes on reading were assessed prior to the intervention. The *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS)* (McKenna & Kear, 1990) measures children's attitudes about reading, with subscales for recreational and academic reading. The survey is suitable for grades 1 through 6 and uses a student-friendly response format. For each item, students respond by selecting one of four Garfield the cat cartoon illustrations. The scale depicts a range of Garfield's moods (very happy, a little happy, a little upset, and very upset) with Garfield's face and body expressing each mood. Students were instructed that it was not a test, there were no right or wrong answers, and that it was important that they think about the questions and answer according to how they really felt. It was explained that for each question they were to circle the picture of Garfield that was closest to their own feelings. Per the survey's standardized administration instructions, we reviewed what mood was represented in each of the pictures (e.g., "Here Garfield seems to be very happy"). Each question was read aloud to the student and s/he was allowed time to circle his/her response.

The *Qualitative Reading Inventory-5 (QRI-5)* (Leslie & Caldwell, 2011) was used to assess students' reading accuracy, automaticity, and comprehension. Following administration of the ERAS, students were asked to read two brief QRI-5 passages. The first, titled "People at Work," was an expository passage rated an F&P level E. The second was a narrative F&P level E passage titled "A Trip." Before each passage, students were told that they were going to read something out loud and that if they came

to a word they were not sure of they should just try to do their best. They were reassured that this was not a test and that I would be taking some notes so that I could remember some things for my project. It was further explained that if I was writing it did not mean they had done something wrong. Prior to reading, students were informed that when they finished reading I was going ask them a few questions about what they read. The readings were audio recorded to allow for review and ultimately greater accuracy in scoring. After the student finished reading a passage s/he was asked the comprehension questions provided as part of the QRI-5. The passage readings were also used to assess prosody and were scored using a prosody rubric (Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 2009).

Qualitative data was collected based on observations of students' attitudes and behaviors around reading. Observational data was collected throughout the duration of the research process (from pre to post intervention data collection). The majority of the observations recorded were from the group intervention sessions. Any potentially relevant verbal and non-verbal behaviors such as changes in fluency (e.g., speed, word recognition, attention to punctuation, changes in voice), interactions between students related to reading, interactions between a student and a text, body language, and statements or behaviors related to reading confidence were recorded in a journal to later be coded and categorized to reveal any patterns or changes over time.

After all six students had individually completed the pre-intervention assessments, we began meeting as a group. The intervention consisted of three meetings per week, over a consecutive four-week period. We met a total of 12 times with each session lasting 20-30 minutes.

Our first session was an opportunity to set the stage for what we would be doing and why. I read aloud the picture book *How Rocket Learned to Read* (Hills, 2010), a sweet story about a dog, Rocket, and a yellow bird that subtly draws a reluctant and skeptical Rocket into discovering the joys of words and reading stories. We discussed why Rocket wanted to learn to read and why we might care about being able to read. Here I was encouraging students to think about both the purpose for reading and our purpose for meeting. Following the read aloud, we talked about what "fluency" means. The students were familiar with Ms. Poppy's expression of fluency which was "reading like a smooth flowing river." I went on to explain that being fluent readers also means being able to read with expression. I asked them to listen to my voice as I reread two pages from *How Rocket Learned to Read* (one with expression and one without). We discussed what they noticed about the way that I read, which they preferred, and why. Lastly, I explained that our group would be meeting every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday for 4 weeks. To prime them for the work we would be doing, I asked them if they were familiar with postcards. I showed them a blank postcard and we discussed the purpose of postcards. They were told that every week they would each get a new postcard in their mailbox. When it was time for the group to meet, those who were to receive a postcard that day would retrieve it from their classroom mailbox and bring it to group. The other members received a photocopy of each other's postcards that same day.

I chose to use hand-written postcards for the personalized authentic materials. Postcards were chosen because they are a form of written language that is found in the "real world" and they possess a uniqueness and special quality. Their size provided a natural boundary for the amount of text appropriate for our meeting time. The

conversational tone of postcard writing would expose the students to everyday language; I hoped the students' familiarity with spoken conversation would make identifying phrases (which is necessary for reading with accurate expression) more accessible. Postcards lent themselves to being read aloud, and lastly, postcards are fun. I used *Pixar* movie postcards (Pixar Animation Studios, 2005) and wrote each postcard from a character in the movie represented on that postcard's artwork. Some of the postcards used included *Toy Story, Monsters Inc., The Incredibles, A Bug's Life,* and *Cars*. Students received postcards from characters such as Woody, Jesse, Buzz Lightyear, Lighting McQueen, Mador, Mike, and Sulley. Postcards were written to include both references to the particular movie and things that I knew about each of the students. During my 8-weeks in the classroom leading up to our group sessions, I watched, listened, and noticed things about the students – perhaps it was what kinds of books they chose during independent reading time (e.g., *Fly Guy*), what they spontaneously chose to talk about (e.g., hockey, music, movies), what character was on their backpack or lunchbox (e.g., *Star Wars, Angry Birds*), and personality characteristics. I included (as written by the movie character) a personal question at the end of each postcard (e.g., What's your favorite kind of ice cream?) that each of the students had the option of answering. This was an effort to have students interact with the text and subtly create a sense of community as we learned things about each other. The postcards were also written to intentionally include words from Fry's (1980) *First 100 Instant Words List*. Using text samples from 1,045 books in 12 subject matter areas, Fry generated a list of 100 words that account for half of all English written material. All 100 words were represented among the 24 total postcards. Research tells us that students' self-efficacy develops as a

result of facing achievable, yet challenging tasks, and experiencing successes

(Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). With that in mind, I created postcards just challenging

enough to allow for instructional opportunities that would facilitate student's growth and

experiences with success (see Appendix for example postcards).

Our sessions followed a consistent format each week. This schedule allowed for

the students to establish a routine, have a general sense of what to expect, and know

which day they would be receiving a postcard. See Table 1 for an overview of what

occurred in our group meetings each week.

Table 1

Weekly Intervention Schedule

Day	Activities
Tuesday	Before commencing with our usual routine, on Day 2 we had a brief discussion about punctuation, specifically what the following look like and what they tell us to do when we are reading: period, comma, question mark, and exclamation point. ▪ Students 1, 2, and 3 each received a new personalized postcard. Every student had his/her own photocopy of each of the three new postcards. Each student was given a folder in which they stored their personalized postcards and all of the photocopies of their peers' postcards. The folders were collected at the end of each session and distributed at the beginning of the following session. ▪ We randomly selected a postcard to read first. The postcard recipient showed the postcard's artwork to the group. As a group, we read the postcard together. All the students were expected to read aloud and follow the text using their finger. Reminders were given to use punctuation to help them read expressively. When necessary, we would pause to define any new vocabulary or model fluent reading. ▪ We then went around the table and each student had an opportunity to answer the question posed at the end of the postcard. ▪ This process was repeated for the other 2 new postcards.
Wednesday	▪ Students 4, 5, and 6 each received a new personalized postcard. Each student had his/her own photocopy of each of the three new postcards. ▪ Wednesdays followed the same procedure as Tuesdays.

Day	Activities
Thursday	▪ Each student could choose any one of his/her personalized postcards to individually read out loud. ▪ Students were offered support for any challenging areas. ▪ When the other students were not reading out loud, they were silently following along using their finger on their photocopy. ▪ After a student would finish reading his/her postcard, I would give him/her Two Stars and a Wish* (e.g., "I noticed you were reading with expression when you read x. This part you were reading 'smooth like a river.' My wish is that you work on stopping for a second when you get to a period."). *Because we know that self-efficacy plays a key role in how and if a student will engage in a task, Linnenbrink & Pintrich (2003) recommend that teachers provide feedback to students to help them develop accurate self-efficacy beliefs. Also, in an effort to resolve student worries and/or misconceptions, I regularly provided feedback that everyone reads differently and that reading fast is not the only thing that makes someone a good reader.

Following completion of the four-week intervention period, I again individually

met with each of the six students to complete the *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey*

(McKenna & Kear, 1990). I followed the same administration procedures that I used

during the pre-intervention data collection. Students were told that they should not worry

about remembering how they answered the first time, but they should answer based on

how they are feeling now.

Similar to the pre-intervention data collection, passages from the *Qualitative*

Reading Inventory-5 (QRI) (Leslie & Caldwell, 2011) were used to assess reading

accuracy, automaticity, prosody, and comprehension. Students first re-read a passage that

was read during their pre-intervention assessment (1) "A Trip" (Narrative, F&P level E)

followed by two new QRI-5 passages (2) "Fox and Mouse" (Narrative, F&P level F) and

(3) "Lost and Found" (Narrative, F&P level F). Administration and scoring procedures

were the same as those followed for pre-intervention data collection.

Analysis of Data

As detailed above, fluency and reading attitude assessments were used to collect data before and following the intervention. The primary goal of this research was to investigate the impact of personalized authentic reading experiences on oral reading fluency. In addition to the quantitative data collected before and after the intervention, observational data were collected both within and outside the context of the group meetings. These observations will be used throughout the discussion of the quantitative data to help explain and highlight notable findings.

Over the course of the four-week intervention, each student received 4 unique, personalized postcards, combining for a group total of 24 postcards. Students received photocopies of their classmates' postcards allowing all students to actively participate in reading all 24 postcards. All three components of fluency were attended to in the reading of the postcards: Inclusion of words from Fry's *First 100 Instant Words List* (1980) gave students practice with high-frequency words to boost accuracy; practice with high-frequency words and the opportunity to re-read portions and entire postcards addressed automaticity; and the conversational nature of postcards that included a variety of punctuation allowed students to attend to prosody in their oral reading. Pre- and post-intervention assessments were used to quantitatively explore the value of personalized postcards to increase fluency.

To assess fluency, the audio-recorded readings were reviewed and scored for automaticity, accuracy, and prosody. Each of these dimensions of fluency will be presented in terms of (a) student averages pre- and post-intervention and (b) direct comparisons of the passage "A Trip" pre- and post-intervention. When student averages

are reported for the different dimensions of fluency, they will be presented both including and excluding the post-intervention passage "Lost & Found." While "Lost & Found" is rated more challenging (F&P level F) than the pre-intervention passages, I still had concerns that the repetitive nature of the passage's phrases may make its comparisons with the other passages unreliable and could, in fact, inflate the post-intervention assessment scores. In the interest of representing the data in the most accurate manner possible, both sets of averages are included.

　　　　Automaticity, which is quantified in terms of rate, was scored using the QRI-5 scoring guidelines (Leslie & Caldwell, 2011). Automaticity is measured as a rate in words per minute (WPM) and is calculated by multiplying the number of words in the passage by 60 and dividing by the number of seconds it took the reader to complete the passage (e.g., 119 total words x 60 seconds = 7,140 seconds / 228 seconds = 31 WPM). Automaticity scores were calculated for each of the two pre-intervention and three post-intervention passages. Findings show that students had increased automaticity rates following the intervention. As Figure 1 illustrates, average WPM increased both including and excluding "Lost & Found." Excluding "Lost & Found," Student 4 and Student 6 made the greatest gains and increased their average WPM by 22 words. Per school district expectations, May Elementary first grade students should be reading 9 words per minute in the fall, 24 in the winter, and 55 at the conclusion of first grade. These expectations can vary by districts. For example, from a national perspective, Fountas & Pinnell recommend first grade students complete first grade with a 75-100 WPM oral reading rate (Heinemann, 2014).

Figure 1. Students' average automaticity pre- and post-intervention both including and excluding the post-intervention passage "Lost & Found" (L&F).

While it is possible that the pre-intervention exposure to "A Trip" influenced post-intervention performance, given that students only read the passage once during pre-intervention and there was a 4-week period between readings, it seems unlikely that prior exposure had a significant influence on post-intervention scores. Direct comparison of automaticity for "A Trip" shows an increase in WPM for all students (Figure 2).
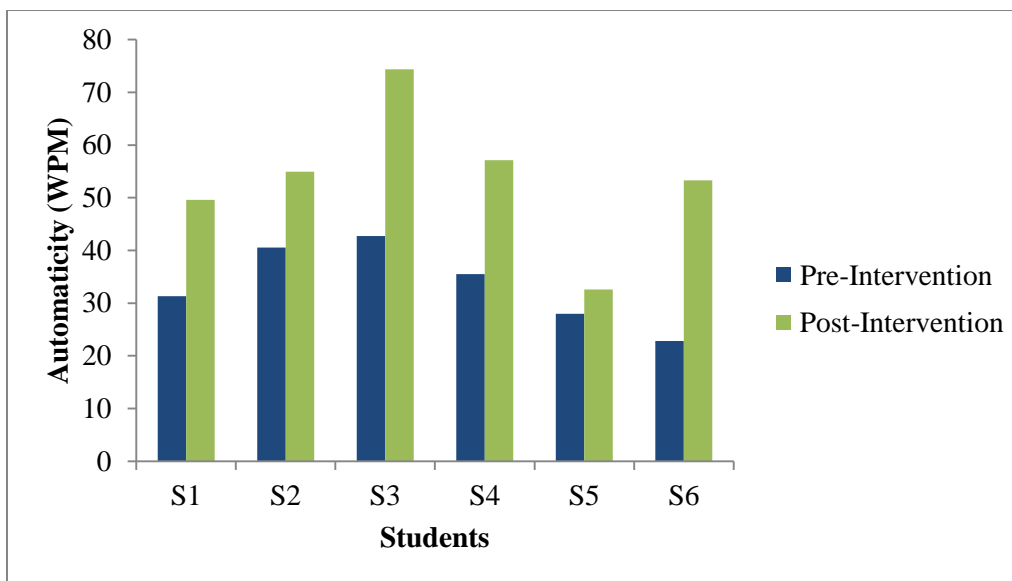
Figure 2. Students' automaticity for pre- and post-intervention readings of "A Trip."

Accuracy is calculated by counting the number of miscues in a passage. Miscues are noted when there is any deviation in reading from the printed text and include: insertions (adding words that do not appear in the text), omissions (missing words that are in the text), substitutions (replacing the word in the text with another word), reversals (transposing two words or phrases), and self-corrections (correcting a miscue without assistance). While there may be some debate over whether or not self-corrections should be counted as miscues, the QRI-5 advocates for their inclusion, asserting that self-corrections represent a deviation from the text and can affect fluency and/or comprehension. For the purposes of this research, self-corrections were counted as miscues. Per QRI-5 guidelines, repetitions, hesitations, and omissions of punctuation were not counted as miscues; however, omissions of punctuation were considered as part of prosody scoring. Accuracy is represented as a percentage of words read correctly and is calculated by subtracting the number of miscues from the total number of words in the passage and dividing by the total number of words in the passage (e.g., 119 total words – 8 miscues = 111 correct words / 119 total words = 93% Accuracy score). Comparisons of pre- and post-intervention accuracy rates show post-intervention increases for all students. There were increases seen both across students' accuracy averages as well as their accuracy on "A Trip" (Figures 3 and 4).
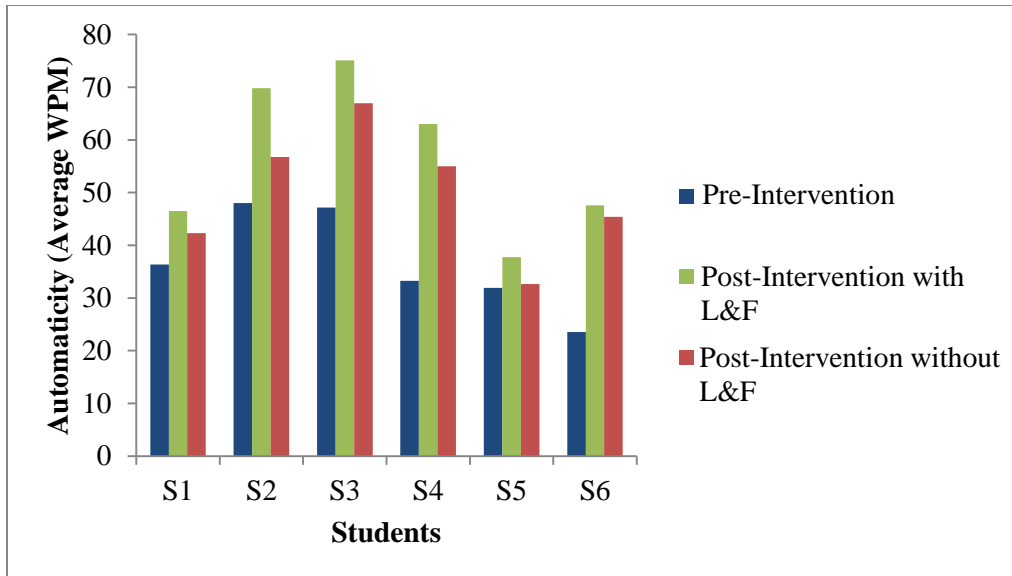
Figure 3. Students' average accuracy pre- and post-intervention both including and excluding the post-intervention passage "Lost & Found" (L&F).
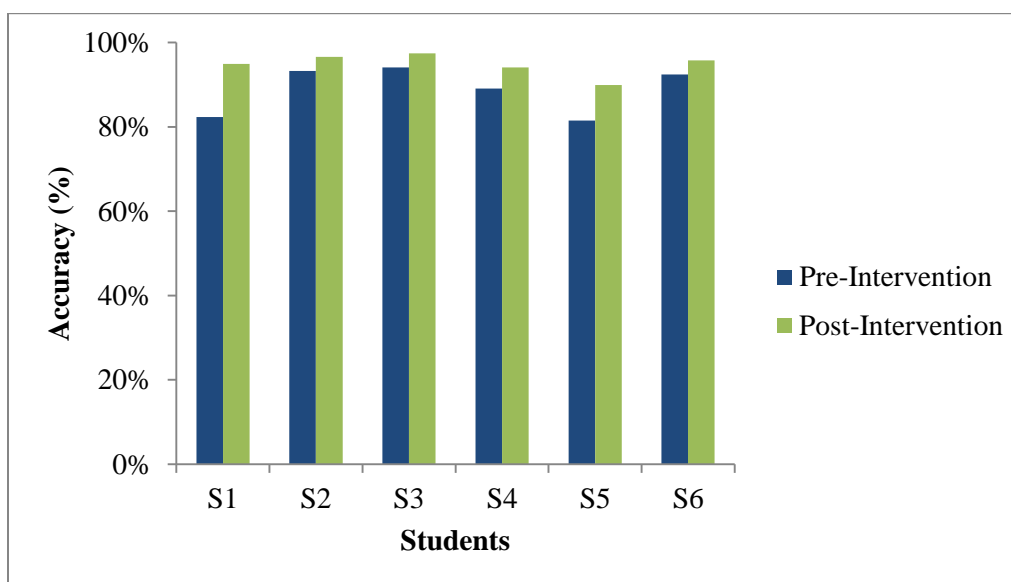
Figure 4. Students' accuracy for pre- and post-intervention readings of "A Trip."

Prosody, the final dimension of fluency, was scored using the *Multi-Dimensional Fluency Scoring Guide (MFSG)* (Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 2009). Teachers use the MFSG to assess students' prosody (expression) in oral reading. Students receive a score from 1-4 on three prosodic dimensions: phrasing and expression, accuracy and smoothness, and pacing. Although there is the potential for subjectivity in scoring, the

rubric provides detailed explanations of what should be present to achieve each level/score. In general, scoring centers around attention to and delivery of reading in a natural and conversational tone, appropriate phasing, and proper and adequate stress and intonation. The total score for each student could range from 3-12, with 12 indicating exceptional prosodic reading. The five passages read by each student were scored using the MFSG. Scores indicated that there were improvements in students' prosodic reading abilities from pre- to post-intervention (Figure 5).
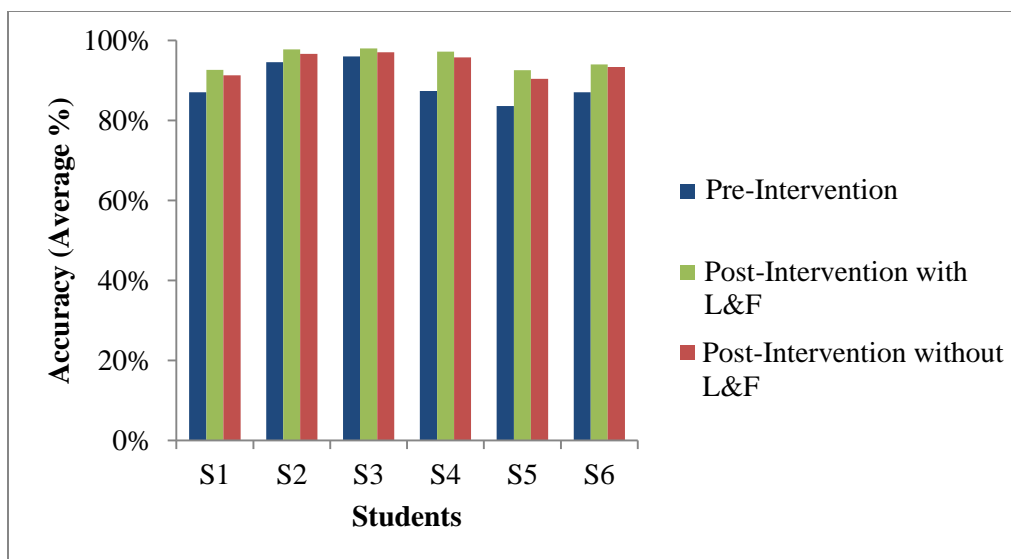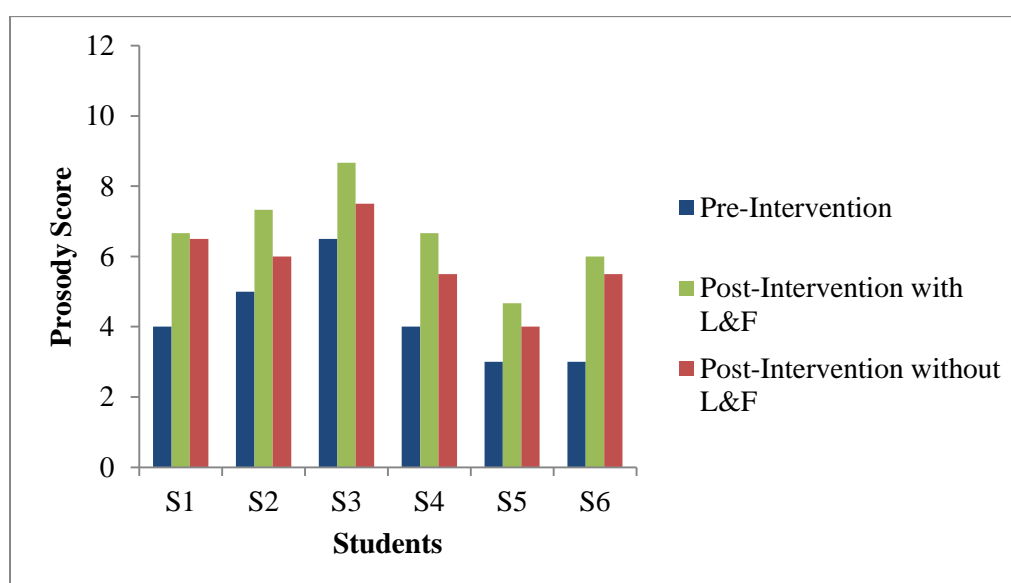

Figure 5. Students' average prosody scores pre- and post-intervention both including and excluding the post-intervention passage "Lost & Found" (L&F).

Prosody scores were also compared for the pre- and post-intervention readings of "A Trip." All students showed gains in their prosodic reading of "A Trip," with half of the students doubling their prosody score (Figure 6). The students' early understandings of how to use punctuation and expression in their reading were observed during our weekly intervention meetings. Review of my notes indicates this shift became noticeable during our fifth meeting where I observed, "As a whole, the group is reading a little faster and they are paying more attention to punctuation and expression. I feel there is a sense

of pride inside the students when they use an element of punctuation as it is intended to be used" (field notes, November 6, 2013). Each week we discussed the different forms of punctuation and how we use them when reading. As our meetings progressed, the students regularly began attending to elements such as question marks, exclamation points, periods, commas, and quotation marks. Unfortunately, during the post-intervention assessments it became apparent that the passages selected did not allow the students' gains in the areas of prosody to truly shine. The QRI-5 passages are designed to skillfully measure accuracy, automaticity, and comprehension; however, these features of the passages make them less suitable for truly demonstrating expressive reading. There is a limited presence of elements in the passages (punctuation, dialogue, etc.) that allow for natural changes in expression. A memorable moment regarding this happened during the post-intervention assessments. Student 3 had finished his final passage and I said to him, "I noticed you were reading with expression." He responded, "I know. And I noticed that there aren't any commas in this story" (field notes, December 5, 2013). He noticed that there were not any commas! I speculate that prior to the intervention (where we explicitly discussed punctuation and repeatedly practiced using it in reading the postcards), he would not have been able to identify a comma or understand the purpose of commas. The scores that provided the quantitative evidence that gains were made during the invention are undeniably wonderful, but it is moments like this that are true highlights for a teacher.
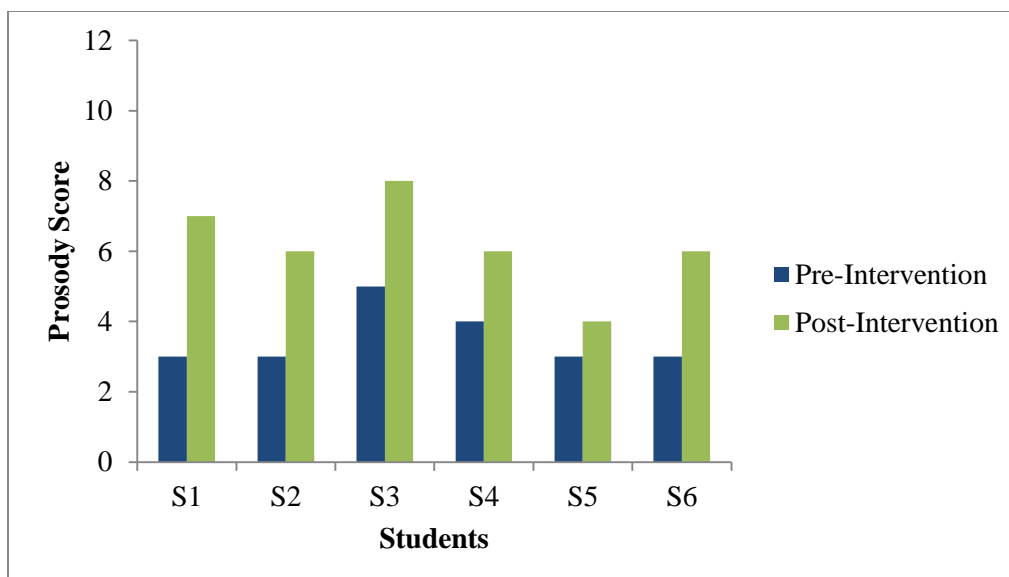
Figure 6. Students' prosody scores for pre- and post-intervention readings of "A Trip."

Assessment of *comprehension* immediately followed the student's reading of each passage and involved asking the student explicit- and implicit-based comprehension questions about the passage. As previously discussed, it is not responsible or meaningful to focus on fluency instruction without also attending to comprehension. Reading quickly, accurately, and with expression is pointless if the student has no idea what s/he just read. With that in mind, QRI-5 comprehension questions were administered for the pre- and post-intervention passages, with the exception of "A Trip." The comprehension questions were not re-administered for the post-assessment reading of "A Trip." Five of the six students earned the top comprehension score of 6 on their pre-intervention reading of this passage, with one student receiving a score of 3. This student was asked the comprehension questions during her post-intervention assessment and earned a score of 6. This was done to check comprehension, but was not included in the scores reported here. On two of the passages, students could earn a total of 6 comprehension points, and

on the other two there were 5 total points possible. The 5-point scales were converted to 6-point scales for the purposes of comparisons.

Comprehension scores increased at varying degrees for four students and slightly decreased for two students (Figure 7). Even with some scores decreasing, all post-intervention comprehension scores were within an acceptable range and were not cause for concern. The difficulty of the passages increased from F&P level E to F&P level F from pre- to post-intervention assessments and could account for some of the slight decreases in comprehension scores. This quick assessment of understanding served the purpose of providing some assurance that any gains in fluency did not come at the cost of comprehension.

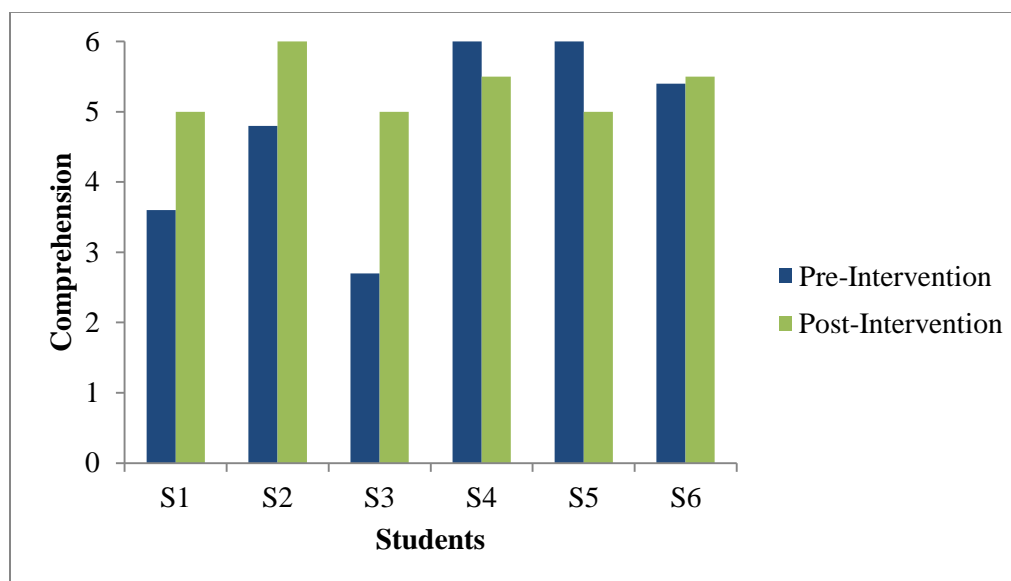*Figure 7.* Students' average comprehension scores pre- and post-intervention.

Students' attitudes on reading were measured using the *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS)* (McKenna & Kear, 1990). Scores were calculated for the recreational reading attitudes and academic reading attitudes subscales, as well as overall reading attitude. ERAS scores can be examined in a variety of ways. I was particularly

interested in seeing: (a) if there were noticeable differences between each student's recreational and academic raw scores, (b) whether students' scores changed from before to after the intervention, and (c) how the students' recreational, academic, and overall attitudes compared with a normative sample of U.S. first grade students who were administered the ERAS. The later was accomplished by converting raw scores into percentile ranks, per the ERAS scoring guide. Pre- and post-intervention ERAS raw scores and percentiles for each student are summarized in Table 2.

I first looked for any significant differences (5 points or more) between recreational versus academic scores for each student. For example, a higher recreational score might suggest a more positive attitude towards reading for recreation versus for academic purposes. In fact, Student 2's pre-intervention survey showed an 8-point difference between academic and recreational scores, with a higher recreational score. However, these scores become more aligned in his post-intervention survey when his recreational score significantly decreased. It is difficult to surmise what caused a drop in this score. Perhaps more noteworthy are his pre- and post- academic percentile ranks and his overall percentile rank. His academic and overall scores indicate that more than sixty-percent of his first-grade peers across the country have stronger attitudes towards reading in school and towards reading in general. Student 4 had a 16-point difference between his recreational and academic scores on the post-intervention survey, suggesting strong attitudes towards reading in school (99th percentile). His score of 24 (12th percentile rank) is concerning as it suggests a poor attitude towards reading outside of school. It is also interesting that this recreational score dropped by 9-points from pre-to post-assessment, while his academic score increased by 5-points.

Table 2

Pre- and Post-Intervention Elementary Reading Attitude Survey Scores by Student

	Recreational Raw Score	Recreational %-Tile	Academic Raw Score	Academic %-Tile	Overall Raw Score	Overall %-Tile
S1-pre	39	92	37	85	76	90
S1-post	40	99	39	91	79	95
S2-pre	35	77	28	39	63	55
S2-post	30	44	27	34	57	37
S3-pre	27	26	29	44	56	34
S3-post	34	72	38	88	72	82
S4-pre	33	65	35	75	68	72
S4-post	24	12	40	99	64	59
S5-pre	40	99	40	99	80	99
S5-post	37	86	37	85	74	86
S6-pre	33	65	32	58	65	62
S6-post	28	32	28	39	56	34

Differences between pre- and post-intervention scores are similarly difficult to interpret. Half of the students showed some shifts (both up and down) from pre-to post-assessment, but generally remained relatively stable. Of those shifts not already mentioned, most notable were Student 3's pre- to post-survey 10-point increase in his recreational score (26th to 72nd percentile) and 9-point increase in his academic score (from 44th to 88th percentile). His overall percentile ranking went from 34th to 82nd. Student 3 also consistently had the highest fluency scores pre- and post-intervention.

Student 6's survey scores went the opposite direction before and after the intervention. Her recreational score dropped by 6 points and her academic dropped by 5 points. Even though Student 6 had some of the lower fluency scores, the downward shift in her attitude scores were not consistent with gains that I observed in her confidence and interest in reading. While she did express some concerns during our post-intervention one-on-one meeting about one of her peers being "frustrated" with her reading slowly, she was eager to initiate reading for me during independent classroom reading time and

when I informed her during our post-intervention meeting that I was going to have her read for me, she enthusiastically responded "yay!" Since I was surprised by some of her (post-intervention) survey responses, I decided to probe a little into a couple of the questions. This was done in a casual, non-judgmental way as not to make her feel like her answers were wrong. Question 14 asks, "How do you feel about reading your school books?" She selected the 'a little upset' looking Garfield. I asked her "What made you pick that Garfield?" She responded that during independent reading time the books are not interesting and that she likes *Fly Guy* books. Question 17 asks, "How do you feel about stories you read in reading class?" She selected the 'a little upset' looking Garfield. Again I asked her "What made you pick that Garfield?" She said they [the books] are not always very interesting and that she likes fantasy books more. Without this additional information, her responses could have been interpreted as a global, negative attitude towards reading in school. Instead, the additional insights into her survey responses told me that her attitude towards reading at school was specific to her interests and the types of books that were available to her in the classroom. Equipped with this type of information about students, a teacher can then make choices about the books available to students, thus hopefully increasing interest, motivation, and ultimately engagement with reading.

The limitations of using the survey data to draw any substantial conclusions were evident. The ERAS has exciting possibilities for gaining knowledge about differences in attitudes towards reading in school versus reading outside of school and for observing changes in attitudes over time; however, its potential was not fully realized in this study. The abbreviated timeframe (4-weeks) between completion of the surveys may have been

an issue. Also, as evidenced by the brief exploration into two of Student 6's questions, without more insight into how and why students were answering the questions it is difficult to draw any sounds conclusions from the numbers alone. This data could be used as a launching pad for further investigation into possible areas of concern, areas to continue nurturing, and to inform instructional strategies.

In summary, the findings of this action research project support the idea of using personalized authentic reading experiences to enhance oral reading fluency. Through an intervention centered on the reading of personalized postcards, students showed gains in automaticity, accuracy, and prosody – all the elements of reading fluently. Table 3 presents a snapshot of the overall average fluency scores for each of the pre- and post-intervention passages.

Table 3

Mean Overall Pre- and Post-Intervention Fluency Scores by Passage

| Passage Title | F&P Level | Pre-Intervention | | | |
		Automaticity (WPM)	Accuracy	Prosody[a]	Comprehension[b]
A Trip	E	33.5	89%	3.5	5.5
People at Work	E	39.9	90%	5	4
Title	F&P Level	Post-Intervention			
		Automaticity (WPM)	Accuracy	Prosody[a]	Comprehension[b]
A Trip	E	53.6	95%	6.2	----
Fox & Mouse	F	46.2	93%	5.5	5
Lost & Found	F	70.1	98%	8.3	6

Note. F&P = Fountas & Pinnell; WPM = words per minute.
[a]Scores are out of 12 possible using the *Multi-Dimensional Fluency Scoring Guide*. [b]Scores are out of 6 points possible. Assessments with 5 points possible were converted to a 6-point scale. Comprehension questions for "A Trip" were not re-assessed during the post-intervention assessments.

Although the survey results measuring the students' attitudes around reading are somewhat difficult to interpret, observations of students throughout the intervention led me to believe that there were some positive gains in self-efficacy and confidence. I noticed a shift in the volume level of the previously quiet readers when reading aloud, an eagerness to read first where that had previously been absent, and a new engagement with reading outside of our group meetings with students requesting to read for me. This project has sparked in me a curiosity about the other elements that may have been at play during the intervention – how they may have impacted the findings and how they can be applied to instruction both with and without personalized reading materials. Recommendations for incorporating personalized authentic experiences into the classroom and suggestions for additional applications of this research are discussed in the section below.

Action Plan

The purpose of this action research project was to increase first grade students' oral reading fluency in a way that was meaningful and fun. It was hoped that if that goal was achieved, students who had poor attitudes about reading and who viewed themselves negatively as readers would begin experiencing shifts in a more positive direction. As outlined above, the introduction of personalized authentic reading experiences, in the form of age-appropriate and entertaining postcards, appeared to be successful at increasing fluency and engaging the students. With many competing demands on a teacher, the worthiness of an intervention needs to be considered in light of limited resources and time. I believe an intervention like the one described in this action research

has the potential to increase fluency and benefit students in ways that extend beyond building fluency.

First, I will address some of the practical logistics associated with this type of intervention. There is the question of how much time is required to create personalized authentic reading materials that are relevant and interesting to a specific group of students. There is no getting around the fact that it does take time. However, once a repository of templates has been created, it would not be very time intensive to make minor edits. Postcards could also be used intermittently, decreasing the need for a large volume; in general, they should not be used so frequently that they lose their specialness. The postcards were purchased as a set of 100 for $12.16, so the cost was relatively low. Using another medium, such as handmade note cards, could reduce this cost significantly. One idea is to dedicate a short time in class for the students to design blank note cards (using classroom art materials) to later be used by the teacher. Regarding space and time for the intervention, this could occur during typical guided reading time (as it did with this action research project).

In addition to being excited about the personalization and uniqueness that the postcards brought to fluency instruction, as the project progressed I became curious about other, less tangible, interactions and exchanges that were happening in our reading group. For instance, how much did feeling a sense of connection and community with the other students in the group impact engagement and ultimately fluency growth? Although I had not considered directly studying this aspect of group work, I had been intentional about trying to build connections among the students. This included posing a question on each postcard that every student, including myself, would then have an opportunity to answer

(e.g., What is your favorite flavor of ice cream? Can you tell me just a little about one of your friends? What's your favorite song? What do you think makes someone a good friend?). It was my belief that encouraging sharing like this would allow the students to learn about each other and begin to develop connections and feelings. When sharing is supported and heard, an environment of safety and openness can be created. I believe the space we created likely enhanced students' willingness to be brave and take chances, such as reading aloud when confidence was low. The chance to experience successes in those moments then builds upon each other, making way for self-efficacy to develop and attitudes to change.

Reflecting back on our meetings, there was a "specialness" about the group that I suspect contributed to the overall success of the intervention. Perhaps it was the fact that we got to meet in the teachers' conference room and sit in chairs that twirled around. Maybe it was the anticipation of receiving the postcards, as the students eagerly checked their mailboxes to discover who wrote them that week. All of this prompted me to think about how I could, in general, make guided reading groups feel "special." Guided reading groups will likely continue to be formed based on common reading abilities. This makes sense and was the basis for the selection of students to participate in this action research. Even so, I imagine that sharing the same reading level as everyone else in your guided reading group or being called the "red group" does not feel special to a first grade student. When there is a feeling of "together we stand" the work that happens can feel and be more powerful. I will look for ways (that extend beyond the specific materials we are reading) to help groups feel special. For example, service projects unique to each group could help build a sense of community. Another idea would be to personalize the

physical space where each group meets (e.g., the jungle, space, a beach). Changes that may only require the addition of a few inexpensive props could make a group feel unique, special, and more cohesive. Future action research could focus on exploring, implementing, and analyzing simple and creative ways to build community within classroom reading groups.

The use of a survey to assess and monitor attitudes around reading proved to be perhaps more confusing than clarifying in this action research; however, looking at the results did serve as reminder for how important it is to really know my students. Knowing a student's reading attitudes and beliefs can help inform instructional strategies and targeted interventions. Understanding differences in how a student views reading at school versus reading at home is an area I find particularly interesting. If there is a distinct separation between the two, what broader impacts can this have on future engagement with reading either in or outside of school? Without active exploration into students' beliefs and attitudes, we would miss valuable intervention opportunities with students that have strong negative attitudes about reading; these could be both high achieving students and students struggling to reach grade-level benchmarks in reading. In the future, I plan to periodically assess students' attitudes, beliefs, and interests with the intention of identifying where interventions might be beneficial. For example, this could involve simply adding new texts to the classroom library or developing and evaluating a more involved plan to help students make a more meaningful and authentic home-school reading connection.

Finally, there is my favorite moment of the entire project yet to share. The moment I will carry with me as I do my part to foster kind, thoughtful, and fluent readers.

It was our sixth meeting and each student was taking turns individually reading a postcard of his/her choosing. After each student finished, I gave my Two Stars and a Wish for that student – two compliments and something that could use some extra attention. This was not a time for group sharing. It was Student 6's turn to read. Although it would not be apparent to her peers, I knew her confidence with reading was pretty low. Earlier in the school year her parents had shared at conferences that she feels bad about her reading and that she has cried at home about it. When she finished her postcard I commented, "I noticed you were reading with expression." Without hesitation and with such authentic enthusiasm, another student said, "I noticed that too!" I could instantly feel them both light up inside. In that moment, both students received so much in the giving and receiving of that exchange. As an educator, it is exciting to consider all the many factors that play a role in a student's interest and engagement in reading. This action research project sheds further light on some of those key factors and has the potential to inform classroom instruction and future action research. Both inquiry and instruction in this area can begin from an understanding that the use of personalized authentic reading experiences, combined with assessment of students' beliefs and attitudes, enveloped in a supportive, special community environment have the promise of creating more skilled, engaged, happy, life-long readers.

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Appendix

Example Postcards

Cars
Storyboards by Joe Ranft
© Disney Enterprises Inc./Pixar Animation Studios

FIRST-CLASS POSTAGE REQUIRED

1

Dear

Do you want to know what I love? I love ice cream! I love it so much. I wish I could eat it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I would melt it and drink it instead of water (or oil). My favorite flavor is pistachio. Yum, yum, yummy! There was this one time I had it and it was so gross! But mostly I love it. What is your favorite flavor of ice cream?

Your ice cream loving friend,
Mater

Toy Story
Concept art by Nilo Rodis
© Disney Enterprises Inc./Pixar Animation Studios

FIRST-CLASS POSTAGE REQUIRED

2

Dear

Yesterday Andy had the TV on and he was watching a super cool movie! It had things called stormtroopers and they had awesome helmets. They were almost as cool as mine. There was also a scary guy with a mask. Do you know the name of that movie? I love it!

To Infinity and Beyond,
Buzz

Finding Nemo
Film image
© Disney Enterprises Inc./Pixar Animation Studios

FIRST-CLASS POSTAGE REQUIRED

6

Dear

I think it's so neat that you are in first grade. I have so much fun going to school! Well, it is a little different for me because I'm a fish and that means I go to school under water. Oh, and also I have to worry about sharks. S·C·A·R·Y! What is one of your favorite things about being in first grade?

Bye-bye,
Nemo

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