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SOUND TO SYMBOL: THE ROLE OF PHONICS IN EARLY LANGUAGE AND LITERACY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effectiveness of the Little Wandle phonics program in improving the early literacy skills of Year 1 learners at Citizens School Dubai, with particular attention to English as an Additional Language (EAL) students. Conducted as part of an evidence-based evaluation initiative, the research aimed to assess learners' literacy levels before and after program implementation, identify instructional resources, strategies, and challenges experienced by mentors, and develop an enhanced utilization plan for potential adoption in selected schools in the Philippines. A mixed-methods approach was employed, involving pre-test and post-test assessments of 86 learners and survey responses from 7 mentors. Quantitative findings revealed significant improvements in phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, and comprehension after four months of structured phonics instruction, supported by statistical analysis indicating a meaningful effect size. Qualitative findings highlighted key instructional strategies such as small group interventions and multi-sensory approaches, alongside challenges in differentiation, engagement, and resource allocation. Based on these findings, a comprehensive action plan was developed, addressing training, time allocation, and supervisory support. The study underscores the value of systematic phonics instruction and collaborative implementation in enhancing early literacy outcomes and informing scalable educational interventions.

Keywords: *Phonics Instruction, Little Wandle Program, Early Literacy, Phonemic Awareness, Decoding Skills, English as an Additional Language (EAL), Reading Development, Mixed-Methods Research, Program Evaluation, Elementary Education*

INTRODUCTION

Early literacy development is a critical foundation for academic success, as it enables learners to acquire essential reading skills that support learning across all subject areas. Among the core components of early literacy, phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, and comprehension play a vital role in helping children transition from emergent to proficient readers. However, many young learners, particularly those identified as English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners, experience difficulties in acquiring these foundational skills due to limited exposure to the English language and differences in linguistic background.

Systematic phonics instruction has been widely recognized as an effective approach to developing early reading skills. Programs that follow a structured and explicit sequence of teaching letter-sound relationships and blending strategies have been shown to improve learners' ability to decode unfamiliar words and build reading confidence. One such program is the Little Wandle Letters and Sounds Revised phonics program, which emphasizes daily, structured instruction and the progressive development of reading skills. Despite its growing adoption in various educational settings, there remains a need to evaluate its effectiveness in diverse learner populations, particularly in international school contexts with a high proportion of EAL learners.

In the context of Citizens School Dubai, a significant number of Year 1 learners were identified as being in the early stages of literacy development, with many requiring targeted support in phonics and reading. This situation highlighted the need for an evidence-based intervention that could address gaps in foundational literacy skills. The implementation of the Little Wandle phonics program provided an opportunity to systematically assess its impact on learners' reading development over a defined period. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the Little Wandle phonics program in improving the early literacy skills of Year 1 learners. Specifically, it sought to (1) analyze learners' literacy levels before and after the implementation of the program, (2) examine the resources, strategies, and implementation challenges experienced by mentors, and (3) develop an enhanced utilization plan for the pilot implementation of the program in selected schools in the Philippines. By integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, the study provided a comprehensive understanding of both learner outcomes and instructional practices.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the growing body of research on phonics instruction and early literacy development, particularly in multilingual and EAL contexts. Furthermore, the results aim to inform educational leaders, curriculum developers, and teachers in making data-driven decisions regarding the adoption and implementation of structured phonics programs. Ultimately, this research seeks to support the development of effective, scalable literacy interventions that can improve reading outcomes for young learners in diverse educational settings.

Research Objectives

This study evaluated the effectiveness of the Little Wandle Letters and Sounds Revised phonics program on the language literacy of Year 1 English as an Additional Language Learner (EAL) at Citizens School Dubai.

Specifically, this study sought to:

1. Analyze the learners' language literacy level before and after the use of Little Wandle resources.
2. Describe the various available resources, strategies and implementation challenges experienced by the mentors.
3. Propose an enhanced utilization plan for the pilot implementation of the Little Wandle phonics program in selected schools in the Philippines.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-evaluative research design using a mixed-methods explanatory sequential approach, grounded in Stufflebeam's Context-Input-Process-Product (CIPP) Evaluation Model. This approach was selected because it allows for a comprehensive, systematic assessment of the Little Wandle Phonics program and its impact on early literacy development of Year 1 learners at Citizens School Dubai.

The explanatory sequential design involved collecting and analyzing quantitative data first, followed by qualitative data to help explain the quantitative results. In this study, the pre-test and post-test scores of the 86 learners served as the quantitative data, while the teacher questionnaires provided the qualitative data to explain the observed improvements or challenges.

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at Citizens School Dubai, a progressive international school located in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The school offers an innovative, inquiry-based curriculum designed to support diverse learners, including a significant population of students identified as English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners.

Sampling Method

The study utilized Purposive Sampling, a non-probability sampling technique in which participants were selected based on specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives. The respondents consisted of 86 Year 1 learners and 7 mentors from Citizens School Dubai who were directly involved in the implementation of the Little Wandle

phonics program. This sampling method was appropriate as it allowed the researcher to focus on participants who had direct experience with the intervention being evaluated.

Demographics

The respondents of the study consisted of two groups: Year 1 learners and mentors from Citizens School Dubai located in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

A total of 86 Year 1 learners participated in the study. These learners were typically aged 5 to 6 years old and were in the early stages of literacy development. A significant proportion (72%) were identified as English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners, indicating that English was not their first language. This multilingual background is an important demographic factor, as it influences literacy acquisition and responsiveness to phonics instruction.

The study also involved 7 mentors who were responsible for delivering the Little Wandle phonics program. These mentors were actively teaching Year 1 learners and had direct experience implementing phonics instruction in both whole-class and small-group settings. Their level of confidence in teaching phonics and their instructional practices were considered as part of the study.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were gathered using two primary instruments: questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs).

Instruments Used

Questionnaire: The study utilized a researcher-developed questionnaire to gather data from mentors regarding the implementation of the Little Wandle phonics program. The questionnaire was designed to collect information on the available instructional resources, teaching strategies, and implementation challenges experienced by mentors.

The instrument consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended items to allow for a comprehensive understanding of mentor experiences. The closed-ended items included Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions that measured the mentors' level of confidence in teaching phonics, frequency of strategy use, and availability of instructional resources. These items provided quantitative data that described general trends in phonics instruction.

The open-ended items allowed mentors to elaborate on their experiences, particularly in relation to challenges encountered during implementation, strategies used to support struggling learners, and suggestions for improvement. These responses were essential in generating qualitative themes, which were used to provide deeper insights into the implementation process.

The questionnaire was divided into three main parts:

1. Resources – items that identified the availability and adequacy of phonics materials such as decodable readers, flashcards, sound mats, and other instructional tools;
2. Instructional Strategies – items that examined the teaching approaches used by mentors, including modeling, small-group instruction, and multi-sensory activities;
3. Implementation Challenges – items that explored difficulties encountered, such as differentiation, learner engagement, time constraints, and need for professional development.

Prior to administration, the questionnaire was reviewed to ensure clarity and alignment with the objectives of the study. It was then administered to seven mentors who were directly involved in the implementation of the phonics program. The responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data followed a mixed-methods approach to capture both the numerical changes in literacy performance and the qualitative insights from the teachers. The quantitative data from the pre-test and post-test scores of the 86 learners were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Mean scores, frequencies, and percentages were computed to provide a clear picture of the learners' literacy progress before and after the intervention. The mean gain for each learner was calculated by subtracting the pre-test score from the post-test score.

To determine whether the observed improvements were statistically significant, a paired-samples t-test was used. This test is appropriate for dependent samples because it compares the scores of the same group of learners before and after the intervention. The paired-samples t-test was applied to each of the four literacy components: phonemic awareness, decoding, reading fluency, and comprehension. The significance level was set at $\alpha = .05$. Results with p-values less than .05 will be considered statistically significant, indicating that the improvements were likely due to the Little Wandle program rather than chance.

Qualitative data from teacher questionnaires were analyzed using thematic analysis. Questionnaires used was adapted from previous studies and were validated.

Scope and Limitations

This study evaluated the effectiveness of the Little Wandle Letters and Sounds Revised phonics program over a four-month period (January–April 2025) at Citizens School Dubai in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. It involved 86 Year 1 learners, mostly English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, and examined their development in phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, and comprehension.

The study was limited to one school, one grade level, and one phonics program, which restricts generalizability. It focused mainly on EAL learners and covered only short-term outcomes, without comparing other phonics approaches or controlling all external factors influencing literacy development.

RESULTS

This study evaluated the effectiveness of the Little Wandle Letters and Sounds Revised phonics program on the language literacy of Year 1 English as an Additional Language Learner (EAL) at Citizens School Dubai.

Table 1
Pre-Test Scores of Year 1 Learners (n=86)

Pre-Test Scores of Year 1 Learners			
Components	**Mean Score**	**Maximum Score**	**Interpretation**
Phonemic Awareness	3.99	25	Low
Decoding	0.12	3	Low
Fluency	0.00	5	Low
Comprehension	0.00	5	Low

Phonemic Awareness mean is 3.99 which means Low
Decoding mean is 0.12 which isLow
Fluency mean is 0.00 which is Low
Comprehension mean is 0.00 which is Low

Table 2
Students Challenges in Phonics

Students Challenges in Phonics		
Challenges	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Blending sounds into words	4	57.1%
Recognizing phonemes	2	28.6%
Understanding spelling patterns	1	14.3%
Segmenting words into sounds	0	0%
Retaining and applying phonics knowledge	0	0%

Blending sounds into words is the challenge for 4 mentors
Recognizing phonemes is the challenge for 2 mentors
Understanding spelling patterns is a challenge for 1 mentor
Segmenting words into sounds 0
Retaining and applying phonics knowledge 0

Table 3
Teacher's Demographic Profile

Teacher's Demographic Profile		
Teacher	**Years of Experience**	**Age Group Taught**
T1	Less than 1 year	Year 1
T3	4 - 6 years	Year 2
T3	4 - 6 years	Early Years
T4	4 - 6 years	Mixed Year Group
T5	7 - 9 years	Year 2
T6	10+ years	Year 3 and above
T6	10+ years	Year 1

T1 has Less than 1 year of teaching experience teaching Year 1
T3 has 4 - 6 years of experience in teaching Year 2
T3 4 - 6 years of experience in teaching Early Years
T4 4 - 6 years of experience in teaching Mixed Year Group
T5 7 - 9 years of teaching experience teaching Year 2
T6 10+ years of teaching experience teaching Year 3 and above
T6 10+ years of teaching experience teaching Year 1

Table 4
Phonics Programs Used by Teachers

Phonics Programs Used by Teachers	
Teacher	**Phonics Program**
T1	Little Wandle Letters and Sounds Revised
T3	Little Wandle Letters and Sounds Revised
T3	Letters and Sounds
T4	Letters and Sounds
T5	Letters and Sounds
T6	Jolly Phonics
T6	Others

Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 Used Little Wandle Letters and Sounds Revised
Teachers 3,4 and 5 used Letters and Sound
Teachers 6 used Jolly Phonics and Others

Table 5
Teacher's Confidence Level

Teacher's Confidence Level	
Teacher	**Confidence Level**
T1	Confident
T3	Confident
T3	Confident
T4	Confident
T5	Very Confident
T6	Very Confident
T6	Confident

Teachers 1,2,3,4,and 6 are confident in teaching Phonics
Teachers 5 and 6 are very confident in teaching Phonics

Table 6
Additional Support or Training Needed

Strategies Used to Support Struggling Learners		
Strategies	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
More professional development and training	3	43%
Smaller group sizes for targeted instruction	3	43%
Additional phonics teaching resources	1	14%
Integration of phonics with other literacy strategies	0	0%
Other	0	0%

Three mentors need more professional development training.
Three mentors need smaller group sizes for targeted instruction.
One mentor needs integration of phonics with other literacy strategies.

Table 7
Frequency of Phonics Instruction

Frequency of Phonics Instruction		
Frequency	**Number of Teachers Responded**	**Percentage**
Daily	3	43%
3 - 4 times per week	3	43%
1 -2 times per week	1	14%
Occasionally	0	0%
Rarely	0	0%

Three mentors uses phonics 3 daily.
Three mentors uses phonics 3 times per week.
One mentor use phonics once to 2 times per week.

Table 8
Strategies Used to Support Struggling Learners

Strategies Used to Support Struggling Learners		
Strategies	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Small group interventions	6	86%
Multi-sensory activities	2	29%
Repetition and reinforcement	2	29%
One-on-one tutoring	1	14%
Other	0	0%

Small group interventions were used by 6 mentors.
Multi-sensory activities were used by 2 mentors.
Repetition and reinforcement was used by 2 mentors.
One-on-one tutoring was used by 1 mentor.
Other 0

Table 9
Thematic Analysis of Effective Strategies During Little Wandle Implementation

Thematic Analysis of Effective Strategies During Little Wandle Implementation		
Theme	**Representative Quotes**	**Number of Teachers Responded**
Modeling and Gradual Release	"modelling method, I do, we do, you do"	2
Small Group Instruction	"Small group in teaching phonics"	2
Repetition	"Repetition of sounds for better retention"	1
Games and Song	"Using games and singing sound related songs"	2

Multi-sensory Approach	"small group sessions, multi-sensory phonics approach"	2
Comprehensive Approach	"Effective phonics teaching combines multisensory techniques, structured instruction, blending and segmenting, interactive games, decodable books, and technology"	1

Table 10
Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Components	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Mean Gain
Phonemic Awareness	4.04	9.76	+5.72
Decoding	0.12	1. 7	+1.58
Fluency	0.0	0.79	+0.79
Comprehension	0.0	0.64	+0.64
Total Score	**4.16**	**12.89**	**+8.73**

Phonemic Awareness gain is +5.72
Decoding gain is +1.58
Fluency gain is +0.79
Comprehension gain is +0.64
Total Score gain is +8.73

Table 11
Paired-Samples T-Test Results

Paired-Samples T-Test Results

Comparison	Mean Difference	t-value	df	p	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
Pre-Test vs. Post Test	-8.1512	-6.7572	85	<.0001	-0.7286

Mean difference for pre test and post test is -8.1512
T Value is -6.7573
Effect size is -0.7286

Table 12
Teacher Perception of Little Wandle Effectiveness

Teacher Perception of Little Wandle Effectiveness		
Rating	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Very Effective	0	0%
Effective	6	86%
Neutral	1	14%
Somewhat Effective	0	0%
Ineffective	0	0%

Six mentors said Identified Little Wandle as Effective
One mentor identified Little Wandle as Neutral

Table 13
Teacher Perception of Sound-Symbol Correspondence

Teacher Perception of Sound-Symbol Correspondence		
Rating	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Extremely Well	0	0%
Very Well	6	86%
Moderately Well	1	14%
Slightly Well	0	0%
Not Well at All	0	0%

Six mentors rated extremely well as their perception to Sound to Symbol Correspondence.
Six mentors rated extremely well as their perception to Sound to Symbol Correspondence.

Table 14
Teacher Perception of Phonics Support for EAL Learners

Teacher Perception of Phonics Support for EAL Learners		
Rating	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Extremely Well	2	29%

Very Well	4	57%
Moderately Well	1	14%
Slightly Well	0	0%
Not Well at All	0	0%

Extremely Well 2 mentors
Very Well 4 mentors
Moderately Well 1 mentor
Slightly Well none
Not Well at All none

Table 15
Thematic Analysis of Teacher Recommendations for Improvement

Thematic Analysis of Teacher Recommendations for Improvement

Theme	Representative Quotes
Daily Instruction	"Use it daily"
Training	"Training"
	"proper training according to the scheme implemented in school"
Technology Integration	"Use apps, interactive whiteboards, and online phonics games to make learning fun."
	“Phonics instruction can be improved by making it systematic and explicit, incorporating multisensory activities, using engaging games and technology…”
Multi-sensory and Engaging Activities	"Using games and singing sound related songs"
	"Phonics instruction can be improved by making it systematic and explicit, incorporating multisensory activities, using engaging games and technology..."
Home-School Connection	"consistent reinforcement at home and school"
	"Phonics instruction can be improved by making it systematic and explicit, …and ensuring consistent reinforcement at home and school."
Resources	"availability of resources needed in class"
	"Phonics instruction can be improved by making it systematic and explicit, … providing real reading practice with decodable books…"

Table 16
Causal Analysis of Implementation Barriers

Causal Analysis of Implementation Barriers		
Barrier	**Evidence from Data**	**Root Cause**
Differentiating instruction for varied learning needs	57% of teachers identified this as their biggest challenge	Lack of Training – Teachers lack specific strategies for differentiation
Keeping learners engaged	29% of teachers identified this as their biggest challenge; only 29% used multi-sensory activities	Lack of Training – Teachers lack training in active learning strategies
Limited use of evidence-based strategies	Only 29% of teachers used multi-sensory activities or repetition	Lack of Training – Teachers not exposed to engaging instructional techniques
Inconsistent frequency of instruction	One teacher taught only 1-2 times per week; 43% taught 3-4 times per week (below daily recommendation)	Lack of Supervisory Support – Phonics time not protected in daily schedule
Resource Gaps	Requests for "additional phonics teaching resources" and "decodable books"	Lack of Supervisory Support – Inadequate resource allocation and distribution
Variation in implementation	Different programs used across classrooms; varying instructional frequency	Lack of Supervisory Support – No standardization of expectations

Table 17
Action Plan for Pilot Implementation of Little Wandle Phonics Program in Selected Philippine Schools

Phase	Activity	Responsible Party
I. Preparation (Month 1-2)	Select 3 pilot schools (urban, rural, high-need) based on selection criteria	Division Superintendent, Curriculum Supervisor

	Conduct baseline assessment of learner literacy skills	Teachers, School Head
	Procure instructional materials (decodable readers, phonics cards, sound mats)	School Head, Division Administrator
II. Capacity Building (Month 3)	Conduct teacher training on Little Wandle (differentiation, multi-sensory activities, active learning)	Division Supervisor, Phonics Lead
	Orient school heads on protecting daily 30-minute phonics block	Division Supervisor
	Train division supervisors on monitoring and evaluation tool	External Technical Advisor
III. Pilot Implementation (Month 4-12)	Deliver daily 30-minute phonics instruction	Teachers
	Conduct small group interventions for struggling learners	Teachers
	Use multi-sensory activities, games, and songs	Teachers
	Conduct coaching visits and quarterly reviews	Phonics Lead Teacher, School Head
IV. Evaluation (Month 13)	Administer post-test assessments	Teachers
	Analyze pre-test/post-test comparison using paired t-test	Division Supervisor
	Conduct stakeholder interviews and teacher satisfaction survey	Researcher
V. Scale-Up Planning (Month 14)	Present pilot results to Division Office	Division Superintendent
	Develop division-wide implementation plan	Curriculum Supervisor
	Revise action plan based on pilot learnings	All stakeholders

Note: Each activity in this action plan directly addresses specific findings from Chapter IV: lack of training (57% struggled with differentiation; 43% requested training), lack of time (inconsistent instructional frequency), and lack of supervisory support (variation in implementation; resource gaps). The plan is grounded in the CIPP Evaluation Model and the Active View of Reading from Chapter I.

Table 18
Scale-Up Roadmap for Division-Wide Adoption

Phase	Timeline	Key Activities	Success Criteria
Pilot Phase	Year 1	Implementation in 3 schools, evaluation, refinement	All three schools show significant literacy gains ($p < .05$)

Expansion Phase	Year 2	Expand to 3-5 additional schools; develop division-level support system	Positive outcomes sustained in pilot schools; new schools show progress within 6 months
Division-Wide Adoption	Year 3	Scale to all schools in the division; integrate into division literacy program	All schools have trained teachers; literacy outcomes improve division-wide
Regional Scaling	Year 4 - 5	Share model with other divisions; advocate for policy inclusion	At least 2 other divisions adopt the model

Note: Systematic expansion to the next phase will be based on the success of the previous phase, as measured by the success criteria outlined in this table. Expansion will only proceed when the success criteria of the current phase are met.

Table 19
Risk Management Strategies

Risk	Mitigation Strategy	Responsible Party
Teacher turnover during pilot	Train at least 2 teachers per school; document all training materials	School Head
Resource delays or shortages	Procure materials before pilot begins; establish central resource pool	Division Administrator
Low learner attendance	Coordinate with parents; integrate phonics with existing school programs	School Head, Teachers
Limited division support	Engage Division Office early; present pilot proposal with clear success indicators	Division Superintendent
Cultural/linguistic mismatch	Develop supplementary culturally relevant materials; adapt examples to local context	Teachers, Curriculum Supervisor
Inconsistent instructional frequency	School head to protect daily 30-minute phonics block; monitor through regular observations	School Head

Note: These risk management strategies directly address the three barriers identified in the causal analysis: lack of training (teacher turnover), lack of time (inconsistent instructional frequency), and lack of supervisory support (resource delays, limited division support, cultural mismatch).

DISCUSSION

Pre-Test Scores of Year 1 Learners (n=86)

Studies have consistently shown that learners who enter school with weak phonemic awareness often struggle with decoding and require explicit instruction to develop this foundational skill (Meacham, 2023; Milankov et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2023). The pre-test results confirm that the learners in this study fit this profile, making them ideal candidates for systematic phonics intervention.

Students Challenges in Phonics

The finding that blending sounds into words is the most challenging aspect is consistent with the pre-test results, which showed very low decoding scores (0.12 out of 3). Blending is essential for reading unfamiliar words, and the difficulty students experience with this skill explains why their decoding scores were so low. Without the ability to blend, learners cannot progress to fluent reading.

The fact that recognizing phonemes was also identified as a challenge by some teachers indicates that for a subset of learners, the difficulty begins even earlier. These learners may need additional support in basic phoneme recognition before they can successfully blend sounds into words.

The difficulty with blending aligns with the Dual Route Theory of Reading (Coltheart, 1993), which emphasizes the phonological route as essential for decoding unfamiliar words. The challenge with blending suggests that this phonological pathway was still developing for many learners. Research has shown that explicit instruction in blending, combined with ample practice, strengthens this pathway over time (Ehri, 2020).

Teacher's Demographic Profile

Most teachers in the sample were experienced in phonics instruction, with five out of seven (71%) having four or more years of experience, while only one teacher was a novice. The group also represented a range of teaching stages, including Early Years through to Year 3 and mixed year groups, with the largest representation in Year 1 and Year 2. This spread is significant, as phonics instruction must be adapted to meet the developmental needs of learners at different stages.

The predominance of experienced teachers provides a strong foundation for implementing the Little Wandle program, as they bring established pedagogical skills and classroom management expertise. However, research indicates that teacher effectiveness is shaped not only by experience but also by the quality of support systems available, including ongoing professional development and access to instructional resources (Dursun & Aykan, 2025). Furthermore, effective phonics training is most impactful when it includes modeling, opportunities for practice with feedback, and sustained support over time (Wyse & Bradbury, 2023; Toole, 2023). The presence of a

less experienced teacher in the sample reinforces the need for differentiated professional development to ensure consistent and effective phonics instruction across all classrooms.

Phonics Programs Used by Teachers

Prior to the study, phonics instruction was not standardized across classrooms, with only two out of seven teachers using Little Wandle, while others relied on programs such as Letters and Sounds, Jolly Phonics, or unspecified approaches. This inconsistency suggests that Year 1 learners experienced varied phonics instruction, potentially affecting continuity in skill development. Research highlights that such lack of coordination in instructional approaches can lead to fragmented literacy experiences (Barrios & Ríos, 2025), which is particularly challenging for EAL learners who require structured and sequential phonics instruction to support cumulative language development (Kilag et al., 2024).

Teacher's Confidence Level

As shown in Table 5, all seven teachers reported being either confident or very confident. Specifically, five teachers (71%) described themselves as "confident," while two teachers (29%) described themselves as "very confident." None of the teachers selected "neutral," "slightly unsure," or "not confident at all."

When examining the responses by years of experience, a pattern emerges. The two teachers who reported being "very confident" were T5 (7-9 years of experience) and T6 (10+ years of experience). Both had significant classroom experience. The teacher with less than one year of experience (T1)

Additional Support or Training Needed

The request for more professional development and training (43%) indicates that a significant portion of teachers feel they need additional knowledge or skills to implement phonics instruction effectively. This is consistent with the challenges reported in the Context section, where 57% of teachers identified differentiation as their biggest difficulty. Teachers may need training specifically focused on differentiation strategies for EAL learners, multi-sensory instructional techniques, or using assessment data to guide instruction.

Frequency of Phonics Instruction

As shown in Table 7, three teachers (43%) taught phonics daily, three teachers (43%) taught phonics 3-4 times per week, and one teacher (14%) taught phonics only 1-2 times per week. No teachers selected "occasionally" or "rarely."

The data shows that the majority of teachers (86%) taught phonics at least 3-4 times per week, with three of them teaching daily. This level of frequency aligns with the Little Wandle program's recommendation for daily phonics instruction to ensure consistent skill

development and retention. However, one teacher taught only 1-2 times per week, which is below the recommended frequency.

Strategies Used to Support Struggling Learners

As shown in Table 8, the most commonly used strategy during the Little Wandle implementation was small group interventions, reported by six out of seven teachers (86%). Multi-sensory activities and repetition and reinforcement were each used by two teachers (29%). One teacher (14%) reported using one-on-one tutoring. No teachers selected "other" or wrote in additional strategies.

Thematic Analysis of Effective Strategies During Little Wandle Implementation

Table 9 presents the themes that emerged from the teachers' responses, along with representative quotes and the number of teachers who mentioned each theme.

Several themes emerged from the teachers' responses during the Little Wandle implementation. The most frequently mentioned themes were modeling and gradual release, mentioned by two teachers, small group instruction, mentioned by two teachers, games and songs, mentioned by two teachers, and multi-sensory approaches, also mentioned by two teachers. Repetition was mentioned by one teacher, and one teacher provided a comprehensive list of strategies that combined multiple approaches. No teachers mentioned strategies that fell outside these themes.

The teachers' emphasis on modeling and gradual release aligns with Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, where learners receive support to achieve skills they cannot yet perform independently. Research has shown that the gradual release of responsibility model is effective for developing decoding skills, as it provides learners with the scaffolding they need before expecting independent performance (Dilgard et al., 2022). The use of small group instruction during the Little Wandle implementation is supported by research showing that targeted, small-group interventions are more effective than whole-class instruction for struggling readers, as they allow for increased opportunities for response and feedback (Oxley & De Cat, 2019).

Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test Scores

As shown in Table 10, the results show improvement across all four literacy components. The largest gain was observed in phonemic awareness (+5.72 points), followed by decoding (+1.58 points). Smaller gains were observed in fluency (+0.79) and comprehension (+0.64). The total mean score increased from 4.16 to 12.89, an overall gain of 8.73 points.

The pattern of results shows that the largest improvement occurred in phonemic awareness, which is a foundational skill that directly supports reading development. The gain of 5.72 points in phonemic awareness indicates that learners substantially improved their ability to recognize letter sounds. The gain of 1.58 points in decoding suggests that

learners developed some ability to blend sounds into words, a skill that was almost entirely absent at the start of the study (pre-test mean of 0.12).

The smaller gains in fluency (+0.79) and comprehension (+0.64) are expected, as these higher-level skills typically develop after learners have mastered basic decoding skills. Learners need extensive practice reading connected text before fluency and comprehension can develop. The post-test means for fluency (0.79 out of 5) and comprehension (0.64 out of 5) indicate that while some learners began to develop these skills, most are still in the early stages of fluency and comprehension development.

Paired-Samples T-Test Results

As shown in Table 11, the paired-samples t-test revealed a mean difference of -8.1512 points between pre-test and post-test scores. The t-value was -6.7572 with 85 degrees of freedom. The p-value was less than .0001, and the effect size (Cohen's d) was -0.7286.

The p-value of less than .0001 is significantly below the significance level of $\alpha = .05$. This means that the probability of the observed improvement occurring by chance is less than 0.01%. In other words, there is a 99.99% confidence that the improvement was real and not due to random variation. The negative t-value is expected because the calculation subtracted post-test scores from pre-test scores (pre-test minus post-test). Since post-test scores were higher, the difference is negative. The absolute value of the t-statistic (6.7572) is what matters for interpretation.

The effect size of -0.7286 indicates a medium to large practical impact of the program on learners' literacy skills. According to Cohen's conventions, an effect size of 0.2 is considered small, 0.5 is medium, and 0.8 is large. The obtained effect size of 0.7286 falls between medium and large, indicating that the program had a substantial practical impact beyond what would be expected from normal maturation or incidental learning.

Teacher Perception of Little Wandle Effectiveness

As shown in Table 12, six teachers (86%) rated the program as "effective," while one teacher (14%) rated it as "neutral." No teachers rated it as "very effective," "somewhat ineffective," or "ineffective."

The majority of teachers (86%) perceived Little Wandle as effective in developing students' reading fluency. This positive perception aligns with the quantitative results, which showed significant improvements in decoding and phonemic awareness. However, the absence of "very effective" ratings and the presence of one neutral response suggest that while teachers found the program effective, they did not find it exceptional. This may indicate that there is room for improvement or that teachers have high expectations for what constitutes "very effective."

Teacher Perception of Sound-Symbol Correspondence

As shown in Table 13, six teachers (86%) reported that their students grasp sound-symbol correspondence "very well," while one teacher (14%) reported "moderately well." No teachers selected "extremely well," "slightly well," or "not well at all."

The majority of teachers (86%) perceived that their students grasp sound-symbol correspondence very well. This positive perception is consistent with the quantitative results, which showed significant gains in phonemic awareness (from 4.04 to 9.76).

The fact that no teacher selected "extremely well" may indicate that while students have made substantial progress, there is still room for improvement before they reach mastery. The one teacher who rated it as "moderately well" may have students who are still struggling with this foundational skill.

Teacher Perception of Phonics Support for EAL Learners

As shown in Table 14, two teachers (29%) rated phonics instruction as supporting EAL learners "extremely well," four teachers (57%) rated it as "very well," and one teacher (14%) rated it as "moderately well." No teachers selected "slightly well" or "not well at all."

The majority of teachers (86%) rated phonics instruction as supporting EAL learners either "extremely well" or "very well." This positive perception is consistent with the quantitative results, which showed significant improvements for the overall group of 86 learners, 72% of whom were EAL students.

Thematic Analysis of Teacher Recommendations for Improvement

As shown in Table 15, several themes emerged from the teachers' recommendations: daily instruction, training, technology integration, multi sensory and engaging activities, home-school connection, and resources.

Several themes emerged from the teachers' recommendations. The emphasis on training indicates that teachers want professional development that is specific to Little Wandle, not generic phonics training. The call for multi sensory and engaging activities directly addresses the engagement challenge identified earlier. The recommendation for daily instruction aligns with the Little Wandle program's requirement for daily phonics lessons. The call for technology integration reflects a desire to make learning more interactive. The recommendation for home-school connection highlights the importance of parental involvement. The request for resources, including decodable books, points to an institutional gap in resource allocation.

Causal Analysis of Implementation Barriers

As shown in Table 16, the barriers to effective implementation are primarily rooted in lack of training and lack of supervisory support, rather than lack of teacher effort or ability.

The differentiation and engagement challenges both trace back to insufficient training, while the inconsistent frequency, resource gaps, and variation in implementation trace back to insufficient supervisory support.

The causal analysis reveals that the barriers to effective implementation are primarily rooted in lack of training and lack of supervisory support. The differentiation and engagement challenges both trace back to insufficient training. Teachers reported feeling confident in teaching phonics generally, but confidence did not translate into competence in differentiation or engagement strategies. This suggests that pre-service and in-service training programs have not adequately prepared teachers to meet the diverse needs of EAL learners or to make instruction interactive and enjoyable.

The lack of supervisory support is evident in the inconsistent frequency of instruction, variation in implementation across classrooms, and resource gaps. School leaders have not established clear expectations for how often phonics should be taught, nor have they protected time in the daily schedule

Action Plan for Pilot Implementation of Little Wandle Phonics Program in Selected Philippine Schools

The development of this action plan followed the IPO (Input-Process-Output) model to ensure constructive alignment between the identified challenges, the management theory, and the proposed solutions. This discussion explains how the input from the study's findings informed the process of designing the action plan, which resulted in the output presented in Table 17.

The input for this action plan is drawn from the three objectives of the study. First, the pre-test results showed that learners had very low baseline literacy skills, with mean scores of 4.04 for phonemic awareness (out of 25), 0.12 for decoding (out of 3), and 0.00 for both fluency and comprehension (out of 5). This indicates the need for early intervention and baseline assessment before implementation. Second, the causal analysis identified three root causes of implementation barriers: lack of training (57% of teachers struggled with differentiation; only 29% used multi-sensory activities), lack of time (one teacher taught only 1-2 times per week; 43% taught 3-4 times per week), and lack of supervisory support (variation in implementation across classrooms; resource gaps). Teachers also requested more professional development (43%), smaller group sizes (43%), and additional resources (14%). Third, the theoretical framework grounded in the CIPP Evaluation Model (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007) and the Active View of Reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2021) emphasizes that program effectiveness depends on contextual factors beyond decoding instruction, including teacher training, time allocation, and supervisory support.

Based on these inputs, the action plan was designed with five phases: preparation, capacity building, pilot implementation, evaluation, and scale-up planning. To address lack of training (57% of teachers struggled with differentiation), the plan includes teacher training, coaching visits, and quarterly reviews. To address lack of time (one teacher taught only 1-2 times per week), the plan requires school heads to protect a daily 30-minute phonics block. To address lack of supervisory support (variation in implementation across classrooms), the plan includes a monitoring and evaluation framework with regular

classroom observations. Each activity in the plan directly responds to a specific finding from Chapter IV.

The output is a structured action plan for piloting the Little Wandle program in three selected schools in the Philippines. The plan directly addresses the three barriers identified in the causal analysis and provides a clear scale-up roadmap for potential division-wide adoption based on pilot outcomes. Table 19 presents the action plan, followed by the scale-up roadmap in Table 20 and risk management strategies in Table 21.

Summary of Findings

A pre-test was administered to 86 Year 1 learners before the implementation of the Little Wandle phonics program. The pre-test results showed that all four literacy components (phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, and comprehension) fell within the Low category. The mean scores were 4.04 for phonemic awareness (out of 25), 0.12 for decoding (out of 3), and 0.00 for both fluency and comprehension (out of 5). These results confirmed that learners were in the very early stages of literacy development, with 72% of them identified as English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners.

After four months of daily Little Wandle phonics instruction, a post-test was administered to the same 86 learners. The results showed improvement across all four literacy components. The total mean score increased from 4.16 to 12.89, an overall gain of 8.73 points. The largest gains were observed in phonemic awareness (+5.72) and decoding (+1.58), which are foundational skills that directly support reading development. Smaller gains were observed in fluency (+0.79) and comprehension (+0.64).

A paired-samples t-test confirmed that the improvement was statistically significant ($t(85)= -6.76$, $p < .0001$), with a medium to large effect size (Cohen's $d = -0.73$). This means that the probability of the observed improvement occurring by chance is less than 0.01%, providing strong evidence that the Little Wandle program was effective.

The study gathered data from seven teachers through a questionnaire. All seven teachers reported being either confident (71%) or very confident (29%) in teaching phonics. The most commonly used strategy to support struggling learners was small group interventions (86%). Teachers identified effective strategies including modeling and gradual release ("I do, we do, you do"), small group instruction, games and songs, and multi-sensory approaches.

However, teachers also reported significant challenges. The most frequently reported challenge was differentiating instruction for varied learning needs (57%). The second most common challenge was keeping learners engaged (29%). Students' most challenging aspect of phonics was blending sounds into words (57%). Three teachers (43%) requested more professional development and training, three (43%) requested smaller group sizes for targeted instruction, and one (14%) requested additional phonics teaching resources.

The causal analysis identified three root causes of implementation barriers: lack of training (evident in differentiation and engagement challenges), lack of time (evidenced

by inconsistent instructional frequency, with one teacher teaching only 1-2 times per week), and lack of supervisory support (evidenced by resource gaps and variation in implementation across classrooms). The fact that teachers felt confident but still struggled with differentiation and engagement suggests that confidence alone does not guarantee effective instruction. Teachers may feel confident in their general ability to teach phonics while still lacking specific strategies for differentiation or engagement.

Conclusions

The Little Wandle phonics program proved to be highly effective in improving the early literacy skills of Year 1 learners, particularly in the foundational areas of phonemic awareness and decoding. The statistically significant improvement from pre-test to post-test, combined with a medium to large effect size, provides strong evidence that systematic synthetic phonics instruction successfully develops the skills necessary for reading acquisition. This finding is especially significant given that 72% of the learners were EAL students who faced additional challenges in learning to read in English. The structured, explicit nature of the program reduced the cognitive load for these learners and provided them with clear, reliable strategies for decoding unfamiliar words.

The smaller gains observed in fluency and comprehension are not unexpected, as these higher-level skills typically develop only after learners have achieved automaticity in decoding. According to the developmental progression of reading, learners must first master letter-sound relationships and blending before they can read smoothly with expression or focus on understanding meaning. The gains in fluency and comprehension, while modest, indicate that some learners are beginning to transition from decoding to fluent reading. More time and continued practice are needed for these skills to develop fully. The barriers to effective implementation are systemic, not individual. Teachers cannot differentiate instruction effectively if they have never been trained in differentiation strategies. They cannot make lessons engaging if they have not been exposed to active learning techniques such as games, songs, and multi-sensory activities. The variation in instructional frequency and resource gaps are not the fault of individual teachers but reflect systemic issues that school leaders must address. The causal analysis clearly shows that lack of training, lack of time, and lack of supervisory support were the root causes of the challenges teachers faced.

Teacher confidence alone is not sufficient for effective implementation. While all teachers reported being confident or very confident, this confidence did not translate into competence in differentiation or engagement. This finding highlights the importance of ongoing professional development that goes beyond initial training. Even confident teachers need continuous support, including coaching, mentoring, and collaborative planning, to refine their instructional practices and address specific challenges as they arise. Schools must invest in building not just confidence but also competence.

Recommendations

School leaders should adopt systematic phonics instruction as an institutional priority across all Grade 1 classrooms. The significant gains in phonemic awareness and decoding demonstrate that this approach works, and consistency across classrooms is

essential to ensure that all learners receive the same quality of instruction. Schools should protect a daily 30-minute phonics block in the schedule, as inconsistent instructional frequency (1-2 times per week) was found to limit program effectiveness. Without dedicated time for phonics, learners cannot develop the automaticity needed for fluent reading. School heads must ensure that phonics instruction is not sacrificed for other subjects or activities.

For the pilot implementation in Philippine schools, it is recommended that baseline assessments be administered to all participating learners before instruction begins to identify specific skill gaps. Teachers should use this data to group learners by proficiency level and provide targeted instruction. Progress monitoring should be conducted regularly using the Little Wandle assessment tools to track learner growth and identify those who need additional support. After four months of instruction, post-tests should be administered, and a paired-samples t-test should be conducted to determine if the improvements are statistically significant. The same assessment tools used in this study should be used to ensure comparability of results.

To address the lack of training, educational leaders should provide ongoing professional development that is specific to the Little Wandle program, not generic phonics training. Training should include demonstration and modeling of effective instructional strategies, practice with feedback from knowledgeable mentors, and sustained support over time. Focus areas should include differentiation strategies for EAL learners, multi-sensory activities, and active learning techniques to address engagement challenges. A coaching and mentoring system should be established, with phonics lead teachers providing classroom observations, feedback, and collaborative planning sessions.

To address the lack of time, school heads must protect a daily 30-minute phonics block in the school schedule. The study found that one teacher taught only 1-2 times per week, which is below the recommended frequency. School heads should ensure that phonics instruction is not sacrificed for other subjects or activities and should communicate the importance of daily phonics instruction to all teachers.

To address the lack of supervisory support, educational leaders should establish a monitoring system with regular classroom observations using a structured tool. Constructive feedback should be provided to teachers based on observations to help them improve their practice. Schools should also ensure equitable distribution of instructional resources, including decodable readers, phonics cards, sound mats, and letter tiles, before the program begins. An inventory system should be established to track materials and a replenishment process for consumable items. Where possible, smaller group sizes should be provided for targeted instruction to address the differentiation challenge that 57% of teachers identified as their biggest difficulty.

For the pilot implementation in Philippine schools, training should be conducted for all teachers before the pilot begins. Teachers must understand the program's scope and sequence, lesson structure, and assessment tools. Ongoing coaching and mentoring should be provided throughout the pilot year. A monitoring system should be established from the start, with regular classroom observations using a structured tool.

Implementation challenges should be documented by teachers and used to refine implementation protocols before scaling division-wide.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The study adhered to strict ethical standards to ensure the protection of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with clear explanations provided about the study's purpose and procedures. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. To ensure anonymity, personal identifiers were removed, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research. The well-being of participants was safeguarded by providing support resources and minimizing potential distress. The researchers declared no conflict of interest, and plagiarism was strictly avoided by proper citation of all sources. All findings were used exclusively for research purposes, ensuring the integrity and ethical conduct of the study.

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