

Critical Components in Early Literacy — Knowledge of the Letters of the Alphabet and Phonics Instruction

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The authors describe instructional strategies that can be used to teach critical components of early literacy.
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The most important job of the elementary school is to teach children to read and write. The importance of teaching reading results from the fact that reading success is the key to educational success (Adams, 1990; Honig, 1996; Snow, Burns, & Griffin; 1998). Honig stressed that, “Access to further education, high-skilled jobs, and a chance to participate in the higher reaches of society depends in large part on school successes, which itself is highly correlated with the ability to read” (p.1). For students to succeed in reading, two components must be in place in our early childhood classrooms: a focus on letters of the alphabet and systematic phonics instruction.

Predictors of Reading Achievement

Knowledge of Letters of the Alphabet

The single best predictor of first-year reading achievement is the child’s knowledge of and the ability to recognize and name the upper- and lower- case letters of the alphabet (Adams, 1990; Honig, 1996; Riley, 1996). Stahl (1997) found that knowledge is still the strongest predictor of reading success in fourth grade. A child with automatic, accurate recognition of letters will have an easier time learning about letter sounds and word spellings than a child who does not know the letters of the alphabet.

When educators discuss the importance of children possessing knowledge of letters of the alphabet, they are often discussing a variety of skills. Some may only mean that students will learn to recognize and name the letters of the alphabet. Others will include learning how to write the letters as part of this skill, while others will include matching sounds to letters as a component of letter knowledge (Neuman & Roskos, 1998). Despite this confusion on the definition of knowledge of letters, educators do agree upon its importance. Instruction on letters of the alphabet is “clearly important because one of the beginning reader’s biggest responsibilities is to figure out how our alphabetic language works” (Cunningham & Allington, p. 13).

Recognition of letters can be taught by encouraging children to distinguish shapes and case by manipulating magnetic letters, reading labels, recognizing familiar names, and distinguishing one letter character from another by special features. When introducing letters to young children, consonants are typically presented before vowels. This order is based upon the belief that consonants are more consistent in their sounds than are vowels and are, therefore, easier for students to learn (Strickland, 1998).

Many teachers use a “letter of the week” method for introducing alphabet letters to their students. Although it is recommended that teachers introduce a few letters at a

time rather than teaching all of the letters at once, teachers need to be sure that the pace of letter introduction is not too slow. Wuori (1999) found the “letter of the week” approach problematic because it isolates the letters by removing them from the meaningful context of written language. Wagstaff (1998) warned, “The slow pace of programs like ‘letter of the week’ is a serious disadvantage” (p. 299). Aside from the slow pace of teaching only one letter a week, Wagstaff argued that this approach often teaches letters without connection to meaningful reading and writing. Thus children spend time practicing letters in isolation and do not learn to transfer this knowledge to literacy tasks.

After children learn the names of the letters, they learn to recognize their corresponding shapes, and then establish the concept of letter – sound correspondence. Children learn that letters, when blended together, make sounds. By the end of pre-kindergarten, most children know the letters of the alphabet and the sounds these letters make. Although many children enter kindergarten with a basic concept of print awareness, other children have limited exposure to literacy experiences and come to kindergarten with limited print knowledge.

Writing letters of the alphabet is one way that many teachers attempt to promote letter knowledge in young children. Because many teachers believe that correctly writing letters of the alphabet is a necessary precursor to writing, much time is spent in kindergarten classrooms on copying and tracing letters of the alphabet (Strickland, 1998). Fountas and Pinnell (1996), however, warned against having children wait to write until they know all the letters of the alphabet. Wagstaff stated that students get a sense of letters, their sounds, and the purposes of print as they engage in daily writing activities (Wagstaff, 1998).

In kindergarten, most children learn to recognize familiar print and know that it is print that is read in stories. By the end of kindergarten, children point to print when listening to a story or rereading their own writing. They recognize and are able to name all of the upper- and lower- case letters. Because upper-case letters are more easily visualized, they are usually taught first, followed by lower-case letters.

Most first grade children are able to read familiar and high-frequency words. When exposed to less familiar words, children often write the initial letter of a word and add letters from prominent sounds in the word. By the end of first grade, children are typically able to blend and segment the phonemes of most one-syllable words and many one-to-one letter sound correspondences (Snow, et al., 1998).

Phonic Instruction

The second best predictor of reading achievement is the ability to discriminate the smallest units of sound called *phonemes* (Adams, 1990; Juel, 1994; Snow, et al., 1998). The National Reading Panel (2000) found that teaching children to manipulate improves reading. Phonics involves an understanding of the alphabetic principle (that is, there is a relationship between spoken sounds, letters, or combinations of letters) on which the

English language is based. Phonics instruction teaches the most important and regular letter-to-sound relationships.

A child's ability to learn phonics is related to the amount and quality of his/her previous experiences with written and oral language (Strickland, 1998). In order for children to understand phonics, most reading experts maintain that children need explicit instruction in phonemic awareness (Adams, 1996; Stanovich, 1993). As children learn the letters of the alphabet, they begin to connect the letters with the sounds they hear and blend them together to form words. When developing phonemic awareness skills, children become aware of syllables and are able to hear initial and final sounds in words. Children are then able to combine consonants to create new sounds and to hear and discriminate rhymes. Well-developed phonemic awareness is the ability to hear different sounds, to discriminate between phonemes, and to orally manipulate these sounds. Children who are not phonemically aware often fail to learn to read in first grade and will have difficulty becoming successful readers throughout school (Blackman, 1991; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Phonics instruction is a central component of literacy instruction as students rely upon phonics when decoding unknown words. Chall (1987) cited, "Research evidence over the past 70 years indicates overwhelmingly that direct, explicit instruction in phonics is needed and contributes to better development of decoding, word recognition, and comprehension" (p. 8). Various research studies of non-readers found that most of these children also have difficulty learning how to speak and understand language. They have great difficulty in segmenting spoken words into phonemes. Many educators encourage teachers to provide opportunities for struggling readers to use phonics strategies to recognize unfamiliar words (Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris, 1998). Phonics instruction will help children learn to sound out unknown words; however, Honig (1996) advised that if children rely solely upon sounding out unknown words, it may inhibit their reading. "Sounding out words is a very slow and cumbersome process, and any student who must only rely on sounding out in order to read many words is not reading fluently enough to concentrate on meaning" (Honig, p. 20). Despite the fact that too much reliance on sounding out words causes reading difficulties, the ability to decode words is a necessary skill for all readers. Honig suggested that the biggest obstacle to word recognition and reading comprehension among poor readers is a difficulty in turning spellings into sounds. This means that teachers must look to the prerequisite skill of phonemic awareness before focusing on phonics instruction.

Adams (1996) contended that teachers begin by teaching children to hear rhymes and alliteration. Children then need to be able to hear and discriminate different beginning, middle, and ending sounds. Activities that reinforce these skills can be taught through the use of songs, poems, and nursery rhymes. Instruction that focuses upon common word families will assist students in using these patterns to identify unknown words. "The ability to hear, see, and use the rhyme as a reliable cue for reading new words and spelling words that sound alike offers students a powerful insight into how English spelling works" (Johnston, 1999, p. 64).

A research study by Brady, Fowler, and Winbury (1994) studied urban children, ages 4 and 5, and found that fewer than half could generate rhymes and none could segment simple words into phonemes or read any words. The children who received training in rhyme and segmentation could generate rhymes and segment phonemes at the end of an 18-hour training period, thus demonstrating that these skills can be taught to kindergarten students in a relatively short period of time when presented systematically. Adams (1990) argued, “Without this understanding [phonemic awareness], no amount of drill and practice can be of any use. With it, instruction on spellings and sounds can be accomplished in ways that are far more efficient, effective, and responsive to children’s needs” (p. 209).

The ability to divide words into individual sounds and blend these sounds together promotes successful reading. When reading, children should be able to segment to the number of phonemes they hear in words and combine these to identify unknown words. Finally, children should be able to add, delete, and manipulate phonemes to form new words. Methods such as these increase phonological awareness in kindergarteners and first graders and promote successful reading.

The teaching of familiar rhymes helps students to spell unknown words. Gunning (1995) found that the majority of students used word families to identify unknown words rather than letter-by-letter decoding. Wylie and Durrell (1970) created a list of 37 rhymes that can be used to create over 500 words (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Word Families – Rhyme (Wylie and Durrell, 1970)					
-ack	-ail	-ain	-ake	-ale	-ame
-an	-ank	-ap	-ash	-at	-ate
-aw	-ay	-eat	-ell	-est	-ice
-ick	-ide	-ight	-ock	-oke	-op
-ore	-or	-uck	-ug	-ump	-unk

The question for teachers then becomes, when should we teach these rhymes to young children? Most children come to school having had some experiences with poetry (Perfect, 1999). Researchers found that knowledge of nursery rhymes was strongly related to development of more abstract phonological skills and emergent reading abilities. Rhymes can be introduced to kindergarten students through exposure to oral language and literature.

The ability to read common words fluently is another necessary literacy skill. Cunningham and Allington (1999) argue that in order for children to read they must learn to recognize and spell commonly used words quickly and automatically. Heibert and her colleagues (1998) reinforced the importance of this by reporting that children often spend so much time figuring out unfamiliar words, up to 40% of their reading time, that they cannot attend fully to the message or the passage. Cunningham and Allington (1999)

further stated that children need to master phonics skills to decode unknown words when reading and spelling.

Instructional Practices

Educators are continually searching for the best ways to introduce letters of the alphabet and phonics to young children. An approach of teaching letters implicitly as they occur in children's literature combined with systematic phonics instruction is one suggestion. Trachtenburg (1990) concluded that this combination approach will develop students who not only can read but also who chose to read for pleasure. Strickland (1998) supported this by encouraging teachers to provide letter instruction to students in enjoyable ways. Some suggestions for best instructional practices in teaching letters and sounds to young children are:

- Teach and sing alphabet songs.
- Read alphabet books regularly.
- Keep alphabet charts in the classroom, posted at the students' eye level.
- Focus on letters that have special meaning to the students such as those in their names. Post students' names in the classroom.
- Use letter games and word games that identify letters, sounds, and words.
- Keep plastic, magnetic, tile, or wooden letters available for children to manipulate.

Sample Lesson

Based on these premises, the following lesson was designed to address phonemic awareness, as well as capturing young children's interest in literature through a highly popular choice for young readers, Clifford the Red Dog. The specific book selected for this lesson is *Clifford's ABC's* (Bridwell, 1990), and the specific objective is recognition of the letter "c" and the sound /k/ as it occurs within the context of literature and song. Additional objectives focus on the beginning and ending sounds of concrete objects in the children's immediate environment and the enjoyment of literature and music.

After sharing the story aloud with the class, the students are directed to the sound at the beginning of Clifford's name (/k/). Once the sound has been identified, the students are presented with a chart containing the words to a song about Clifford the Big Red Dog. The students then are taught the following song with the focus on the sound made by the letter "c."

Clifford

(Sung to the tune of "Bingo")

I have a dog that's big and red,
And Clifford is his name-o.
/k/ /k/ /k/ Clifford,
/k/ /k/ /k/ Clifford,
/k/ /k/ /k/ Clifford,
And Clifford was his name-o.

Students are actively engaged in the singing of the song by signing the letter “c” in American Sign Language each time the children recognized the /k/ sound or by any other relevant signal or action. Once the song is completed, the students identify the letter “c” on the chart and find it throughout the classroom environment.

After students identify the initial sound of Clifford, they are assisted in making personal connections to letters through the beginning letter of their own names. This is accomplished by having the students listen for the teacher to announce a particular letter. Once that letter is heard, the students whose name begin with that letter stand. The final component of this lesson is the playing of a word game. The teacher fills a large bag with objects from the classroom and sings the following song:

In My Bag

(Sung to the tune of “Where, Oh Where?”)

Who can guess what’s inside of my bag?
Let me peek in and see
It starts with (beginning sound)
And ends with (rime).
Who can guess for me?

Students sound out the word together, with the teacher writing the word on a chart. The students are then directed to find the words listed on the chart in the context of the story that was just shared or throughout their classroom environment.

The students then participate in learning activity centers where they can practice and demonstrate mastery of the objectives for the lesson. These centers offer opportunities for the children to read, write, listen, speak, view, and present through the exploration of letters. Specifically, the children engage in activities presented in the following centers:

- *Listening center* with taped alphabet books and individual pointers to follow along and to identify specific letters as indicated on the tape.
- *File folder center* with letter games ranging from matching upper- to lower-case letters to long and short vowel sound games.
- *Magnetic center* with alphabet letters and sight words.
- *Pocket chart center* where students match letters to beginning and ending sound pictures.
- *Dry erase center* where students practice writing alphabet letters and high-frequency words on the board.

As the students engage in the center activities, the teacher checks for understanding through teacher observations and through follow-up conferences with individual students as well as through small group instruction.

Conclusions

With phonics, as with any skill, instruction must be based upon the needs of students. Garrison (1997) described effective phonics instruction as, “Doing the right things in the right way and at the right time in response to problems posed by particular places on particular occasions” (p. 271). Beginning readers who receive explicit, direct instruction in phonics show improvement in their ability to read. This instruction includes visual isolation to better capture their shape, size, and form. Phonics instruction stresses the acquisition of letter sound correspondences that help learners understand how letters are *linked to sounds* to form words. Some learners will need to hear the sounds of letters apart from their context, and some will need to be shown how to write their names and favorite words. Phonics knowledge is the preliminary step toward fluent reading. Most children will be able to succeed in reading with experience in these areas.

The challenge for the primary teacher is to design and implement a program that assures that all children entering first grade will have a basic knowledge of letters of the alphabet and knowledge in applying phonics skills during the reading process. The authors hope that this article serves as a guide for designing this type of program.

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