



Effective Methods of Alphabet Instruction for Preschool

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Early Literacy Correlates to Future Reading Abilities

The alphabet knowledge acquired by preschool students impacts future literacy results (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). The more letters that a young child can name decreases the potential for that child to be at-risk for reading difficulties later in life. In preschool, letter knowledge is predictive of reading skills in kindergarten, first, and second grade (Gerde et al., 2019). When starting kindergarten, alphabet knowledge is one of the best indicators of future reading and spelling success, but students already have a large variance in their literacy skills and knowledge (Roberts et al., 2018). Longitudinal research on 371 students was conducted and it determined that students who know 18 uppercase and 15 lowercase letters by the end of preschool decrease later literacy struggles (Piasta et al., 2012).

Letter of the Week Tradition.

A letter of the week curriculum has been a popular tradition for many years; teachers spend an entire week teaching a letter name, sound, and writing formation (Stahl, 2014). Every student has a varying level of alphabet knowledge when coming to school - some students know multiple letters and do not need a week devoted to those letters whereas others have no alphabet knowledge and need to wait 26 weeks before learning the entire alphabet (Cassano & Dougherty, 2018; Jones et al., 2013; Piasta & Wagner, 2010).

Although this format has been utilized a lot in teaching the alphabet, a letter of the week is based more on tradition and not research as a lot of planning or differentiation is not necessary (Jones & Reutzel, 2012; Sunde et al., 2019). Every letter is treated equally and given the same amount of instruction to the whole class at once; this is more of a teacher-centered approach and not a child-centered approach (Huang & Invernizzi, 2014; Piasta, 2014).

Letter a Day: Enhanced Alphabet Instruction

When teaching one letter a day to preschool students, the entire alphabet can be taught in 26 days, which could take 6-7 weeks (Jones et al., 2012). Enhanced Alphabet Knowledge (EAK) was developed to focus on pacing and multiple review cycles (Jones et al., 2012). During these lessons, students are taught the letter name and sound, learn to recognize the letter in text, and learn to write the letter (Jones et al., 2013). Every letter is taught at least once; as students become proficient and master specific letters the lessons are updated to continue focusing only on the letters that need additional practice (Stahl, 2014).

Pacing:

Instructional cycles should be between 10-20% of the time for which information should be remembered. When considering a school year of 180 days, 18-36 days would be the 10-20% range, which is where a letter a day would fall (Jones & Reutzel, 2012; Jones et al., 2013). When using a quickened pace, students can view the alphabet as a unit, compare and contrast features of letters, and use the entire alphabet in their learning and play instead of only a portion of letters throughout the majority of the year (Gerde, 2019).

Review Cycles:

When letters are taught at a faster pace the students will be exposed to all letters sooner and there will be additional time for review cycles and practice of all the letters (Sunde et al., 2019). After the first cycle is completed, students are re-assessed to determine the letters mastered and those letters that require more attention. Once a student is comfortable with a letter and its sound, no more instruction is needed on that particular letter and instead focusing on other literacy activities will help improve literacy skills (Jones & Reutzel, 2012; Sunde et al., 2019).

Enhanced Alphabet Instruction (continued)

Effective and Differentiated Small Group Lessons

Teaching alphabet knowledge in differentiated small groups is more efficient and effective than both whole-class learning and individual lessons (Stahl, 2014). Instructing small groups of 2-5 students has been shown to be more beneficial than other lesson size options (Piasta, 2014). In a study conducted by Stanley & Finch (2018), students who learned in small-group settings learned an average of 15 more letters between the months of September and November (Stanley & Finch, 2018).

Teaching Letter Names and Sounds

When teaching alphabet knowledge to preschool students, including both the letter names and sounds in lessons is most effective to a child's literacy development and provides students with the largest gains in alphabet learning (Gerde, 2019; Gerde et al., 2019). Knowing letter names can help students learn and remember letter sounds, especially if the letter name contains the sound in it - for example, the letter B makes the /b/ sound in its name (Cassano & Dougherty, 2018).

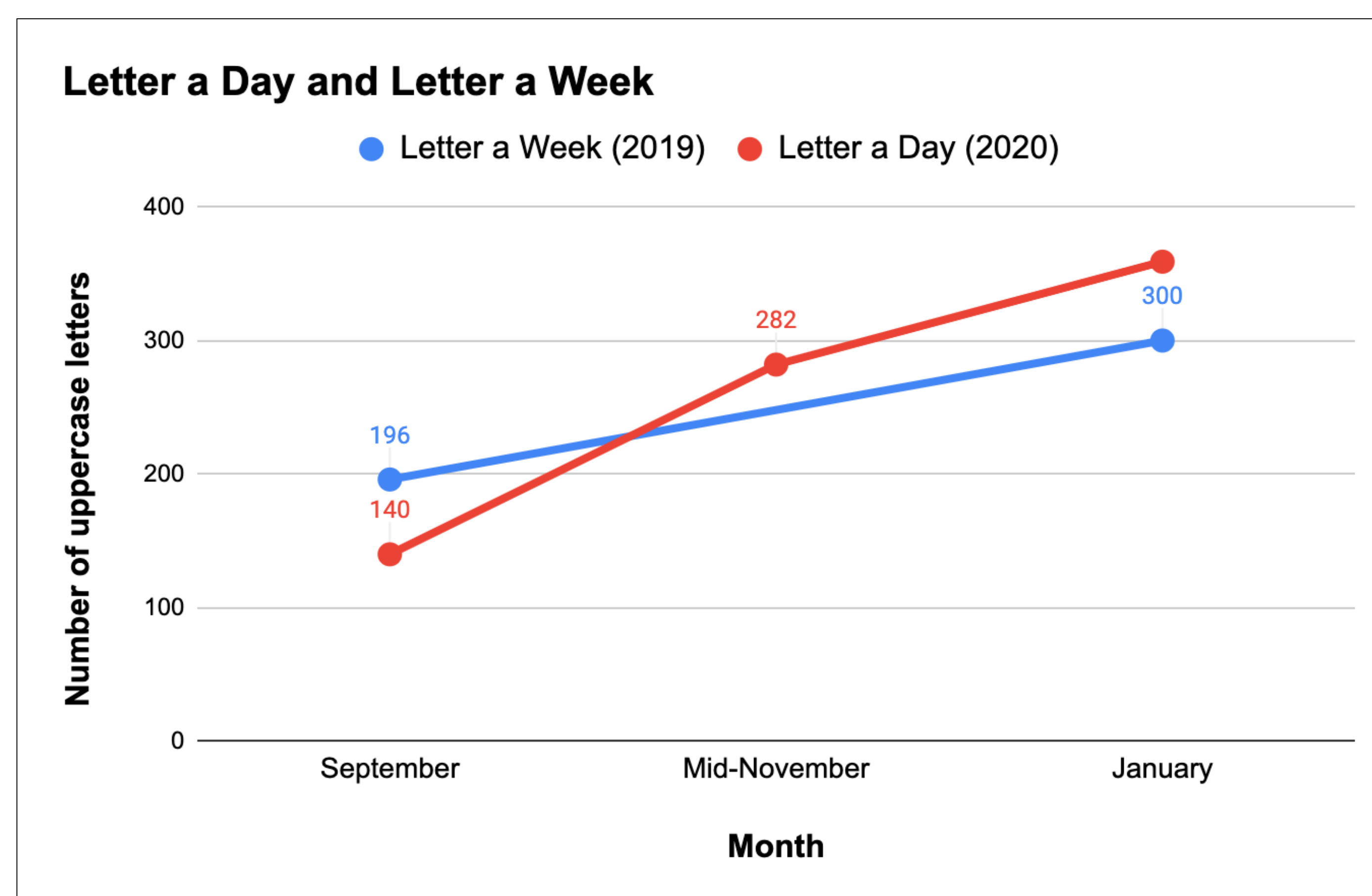
Order of Letter Instruction:

Research has been conducted over the years to determine the most effective order to teach the alphabet to children and the sequences that are more beneficial than others:

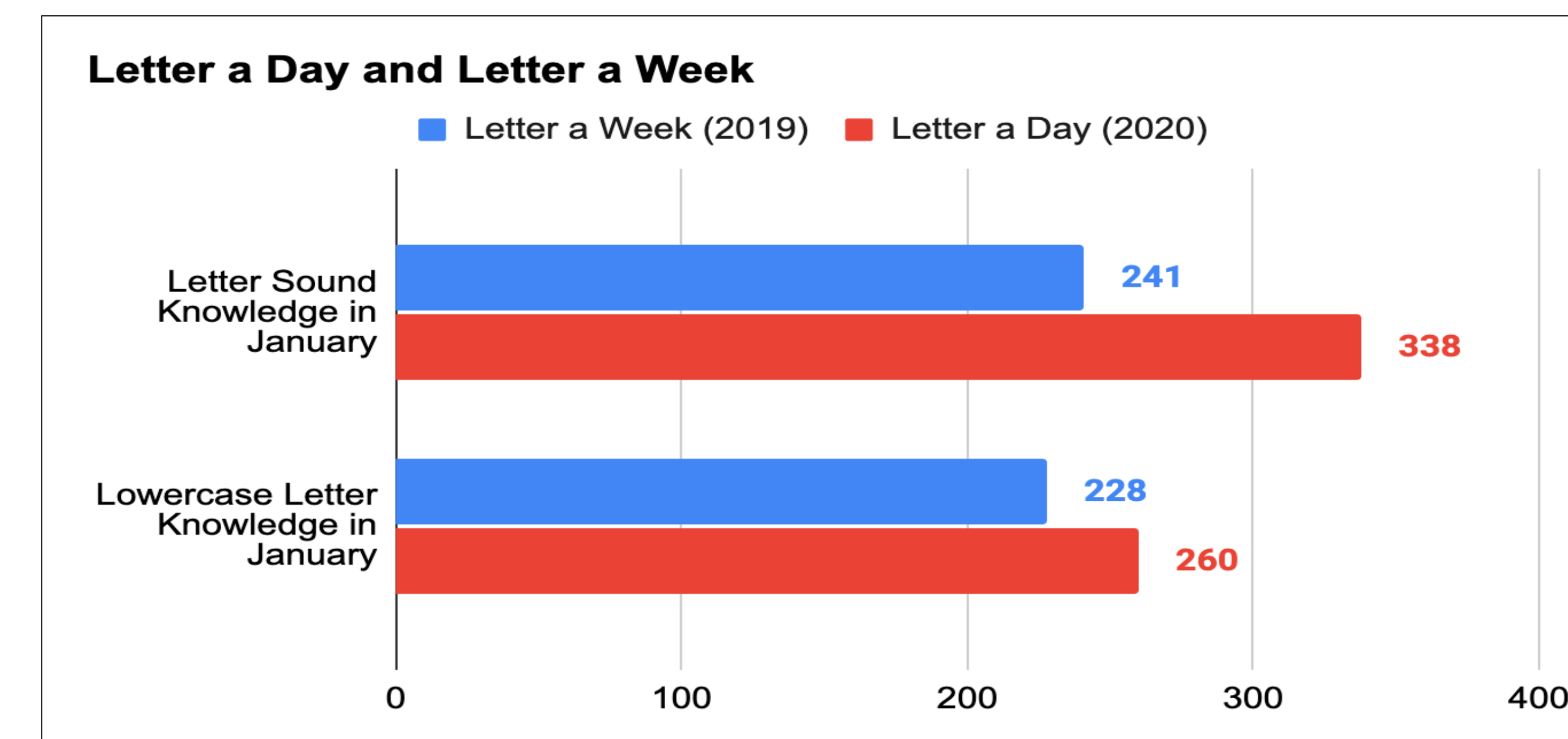
- Own Name Advantage - teach the letters in the students' name first. Children are 1.5 times more likely to know the letters in their first name as compared to other letters in the alphabet (Cassano & Dougherty, 2018).
- Alphabetic Order Effect - teach the letters in alphabetic order as children are often exposed to letters in this order through songs and books (Jones & Reutzel, 2012).
- Letter Frequency -- letters that appear more often in text and environmental print are learned faster than other letters (Reutzel, 2015).
- Letter-Name Pronunciation - Children learn a sound easier when a letter sound is heard as the letter's name is pronounced, such as B, M, and P (Gerde et al., 2019; Reutzel, 2015; Stahl, 2014).

Comparing Data

To compare data, I looked at numbers from my classroom from the fall of 2019 and again the fall of 2020. In the fall of 2019, I had 18 students in my classroom – 10 boys and 8 girls; 11 of these students had attended 3-year-old preschool the year before. During this class, I taught a letter a week throughout the school year. During the fall of 2020, I began teaching a letter a day to my class. This class has 15 students – 11 boys, 4 girls, and 11 of these students attended 3-year-old preschool previously.



Comparing Data (continued)



As evident in the two following charts, when teaching one letter a day, my students in 2020 made larger gains than my class who learned a letter a week; even though I had three less students in 2020.

Conclusion

A lack of early skills and literacy achievement has a long-lasting impact on both students and society (Children's Reading Foundation, 2020). Early childhood letter knowledge is correlated to reading skills in students between the ages of kindergarten through 2nd grade and continues to impact literacy achievement even longer (Gerde et al., 2019). Due to the future implications of early literacy skills, it is important that preschool students are receiving high- quality instruction and engaging with print (Casbergue, 2017).

While a letter of the week instruction is popular in preschool and kindergarten classrooms, it is unlikely that children will learn the entire alphabet from one week-long exposure to each letter and only one cycle through the alphabet (Jones et al., 2013). Alternatively, teaching one letter per day allows the entire alphabet to be learned within 26 days and there is time to cycle through the alphabet 6-7 times during a school year (Jones et al., 2012).

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