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Effective Methods of Alphabet Instruction for Preschool

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Abstract

When children complete preschool with strong alphabet knowledge, there is a higher likelihood that they will read at a level of proficiency or above by third grade. Third-grade reading proficiency is highly predictive of school success factors, including continued reading fluency and high school graduation rates. This literature review compares two different teaching strategies to determine the most effective way to teach the alphabet to preschool students.

When considering the pace in which the alphabet is taught, some classrooms teach a letter a week whereas other classrooms teach one letter a day. Multiple studies were analyzed to determine the best approach to take in regard to the pace of instruction, group size, order of alphabet instruction, and review cycles. Current literature suggests teaching a letter a day in small groups is more beneficial to students because lessons can be differentiated on what each student needs, and information is repeated multiple times until mastered.

Effective Methods of Alphabet Instruction for Preschool

Teaching the alphabet to students is one of the primary objectives in a preschool classroom. Preschool is often the first educational setting that a child attends to learn the alphabet, and alphabet knowledge is important for the future skills of students (Piastra & Wagner, 2010). Proficiency in naming letters is one of the best indicators that a child will have success with reading as they age (Heilmann et al., 2018). When preschool students learn their letters quickly, it allows more time to make advanced progress towards other literacy skills (Jones et al., 2013). After a student leaves kindergarten, very little time is devoted to teaching the alphabet so it is imperative that students are familiar with their letter names and letter sounds, otherwise they may struggle during literacy activities (Tortorelli et al., 2017).

A popular strategy among preschool educators is teaching students one letter per week throughout the school year (Reutzel, 1992). During these lessons, the weekly letter is introduced and students practice saying the letter name, writing the letter, and learning the letter sound (Stahl, 2014). In addition, there may be a theme that coordinates with the letter, including crafts (Wouri, 1999). When teaching one letter a week, it takes the better part of the school year to learn the entire alphabet; there is not enough time to cycle through letters again (Jones et al., 2013). Some students start the school year knowing multiple letters; they do not need entire weeks devoted to letters they already know (Sunde et al., 2019). For students who do not know any letters when starting school, this style of teaching means the student will not officially know all of the letters until 26 weeks into the school year (Jones et al., 2013). This can cause delays when students miss school due to illness, vacations, or moving; and is especially troublesome during times such as the Covid-19 pandemic when schools close and students are unable to officially learn the entire alphabet.

Another option for alphabet instruction is teaching a letter a day to students. This method allows the students to learn the alphabet during different cycles throughout the year (Jones et al., 2013). The entire alphabet can be taught within 26 school days, which, depending on how

many days a school is in session during the week, could take 6-7 weeks (Jones et al., 2012). After the first cycle through, students are assessed to determine what they learned and what they need additional time practicing (Stahl, 2014). Accounting for the varying levels of alphabet knowledge within the classroom, small-group differentiated instruction ensures students are learning materials that benefits them directly (Sunde et al., 2019).

When learning one letter a day, there are different orders in which the alphabet can be presented to be the most effective for the students (Cassano & Dougherty, 2018). Research strongly suggests the first letters a child often knows are the letters in his/her own name, therefore alphabet instruction should begin with those letters (Heilmann et al., 2018). After letters in names are taught, future cycles could focus on alphabetical order, letter popularity, and letter-name and letter-sound relationships (Cassano & Dougherty, 2018; Stahl et al., 2019).

Letter names and letter sounds are both concepts that have been taught in varying combinations within classrooms – either letter names, letter sounds, or letters *and* sounds (Bilodeau, 2013; Roberts et al., 2018). Research conducted by Cassano & Dougherty (2018) showed that knowing letter names helps students learn the letter sound because many of the letter names have the sounds in their name. Teaching letter names and sounds together is more effective than teaching them independently (Gerde et al., 2019).

Throughout this literature review, different methods of alphabet instruction will be described and research will be compared to determine the most effective ways to teach the alphabet to preschool students. Included in this research is the importance of the alphabetic principle, correlations between early literacy and on-going reading success, pacing of letter instruction, small-group versus whole-class lessons, the order in which letters are taught, and assessment options. While not all literacy instruction is effective in helping increase letter knowledge (Casbergue, 2017), this review of literature will help identify the best practices available based on research.

Review of the Literature

Understanding the Alphabetic Principle and Alphabet Knowledge

The alphabetic principle is the understanding that there are relationships between written words and spoken sounds (Titus, 2017). Language is created from distinct sounds and the letters that represent each sound (Huang et al., 2014). When teaching the alphabet, children need to be aware of the big picture and know the importance of letters and their connection to words and writing (Duke & Mesmer, 2019). Understanding the alphabetic principle is a critical part of literacy development as it transitions the child from emergent literacy to a more conventional reader (Huang et al., 2014).

Recognizing the alphabet, letter names, letter sounds, and how to write letters is all part of alphabet knowledge (Bilodeau, 2012; Huang et al., 2014; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Piasta, 2014). Alphabet knowledge is a crucial component of emergent literacy and one of the most important skills required for students to learn how to read (Huang et al., 2014; Piasta & Wagner, 2010; Stanley & Finch, 2018). Simply being able to sing the ABC song does not demonstrate alphabet knowledge; identifying and naming letters is a better representation of knowledge (Titus, 2017). Associating the symbols of letters with their name and sound is an important step in early reading development (Jones & Reutzel, 2012). Despite the importance of learning the letters, this is not an easy task as there are 40 distinctive shapes within the alphabet that need to be learned and memorized (Titus, 2017). There are some examples (Ss, Mm, Ww) where the upper and lowercase letters have the same shape; those letters are easier for students to identify (Titus, 2017). Due to the importance of alphabet knowledge, it is a goal throughout many preschool classes to maximize learning (Piasta et al., 2010). The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) identified alphabet knowledge as the strongest predictor of later literacy success. When kindergarten students know letter names, they tend to learn those letter sounds by the conclusion of the school year (Stanley & Finch, 2018). Also, students in

kindergarten with an increased knowledge of letter names and sounds tend to have stronger skills in reading in the first grade (Stanley & Finch, 2018).

Early Literacy Correlates to Future Reading Abilities

Despite their young age, the alphabet knowledge acquired by preschool students impacts future literacy results (Huang et al., 2014; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). In order to develop an effective literacy processing system, letter knowledge is crucial (Kaye & Lose, 2019). 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 (Gerde et al., 2019). Children who are unable to identify at least ten letters when entering kindergarten have a higher risk of decreased literacy achievement as compared to their peers by the time they reach the first grade (Stanley & Finch, 2018). The relationship between literacy and language becomes more evident over the years- kindergarten students who are familiar with only a few letters will learn words much slower than students who recognize more letters (Kaye & Lose, 2015). In preschool, letter knowledge is predictive of reading skills in kindergarten, first, and second grade (Gerde et al., 2019). The children who have success with naming their letters are more likely to have success in learning literacy skills; literacy struggles generally are linked to those preschool students who are not able to name letters consistently (Piasta et al., 2012).

At the beginning of their kindergarten year, students already have a large variance in their literacy skills and knowledge (Fielding et al., 2019). According to kindergarten teachers, approximately 33% of students entering kindergarten are unprepared (Richard, 2018). Alphabet knowledge when starting kindergarten is one of the best indicators of future reading and spelling success (Roberts et al., 2018). On the first day of kindergarten there can be as much as a five-year range in vocabulary, letter sounds, and sight word knowledge as some students have skills similar to a three-year-old and others function more like an eight-year-old student (Fielding et al., 2019).

Fielding, Maidment, and Anderson (2019) completed a study where 61,691 kindergarten students were assessed on their reading scores in both the fall and spring of kindergarten and during each grade up through 5th grade, for a total of twelve assessments. Results were compared and the students were ranked with 20% of students being placed in each quintile. Specifically, 12,338 students were placed in each of the following quintiles: the top quintile with the above 80th percentile, the 60th-80th percentile, the 40th-60th percentile, the 20th-40th percentile, and the bottom quintile with the 1st-19th percentile. When the reading skills data for these students were compared again in the fifth grade, it showed the following for those kindergarten students in the lowest quintile: 12% of those students were reading above grade level, 17% were at grade level, and 71% were reading below grade level. While there was some reading growth for those students in the lowest 20%, the majority of the students continued struggling to read. In comparison, the 12,338 students who were in the highest quintile in kindergarten showed that 90% of these students were reading at grade level or above in the fall of their fifth-grade year while the remaining 10% were reading below grade level. This research demonstrates the importance of early literacy instruction and that once students start school behind their peers, they tend to stay behind unless they have specific intervention strategies in place (Fielding et al., 2019).

As students continue to grow, they learn to read until the end of the third grade (Kids Count, 2010). Once fourth grade begins, there is an increased demand for students to read to learn (Children's Reading Foundation, 2020). According to the Children's Reading Foundation (2020), over 85% of the fourth-grade curriculum is taught through reading. In 2017, only 37% of fourth graders were above a proficient level on a reading assessment provided by the National Assessment of Educational Progress; this number decreased on the 2019 assessment (The Nation's Report Card, 2019). Due to this, more than half of fourth grade students are unable to do their schoolwork successfully and as assigned (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Not only are literacy skills important during a student's years in school, but third grade reading abilities are directly correlated to high school graduation rates and opportunities (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). 74% of students who struggle with reading in the third grade continue struggling in high school (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Students who are unable to read proficiently when they enter the fourth grade have increased chances that they will drop out of school before graduation (Kids Count, 2010).

Knowing the importance and connection of literacy skills and alphabet knowledge in kindergarten through graduation demonstrates the importance of maximizing the learning for preschool students. Alphabet instruction is taught in-depth for preschool and kindergarten students, but the same level of instruction will not be provided in future years (Tortorelli et al., 2017). Due to this, if a student does not learn these skills quickly they will continue to lag behind their peers (Tortorelli et al., 2017). Once a student falls behind it can be nearly impossible to catch up without major intervention; if a child begins school with a 2 year literacy gap and makes a year's worth of growth during that year, they are still two years behind their peers (Children's Reading Foundation, 2020). Based on this knowledge, it is evident that students need proven and effective literacy instruction in preschool (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Students who attend a high-quality preschool will have higher success when entering kindergarten and can have long-term benefits (Casbergue, 2017). On average, children who attend preschool know 14 lowercase letters and 18 uppercase letters when they begin kindergarten; students who are unable to identify at least 10 letters are at a greater risk for lower literacy achievement in the first grade (Stanley & Finch, 2018). Enhancing the experiences during early childhood can direct children to a path of reading success (Piasta, 2016).

There are different ideas on the number of letters that a child should know before starting kindergarten (Gerde, 2019). Different states and organizations have varying standards ranging from knowing six letters to knowing the entire alphabet (Piasta et al., 2012). On

average, many states and the National Head Start Association suggested that students know at least 10 letters, many of which may be in the students' own names (Heilmann et al., 2018).

Longitudinal research was conducted on 371 students to determine the ideal number of letters students should recognize before entering kindergarten— these children were assessed at the end of preschool and again at the end of the first grade (Piasta et al., 2012). From the information gathered, it was determined that students who know 18 uppercase and 15 lowercase letters by the end of preschool decrease later literacy struggles (Piasta et al., 2012). As a result of this study, organizations such as the Head Start Early Learning Objective Framework increased their previous standards to match the recommended 18 uppercase and 15 lowercase letters (Heilmann et al., 2018; Tortorelli et al., 2017). While it is unrealistic and not developmentally appropriate to expect all students to know all of their letters when starting kindergarten, providing repeated exposure allows students to maximize their learning (Titus, 2017).

Letter of the Week

A Popular Tradition for Alphabet Instruction

When determining how to teach the alphabet to young children, the letter of the week curriculum has been part of the kindergarten tradition and culture for many years (Reutzel, 1992). During this approach, teachers spend an entire week on a letter and focus on the letter name, sound, and writing formation (Stahl, 2014). Each letter is treated equally and is given the same amount of instruction (Huang & Invernizzi, 2014). Many times, the letters are taught in alphabetical order and there are weekly themes that revolve around the current letter (Wouri, 1999).

Letter of the Week Concerns

Despite its popularity, there are several concerns with focusing on one letter a week (Jones et al., 2013). 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 (Jones & Reutzel, 2012; Sunde et al.,

2019). Due to personal experiences and home environments, every student has a varying level of alphabet knowledge when coming to school (Cassano & Dougherty, 2018; Piasta & Wagner, 2010). Some students know multiple letters and do not need a week devoted to those letters (Jones et al., 2013; Sunde et al., 2019). Yet when teaching a letter a week, there is no consideration for a student's current alphabet knowledge or struggles with specific letters (Stahl, 2014). Each letter receives the same amount of time and instruction even though some letters are more challenging for students to learn (Huang & Invernizzi, 2014; Piasta & Wagner, 2010). A lot of planning or differentiation is not necessary when teaching one letter a week to the entire class; this is more of a teacher-centered approach and not a child-centered approach (Huang & Invernizzi, 2014).

In addition, learning one letter a week will take the majority of the school year to complete one cycle through the alphabet (Gerde, 2019). Students with no alphabet knowledge need to wait 26 weeks to learn the entire alphabet, which is typically mid-March (Jones et al., 2013). Those students who know some or most letters are wasting their time by re-learning letters they are familiar with already (Sunde et al., 2019).

Due to these limitations, the varied needs of all students in the class are not being addressed (Jones et al., 2013). Depending on the individual needs of each student, teaching a letter a week wastes time for students who know those specific letters, yet does not provide enough time and repetition for the students who are struggling (Stahl, 2014; Stanley & Finch, 2018; Tortorelli et al., 2017). When adequate time and repetition is not provided, the at-risk students are at a further reading disadvantage (Jones et al., 2013).

In most classrooms, letter of the week activities are often associated with a theme or craft that begins with the current letter being learned (McKay & Teale, 2015). When the theme or curriculum is constantly changing to match the letter, it can appear that the theme is not important as long as the initial sound matches (Wouri, 1999). In addition, these activities are

often used as exposure to a letter and not as a way to continue explicitly teaching the letter name, sound, or relationship to print (McKay & Teale, 2015).

Regardless of the popularity of the letter a week format over the past several decades, research in the early 1990's was already showing that it is not as beneficial to students as teaching letters that are meaningful to them (Reutzel, 1992). According to Reutzel (1992), children should be surrounded by reading and writing opportunities that will help them learn naturally; learning an individual letter over the course of a week will not have the same impact. Providing students with repeated exposure throughout the year, instead of within a week, is more beneficial to learning (McKay & Teale, 2015).

Enhanced Alphabet Instruction

To provide an alternate to the letter a week strategy, the Enhanced Alphabet Knowledge (EAK) was developed (Jones & Reutzel, 2013). EAK instruction focuses on letter-a-day pacing, multiple review cycles, and effective lessons to teach (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

The pace at which letters are introduced to students is important to consider (Gerde 2019). Research has previously shown that instructional cycles should be between 10-20% of the time for which information should be remembered (Jones & Reutzel, 2012; Jones et al., 2013). 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).

Several studies have been conducted to determine the ideal pace for alphabet instruction. Jones and Reutzel (2012) spent two years studying the benefits of incorporating Enhanced Alphabet Knowledge into kindergarten classrooms. During the first year, 329

students and thirteen teachers were included in the study. Nine teachers followed the EAK format and taught a letter a day; four teachers continued with the letter of the week format. At the end of the first year, results comparing pre-test and post-test scores from the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) Letter Name Fluency (LNF) assessment were reviewed. DIBELS LNF was created for students between the fall of kindergarten and the fall of first grade; students in the lowest 20% of the school district were considered at-risk (Good & Kaminski, 2002). The results from the first year showed that the mean number of at-risk students decreased from 50 to 20 for those receiving EAK Instruction; the mean number of at-risk students receiving a letter a week instruction decreased from 65 to 45 (Jones & Reutzel, 2012). This shows the EAK method was 1.5 times more effective in lowering the number of at-risk children over the first year. Over the second year, the remaining four teachers used the EAK instruction in their classroom and also had success for lowering the number of at-risk students while also increasing the number of benchmarked students. At the end of the second year, posttest scores from the two years were compared. At the end of the first year, 45% of the students in the four classes receiving letter of the week instruction were at-risk, but at the end of the second year that number dropped to 25% in those same four classrooms.

Another study was conducted to determine if a faster pace of instruction is connected to a stronger development of letter knowledge in children (Sunde et al., 2019). Throughout the year, 952 students were tracked during their first year of school and assessed to monitor their learning. The study was conducted in Norway, where students begin school during the year in which they turn 6 years old; any prior kindergarten or school settings do not provide formal literacy instruction. At the end of the study, it was determined that the students who learned their letters at a faster pace had more success with their word-reading accuracy and the students who were in a class with faster letter instruction had a decreased chance of scoring in the lowest 10-20% of the students with literacy knowledge. This study was especially important

for those students who began the year with lower letter knowledge as educators were able to focus on strategies that reinforced letter learning through the multiple cycles (Gerde, 2019).

Sunde & Lundetræ (2019) conducted another study to determine if a faster pace of letter instruction was associated with other teaching practices. During this study, 51 first grade teachers were provided surveys in December and June to determine how quickly letters were taught to students, time allotted for student reading and writing activities, the use of reading materials (leveled books and reading worksheets), and handwriting tasks. Of the educators surveyed, 27 of them taught the entire alphabet to their students by the end of December, and the other 24 completed alphabet instruction by the end of June. When looking at the data from the December survey, the educators who taught the entire alphabet by the end of December showed that less time was spent on worksheets, but there were no correlations for the other variables analyzed: time to read or write, leveled books, reading sheets, or handwriting. These surveys also reflected that more time was spent on daily alphabet instruction (more than the 10-15 minutes recommended lesson time), and many teachers did not start writing or reading activities until the entire alphabet was taught. However, when the data was compared from the June survey it was evident that introducing the letters faster was correlated with more time to write, more use of leveled books, less time on handwriting and worksheets, and an increase of repeated lessons for students who needed more exposure to specific lessons.

As demonstrated in these studies, children who learned their alphabet at a faster pace than a letter a week resulted in higher letter knowledge by the time the children ended preschool (Gerde, 2019). 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

During letter of the week instruction, letters are reviewed often after being taught to the students and the letters learned at the beginning of the year are reviewed much more than the

letters learned at the end of the year (Sunde et al., 2019). Contrarily, when letters are taught at a faster pace the students will be exposed to all letters sooner; there will be additional time for review cycles and practice of all the letters (Sunde et al., 2019). By following this format, students are exposed to multiple cycles of review to help strengthen the students' alphabetic knowledge (Gerde, 2019; Reutzel, 2015). Instead of taking 26 weeks to cover the entire alphabet (which can be mid-March), a faster pace allows time for 6-7 alphabet cycles to be completed (Jones et al., 2013; McKay & Teale, 2015).

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 (McKay & Teale, 2015). Instead, focusing instruction on other letters or literacy activities will help that student continue to improve their literacy skills (Jones & Reutzel, 2012; Sunde et al., 2019). Since students start preschool with different alphabet knowledge and learn at different paces, there will be a large span of letter knowledge throughout a classroom (Stahl, 2014). Small group instruction will be the most beneficial to ensure students are getting the information they each need.

Effective and Differentiated Small Group Lessons

In classrooms learning a letter a week, the alphabet lessons are delivered to the whole class at once – everyone learns the same letter at the same time (Piasta, 2014). However, according to McKay & Teale (2015), small group instruction is more effective than both whole-class learning and individual lessons. Differentiated small group lessons when teaching letter knowledge are more effective and efficient (Stahl, 2014). Instructing small groups of 2-5 students has been shown to be more beneficial than the other lesson size options in regard to early literacy development (Piasta, 2014). Teachers are able to achieve the best results from their students when they have small group lessons (Stahl, 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. The small group setting affords teachers the opportunity to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of individual students (Piasta, 2014).

While differentiating based on children's previous knowledge is important, there are also other benefits to small group instruction. Not all children learn the same way; focusing on the different strengths and areas for improvement for small groups of students will help make more effective use of instructional time (Kaye & Lose, 2019). Small group learning helps students get the lessons they need to improve their literacy learning while also leaving whole-class lesson time available for other activities regarding the development of language and vocabulary (Piasta, 2014). In addition, teachers are able to create lessons for small groups of students based on developmentally appropriate practices and differentiated instruction (Piasta, 2014).

Teaching Letter Names and Sounds

Before starting school, young children are often introduced to the names of letters and not their sounds, especially in children songs and toys (Duke & Mesmer, 2019; Gerde, 2019; Huang et al., 2014). When teaching alphabet knowledge to preschool students, it is important to include both the letter names and sounds in lessons as this is most effective to a child's literacy development (Gerde, 2019; Gerde et al., 2019). According to the National Early Literacy Panel, one of the factors that impacts reading development is the ability to identify letter names and sounds (Stanley & Finch, 2018). While learning letter sounds, students are better able to understand the alphabetic principle (Huang et al., 2014). In addition, letter sounds are more applicable to literacy skills such as spelling and word decoding (Roberts et al., 2018). Students have an advantage when there is detailed instruction about the connection between sounds and printed letters as this mapping of sounds to letters helps children learn to decode words and to eventually read fluently (Gerde, 2019; Huang et al., 2014). Due to the importance of letter sounds in the reading process, students who struggle to learn this information are more likely to have literacy delays and are at a higher risk for reading and writing difficulties as they age

(Huang et al., 2014, McKay & Teale, 2015). A benefit to teaching the names and sounds together is that 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).

While young students are more likely to know the names of letters in their own name, this does not apply to letter sounds (Huang et al., 2014). Letter names are often taught at home to students before they start school but letter sounds are typically omitted from this learning (Gerde, 2019; Huang et al., 2014). Treiman and Broderick (1998) conducted two studies to determine the correlation between the letters in a student's name and letter names/sounds. In the first study, a total of 420 students ranging between preschool through first grade were assessed for letter name and letter sound knowledge, then the results were calculated based on the letters in each child's name. After the study was completed, the results showed that students knew the beginning initial in their first name more than knowing other letters in their first name, letter sounds, or the first letter in their last name. The exception to these findings is regarding the first initial in their name - children are more likely to know the letter sound of this letter when the sound in the name is similar to the sound of the letter name (Stahl, 2014). An example is that the /j/ sound will be easier for a student named Jennifer to learn than Juan (Stahl, 2014).

In the second study, data was collected on forty-seven students whose name began with the letters D, J, K, M, R, or S (Treiman & Broderick, 1998). Each child was worked with individually and was asked for the letter name and letter sound for each of the six letters. The purpose of this study was to determine if each student knew the first letter of their own name more often than other letters that are not the first letter in their name. The results show that these students know their initial letter more than the other letters during activities such as writing letters and naming the letters. However, this own-name advantage did not apply during activities where the students needed to provide the sounds of letters (Treiman & Broderick, 1998).

Piasta, Purpura, and Wagner (2010) conducted a study to determine if students benefited more from alphabet instruction when lessons were introduced as letter names only or letter and sounds. Over a period of nine weeks students were divided into random groups, assessed, and taught in short (15 minute) small group lessons. At the end of the study it was concluded that the students receiving letter name and sound instruction had the largest gains in their alphabet learning. Within the nine-week period in which the study was completed, students receiving the letter name and sound instruction learned two letters more than the letter sound only group. While an additional two letters learned may not seem like a large improvement, remember that growth was just over nine weeks and year-long growth may increase.

In a study conducted by Kim, Petscher, Foorman, & Zhou (2010), 653 kindergarten students were assessed to determine if letter name knowledge affected the learning of letter sounds. As a result of the study, it was determined that letter names help provide clues for the sound a letter makes and letter sound knowledge was dependent on letter name knowledge. The probability of knowing letter sounds raised from 4% when the letter name was unknown to 63% when the letter name was known.

Uppercase and Lowercase Letters

Many preschool educators initially teach uppercase letters to their students, but it is also important for students to recognize lowercase letters as most texts are created by lowercase letters (Huang & Invernizzi, 2014; Jones et al., 2013). It is estimated that lowercase letters appear in print approximately seventeen times more than uppercase letters (Huang & Invernizzi, 2014). Children use their knowledge of uppercase letters to learn lowercase letters (Jones & Reutzel, 2012). When students know the uppercase of a letter, they are sixteen times more likely to know the lowercase of the same letter (McKay & Teale, 2015).

Lowercase letters can be more difficult to learn due to similarities in visual features (Kaye & Lose, 2015). Letters such as C, K, O, S, V, W, and Z look the same as uppercase and lowercase letters so those are typically the easiest for students to learn (Cassano & Dougherty,

2018). Letters that have different features when comparing the lowercase to the uppercase (such as B and G) are harder to learn (Cassano & Dougherty, 2018). Lowercase letters b, d, p, and q are mirror images are more difficult for students to master (Cassano & Dougherty, 2018). Other lowercase letters that can be challenging due to similarities are a/o, h/n, r/n, i/j, v/w, and y/v (Kaye & Lose, 2015). Students need to learn to follow the left to right reading pattern to ensure they are able to distinguish between different letters (Kaye & Lose, 2015).

Order of Letter Instruction

Research has been conducted over the years to determine the most effective order to teach the alphabet to young children while remembering that some letters are easier to learn and others are more difficult (Stahl et al., 2019). There is not a clearly defined order in which letters should be taught or a method that is the most effective (McKay & Teale, 2015; Titus, 2017). However, there are several letter-order sequences that have been tested and shown to be beneficial while acknowledging that the needs of students will vary annually. Own-name advantage, alphabetical order, letter frequency, and letter-sound relationships are all sequences that can be effective to follow (Jones et al., 2013).

Own Name Advantage

When introducing letters to preschool students it is important to teach the letters in the students' name first, often called the own name advantage strategy (Stahl, 2014). Children have more success with identifying uppercase letters if the letters are in their own name or nickname (McKay & Teale, 2015; Piasta, 2014). These letters are easier for children to learn because they are meaningful, children have an emotional attachment to them, and children tend to see their name written out on labels much more than other words (Cassano & Dougherty, 2018; Huang & Invernizzi, 2014; Justice et al., 2006). In a 2006 study to determine the best ways to teach uppercase letters to preschool students it was determined that 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; Justice et al., 2006).

While a child is more likely to recognize the letters in their first name, this is even more true for their first initial (Piasta, 2014). Research shows that young children learn how to name and print the initial letter in their name before any other letter in the alphabet (Jones et al., 2013). Students tend to claim ownership over this particular letter as there is frequent exposure and personal connection (Heilmann et al., 2018; Kaye & Lose, 2015). Studies show that four-year-old students are eleven times more likely to know the initial letter in their own name than a letter not in their name at all (Justice et al., 2006; Stahl, 2014). This advantage typically applies only to a child's first name since that is the name that is typically practiced and more visible (on labels and nametags, for example); last names do not follow the same trend (Justice et al., 2006).

Alphabetic Order Effect

For the second cycle through the alphabet it is beneficial to focus on the alphabetic order effect (Reutzel, 2015). Children are often exposed to letters in alphabetical order through songs and books with the beginning letters of the alphabet receiving the most attention (Jones & Reutzel, 2012). Letters are taught in alphabetical order as studies have shown that the beginning letters (A, B, C) and the ending letters (X, Y, Z) are the most familiar (Stahl, 2014) when compared to the letters in the middle of the alphabet (Reutzel, 2015). Other research shows the earlier letters (A, B, C) are more likely to be known than the letters later in the alphabet (X, Y, Z; Justice et al., 2006). When studying the effects of letter order it was shown that students were 1.02 times more likely to know a letter that is one earlier in the alphabet, so letter L is known more than M (Justice et al., 2006).

Letter-Frequency Effect

When looking at text and environmental print, some letters appear much more than other letters in words (Piasta, 2014). Letters that appear more often in printed materials are often learned faster and easier than other letters (Reutzel, 2015). As a result, the letter-frequency effect focuses on the letters that are the least exposed in print and text (Jones et al., 2013).

Some of the letters (such as Q, W, and Y) that are harder for students to learn based on their pronunciation are also less seen in print, which creates more of a challenge for students to learn them (Jones et al., 2013).

Letter-name pronunciation effect

The letter-name pronunciation effect focuses on the connection between letter names and letter sounds (Huang et al., 2014). Children learn a sound easier when a letter sound is heard as the letter's name is pronounced (Reutzel, 2015; Stahl, 2014). Students are more likely to remember letters when their sound and name coincide (such as B, M, and P; Gerde et al., 2019).

There are three different methods in which letter sounds are created, and these are a factor in the simplicity in learning the letter names (Jones & Reutzel, 2012). First is when the sound that the letter represents is at the beginning of the letter name (Cassano & Dougherty, 2018). Letters that follow this CV (consonant-vowel) pattern where the sound comes first and is followed by a vowel are the letters B, D, J, K, P, T, V, and Z (Block & Duke, 2015; Huang et al., 2014). The second method is considered the VC (vowel-consonant) pattern, where the letter sound comes second in the name (Piasta, 2014). Examples of these letters are F, L, M, N, R, S, and X (Block & Duke, 2015; Huang et al., 2014). The last set of letters is different from the first two as there is no association between the letter names and its sound (Stahl, 2014). The letters H, Q, W, and Y have no association as mentioned and the letters C, G, and S have more than one sound (Jones et al., 2013). Due to the differences within these letters, they are more difficult for students to learn (Stahl, 2014).

Several studies have provided different insight on which letters children learn faster (Jones et al., 2013). In the previously mentioned study by Treiman & Broderick (1998), students were assessed on six letters to determine if they knew the first initial of their first name more than the other letters. While students did know their first initial the most, the study also showed that students tended to know the CV letters the best, followed by VC letters, and then the no-

association letters when asked to provide letter names. Research has often shown that children learn the CV letters first (Cassano & Dougherty, 2018; Huang et al., 2014; Piasta, 2014). However, there is not consistent research on if VC letters are consistently proven to be learned faster than no-association letters (Huang et al., 2014). Some research states that both VC and CV letters are learned before no-association letters (Cassano & Dougherty, 2018; Jones et al., 2013); other studies show that VC letters are not learned beforehand (Huang et al., 2014). Due to the research that CV letters are easier for students to learn, it is beneficial to start teaching those letters first (Huang et al., 2014).

Assessments

To provide the best instruction, it is imperative to determine which letters and sounds each student already knows (Gerde, 2019). Students start preschool with a large range of existing alphabet knowledge, both with the number of letters they know and the specific letters known (Gerde, 2019). Preschool teachers are encouraged to use assessment results to plan small-group activities with students to support the needs of all students and not follow a one-size-fits all approach (Piasta, 2014). On-going assessments throughout the school year should be utilized to monitor instruction and the groups of students (Jones & Reutzel, 2012).

A selection of alphabet assessments are available to teachers, but most require students to be tested on all 26 uppercase letters and lowercase letters (Tortorelli et al., 2017). While these assessments are very thorough and provide exact details on what each student knows, they are also very time-consuming and must be completed individually with each student (Tortorelli et al., 2017). The most beneficial assessments are those that can be administered quickly and repeatedly to gauge knowledge (Gerde, 2019).

The Quick Letter Name Knowledge (Q-LNK) assessment was developed to quickly assess the alphabet knowledge for each student (Tortorelli et al., 2017). To develop this assessment, data was gathered from a previous study in which 1,113 students were tested on uppercase and lowercase letters to determine which letters are the easiest and most difficult for

students (Bowles et al., 2014). Based off this data, six different assessment forms were created- each containing eight letters (a mixture of uppercase and lowercase) with varying levels of letter difficulty (Tortorelli et al., 2017). When using one of the forms with a student, interpretations are provided for what the score means. For example, if a student knows 1 letter on the form it is expected they would know 6-7 letters of the alphabet; if they know 6 form letters they could know 36-40 letters (Tortorelli et al., 2017). While this assessment does not provide exact alphabet knowledge, it does allow teachers to determine which children know the most letters, who are in the beginning and middle of the letter development, and the growth throughout the year (Gerde, 2019).

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).

Throughout this literature review, research was shared to help provide guidance and suggestions on the best literacy instruction possible. 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).

During these cycles of alphabet instruction, assessments should be used to determine what the students already know and letters that need additional attention (Gerde, 2019).

Assessments such as the Q-LNK test only eight letters at a time but due to the varying

difficulties of the letters on each test, results can be used to estimate how many letters a student knows within the alphabet (Tortorelli et al., 2017). To meet the needs of the students, small-group instruction of 2-5 students is the most beneficial (Piasta, 2014). When first introducing letters to children, focus on the letters in the child's name as these are the easiest letters to learn (Reutzel, 2015). Future cycles can have letters introduced in different orders; letter-frequency, alphabetical order, and letter-name/letter-sound relationships are all proven and popular orders that can be used (Jones et al., 2012).

Maximizing alphabet knowledge in a preschool classroom will help set a child up for literacy success in their future, both over the next few years and in regard to college graduation rates and beyond (Children's Reading Foundation, 2020). Utilizing the Enhanced Alphabet Knowledge instruction may help increase the alphabet knowledge success for preschool students, and also decrease future literacy struggles (Jones et al., 2012).

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