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Explicit Literacy Instruction Focused on Letter Sounds vs. Letter Names and Student Educational Growth

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Abstract

The purpose of this action research was to investigate the effects of explicit literacy instruction focused on letter sounds and letter names to determine student academic growth. This study was conducted in the researcher's early childhood class with a group of 20 preschool aged students. Research was conducted over the course of five weeks with students meeting with the researcher a minimum of two times each week. Data was collected using a literacy assessment with sections on letter sounds, uppercase letter names, and lowercase letter names. The researcher concluded that student growth was observed in the control and treatment groups, and there was not statistically enough evidence to conclude that one instruction method was superior to the other.

Keywords: early childhood literacy, letter sounds, uppercase letters, lowercase letters, preschool

Explicit Literacy Instruction Focused on Letter Sounds vs. Letter Names

Early childhood literacy has become an important focus in many early childhood and preschool centers. "The acquisition of alphabet knowledge, or knowledge of letter names and corresponding sounds, is an important accomplishment in children's early literacy development and recognized as the strongest predictor of later reading ability" (Piasta et al, 2010). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recommends the development of early literacy skills as a goal for preschool, and proficiency in letter discrimination, letter naming, and letter-sound correspondence in the kindergarten year. (Piasta et al, 2010). Determining the sequencing of student instruction in learning letter names and letter sounds has been researched in many studies (Earle & Sayeski, 2017; Ehri, 2020; McBride-Chang, 1999; Roberts, Vadasy, & Sanders, 2019; Wolf, 2015). Alphabet knowledge and phonemic awareness work together and are recognized as two predictors of beginning reading. (Roberts et al, 2020). Both are important to a child's development;a strong literacy foundation needs to be formed to increase the chances of reading success later in life (Teaching Strategies, 2010). When alphabet knowledge, referring to the names and sounds associated with each letter, is not developed and does not become an automatic skill for students by first grade it becomes a predictor of poor literacy throughout life (Wolf, 2015).

Research has been conducted to evaluate the impact of literacy instruction and the method in which it is presented. There are three main methods for teaching early childhood students literacy skills: letter names, letter sounds, and letter names and sounds together. These three methods will provide the basis for research and the differentiation for intentional and explicit small group instruction.

The purpose of this study was to compare the impact of explicit literacy instruction with a focus on letter sounds as opposed to letter names on the growth of literacy skills in preschool. The researcher provided core literacy instruction to the whole group using a curriculum that exposed students to letter names and sounds using auditory instruction and visual representations of letters. Students were divided into two groups, where one group received instruction focused on letter sounds and the other group received instruction focused on learning and using letter names. The makeup of each group comprised students that needed reinforcement, were progressing towards, or had met grade level expectations. Student achievement was assessed before, during, and after interventions using a letter name (uppercase and lowercase) and letter sound assessment linked with the district literacy curriculum Really Great Reading Launchpad to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the interventions. Researcher observations, anecdotal notes, and student work was utilized to determine the effectiveness of the interventions and improve literacy instruction practices.

Literature Review

Early childhood literacy has become an important focus in many early childhood and preschool centers. "The acquisition of alphabet knowledge, or knowledge of letter names and corresponding sounds, is an important accomplishment in children's early literacy development and recognized as the strongest predictor of later reading ability" (Piasta et al, 2009 p. 608). Williams and Lerner (2019) explain that all early learning experiences are educational regardless of setting when instruction is provided in a consistent, developmentally appropriate, and supportive environment. Students beginning to learn and speak the English language are introduced to twenty-six letters. From these twenty-six letters, there are forty-four individual sounds called phonemes. The sequencing of teaching these letters and/or sounds to young

students has been researched, but no clear outcome has been consistently found (Worden & Boettcher, 1990; Roberts et al., 2020).

Early literacy skills are often misunderstood and treated as a unitary concept (McBride-Chang, 1999). Literacy skills that are essential for young children can be broken into three separate categories: phonemic awareness, alphabetic knowledge, and alphabetic principle. Each of these skills independently are important in the early stages of learning to read, and each skill contributes to progress and growth of the others (Roberts et al., 2020). Phonics and emergent writing are additional early childhood literacy skills that begin to develop as students make connections using grapheme and phoneme connections (Ehri, 2020). As young children become aware of print in their environment, they also begin to use it and benefit from having multiple opportunities to practice writing (Byington & Kim, 2017).

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is defined as the ability to recognize and manipulate the spoken parts of words (Reading Rockets, 2021). Learning how to isolate individual phonemes, or letter sounds, in words is a critical skill for learning to read in the English language. The importance of effective phonemic awareness instruction plays an important part in developing reading proficiency, and strong phonemic awareness skills lead to strong readers (McBride-Chang, 1999; Piasta & Wagner, 2010; Roberts, Vadasy & Sanders, 2020). Roberts, Vadasy, & Sanders (2020) found that children who were taught letter sounds using a storybook and storybook character and students taught letter sounds in isolation were able to increase the identifiable letter sounds from pretest to posttest. The test was measured by testing student ability to hear the initial sound in a preselected set of words focusing on the letters in the initial position, and could be recognized by students using simple pictures. Children involved in the research were placed into one of two

groups to determine their instruction method. Students who received instruction through storybook lessons were introduced to letters through storybook reading and seeing letters used in whole words. Roberts, Vadasy & Sanders (2020) cited storybook reading as a highly endorsed preschool practice for early literacy learning as it makes learning letters meaningful. Through their study, it was determined that storybook reading had no statistically significant effect on early childhood alphabet knowledge. A second group of students received instruction using individual letters in puzzles, letter tiles or cards. The letter name or sound was introduced intentionally with each letter and followed a specified predetermined lesson sequence. Roberts, Vadasy & Sanders(2020) determined that the recognized and identified letter sounds taught in isolation made statistically greater gains throughout the study trials as compared to their storybook instructed peers.

Research conducted by Jones, Clark & Reutzel (2012) also focused on the sounds represented by each letter. "Young children use letter names to learn and remember letter sounds" (2012, p.86). Their findings indicated that letter sounds produced when saying the letter name are easier for students to learn—findings that follow closely with studies conducted by others (McBride-Chang, 1999; Treiman & Broderick, 1998). McBride-Chang's (1999) study followed subjects over the course of four testing periods assessing letter sound and letter name knowledge. The study found that students who possessed letter sound knowledge made significant gains, and the letter sound knowledge was influenced by letter name knowledge, but letter name knowledge was not influenced by letter sounds students knew. Though traditional learning through storybooks was determined to be less effective than teaching letter sounds in in isolation, it was shown to benefit students when learning individual letters.

Alphabetic Knowledge

Alphabetic knowledge is defined as the ability to distinguish letter symbols and names (Bradley & Jones, 2007). Young learners are exposed to print in various forms daily. Environmental (signs on restaurants and food labels), books, and pictures all provide information that young children process. Children need to understand visual features such as shape, orientation, and direction along with variations in size, font, and upper or lower case (Bradley & Jones, 2007; Foulin, 2005; Treiman, Cohen, Mulqueeny, Kessler, & Schechtman, 2007). Foulin (2005) found that letter knowledge improved visual recognition of words, and acquisition of these skills may be more influential to learning other literacy skills. As students gain knowledge about the shape of letters and are able to identify letters, they are able to progress to letter naming (Bradley & Jones, 2007). The study conducted by Bradley and Jones (2007) also found correlations between the amount of time teachers spent intentionally bringing attention to individual letters during the reading of children's books to the increase in student ability to recall letters. Bradley & Jones (2007) also discussed student ability to identify letters using both the uppercase and lowercase symbol. Some letters are visually similar in both the upper- and lowercase symbols allowing students to identify them more frequently (e.g. *Cc, Kk, Vv).* Other letter symbol pairs are not similar and can require students to look more closely (e.g. Qq, Rr, Aa). Students were more likely to remember and identify the letters associated with their own name or the names of other important people in their life.

Roberts, Vadasy, & Sanders (2020) conducted a study observing the implications of instruction using letters in isolation and letters with a context clue. Roberts, Vadasy & Sanders's (2020) study examined student ability to recall letters with explicit instruction utilizing storybook reading, drawing attention to individual letters and teaching letters individually with no visual

cue. Recognized and identified letters taught using a storybook and storybook cue had a higher posttest gains at 5.59 compared to individual isolated letters posttest gains of 4.77.

Some educators push back on the idea of teaching students letter names, stating it causes confusion for students. Shanahan (2018) shared an experience when a student was given a word and the student was unable to sound it out. The word was *what* but was pronounced with an initial sound /d/. The student was attempting to use letter name knowledge of W, pronounced *double-you*, to identify the word. The study Bradley and Jones (2007) conducted also found that some children use the letter name to represent the sound, but that students need to learn that not all letter names have similar correlations.

Traditional instruction practices can also limit student learning. Jones, Clark, and Reutzel (2012) shared that traditional letter knowledge focuses on learning one letter per week. For students who already have a good grasp on letters, they are required to endure a whole week listening to a letter they already know. Students who have not been exposed to letters are also impacted by this strategy because they are required to go twenty-six weeks before learning about and hearing all the individual letters and sounds (Jones, Clark, & Reutzel, 2012; Piasta & Wagner, 2010). Jones, Clark & Reutzel (2012) found that students made more gains when letters that appear less frequently in print were introduced and emphasized first so they become more familiar with them.

Alphabetic Principle

Alphabetic Principle is defined as “the idea that words are made of sounds and that letters represent those sounds in a systematic way.” (Really Great Reading, 2019) Students who are able to develop the connection between letter sounds and the letters represented by those sounds

have been found to have higher reading skills later in early elementary (Piasta, Purpura & Wagner, 2009).

Strategies that have been utilized to increase student learning focused on intentional learning experiences. Storybooks, alphabet books, letters and sounds in individual student names, and looking at student inventive writing all provide the ability to target specific letters and sounds (Roberts et al., 2020). Additionally, when looking at specific letters of the alphabet within learning experiences, some letters will provide specific cues for the sound it produces. Piasta, Purpura & Wagner (2009) provided the example of letters like B and F. When students say the letter name it also allows for the sound to be produced /b/ and /f/. While knowing letter names can aid students in learning the sounds that specific letters produce, it does not benefit every letter. Letters such as W and H do not provide accurate cues to their correct sounds (Piasta et al., 2009). In an additional study conducted by Piasta & Wagner (2010), students made more significant gains when instruction was given using the letter name and letter sound together as compared to only providing the letter sound.

Limitations that educators need to consider when giving instruction using letter names and sounds is how the letters (graphemes) are presented. Earle and Sayeski (2017) found that some early childhood programs teach letter sounds using only capital letters or a mix of both capital and lowercase letters. While students do need to be exposed and know upper and lowercase letters, the majority of letters they will be exposed to in reading experiences will be lowercase. Earle and Sayeski (2017) also recommend that uppercase letters be introduced once students are closer to mastery of the letter-sound correspondence with lowercase letters.

A second consideration that needs to be made when providing instruction using letter names and sounds is how and at what pace will they be introduced. Jones, Clark & Reutzel

(2012) found that certain sounds are developmentally appropriate for typical student to have developed by age four. These sounds are gradually developed and include the consonants of *n, m, p, h, t, k, y, f, b, d, g, w,* and *s.* These sounds, along with vowel sounds, should be used within lessons that review multiple sounds. This provides students with continued learning and avoids the traditional one letter per week instruction. Earle and Sayeski (2007) also found that creating explicit instruction and addressing easier, more developmentally appropriate sounds, helped students develop letters and sounds effectively.

English Language Learners

Students that are identified as English Language Learners (ELL) or Dual Language Learners (DLL) speak and/or are learning a language other than English in their home (Teaching Strategies, 2013). These students bring unique home-language experiences to the classroom that can enhance the learning environment, but also can create challenges for educators (Oliva-Olson et al., 2020).

When looking at percentages of students entering kindergarten and first grade who are receiving services for English Language Learners (ELL), 15.9% were in kindergarten and 16.0% in first grade (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). Looking at K-12 enrolment in public school systems, there has been an increase of ELL students entering classrooms and receiving additional support. In the fall of 2000, 8.1% of students (3.8 million students) spoke a language other than English compared to the fall of 2017 where 10.1% of students (5.0 million students) were entering classrooms (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). This change has required educators to develop strategies to support children's language development in both English and their home language (Olivia-Olson et al., 2020).

A study conducted by Roberts, Vadasy & Sanders (2019) reported that students identified as dual language learners (DLL) made gains similar to their non-dual language classmates. Students were given instruction with context clues from stories and characters associated with each letter and also instruction with only printed letters. DLL students had higher mean scores at the end of the assessment period in letter names and letter sounds, but they were not statistically significantly higher than their non-DLL peers.

Guccione (2011) conducted a similar study looking at ELL students and practices that benefit their learning in early literacy skills. The study, done in a first-grade classroom, found that all students need and benefit from explicit instruction revolving around early literacy. Young ELL students benefited more when learning was connected to their cultural background and interactions with print were done in more meaningful ways. This included depending less on a scripted literacy program, and utilizing a more inquiry-based instruction. Guccione's (2011) study was conducted over the course of one academic year and followed native Spanish speaking students as they developed literacy skills. Students in the research class were early elementary and all students, native-English and ELL, learned to make connections and engage in their learning utilizing inquiry-based instruction and learning.

Durán, Gorman & Kohlmeier (2015) examined the use of dual language and literacy curriculum in early childhood for students learning English at school and speaking Spanish in the home. "English reading achievement in bilingual populations begins with language and literacy development in both English and Spanish. Current evidence suggests that dual language instruction is more effective that English-only instruction at improving kindergarten readiness and improving long-term academic outcomes" (p. 453). The effectiveness of dual language and literacy programs is dependent on the staff and the training the early childhood program

provides. Durán, Gorman & Kohlmeier (2015) found for curriculum instruction to be effective for dual-language learners, the instruction needed to be given in English as well as in Spanish. Preschool age students have not completely learned their first or second language, and adding a second language results in knowing different words and concepts in each language (Peña & Halle, 2011). Spanish speaking instructors were expected to teach all concepts in the native language without blending the English and Spanish language together. Student outcomes observed by Durán, Gorman & Kohlmeier (2015) indicated that student engagement was high during instruction and was developmentally appropriate. The development of a dual language and literacy curriculum presented with fidelity would assist students in learning content material and provide the foundation for continuing education.

Conclusion

As a result of this literature review, it is evident that there is not a clearly defined method of early literacy instruction that is best practice for all students. Continued research needs to be conducted in the areas of student acquisition and production of letters and letter sounds. Early childhood literacy skills do appear to be connected and having knowledge and/or understanding of one skill can aid in the development of other literacy skills. Determining the best educational practices for young learners continues to be an essential need for students to build a strong literacy foundation ensuring students and become successful in all literacy content.

Methods

This research will focus on students' ability to identify and produce letter names and letter sounds. Classroom instruction will utilize the current district educational practice of identifying letter names, and learning and using letter sounds. The researcher will use small group settings to determine how explicit literacy instruction focused on letter sounds vs. letter

names affects students' educational growth. Throughout the research period, the current literacy program, Launchpad by Really Great Reading, will continue to be used. The program will introduce and encourage students to use and practice each of the literacy skills targeted by the explicit small group instruction.

Participants

The action research was conducted in an early childhood center in Iowa. The early childhood center is home to the district's three- and four-year-old preschool, serving 371 students. Throughout the 2020-2021 school year students had been in attendance face-to-face for all but two school days. The school served students from multiple ethnic and economic backgrounds. Students attended class Monday through Thursday 7:50am-2:50pm. There were two adults present in the classroom at all times, a lead teacher and an associate teacher. The study was conducted during the daily literacy instruction time with additional instruction given during structured learning centers within the daily classroom routine.

The preschool classroom where this action research was conducted had 20 students: 11 females and 9 males (see Table 1: Student Demographics). When the research was implemented there were no students identified with special needs. Two of the students were beginning the process of academic and behavioral evaluation for suspicion of disability. The goals that were determined by the early childhood center's evaluation team were for these students to identify the letters in their name, placing them in the small group focusing on letter names. This would allow more intentional time to be spent on their intervention goal and continue the focus of their explicit small group. All students participated in both the core instruction and the differentiated explicit instruction. Students were placed into the letter sound or letter name group based on their pre-assessment using the Really Great Reading Foundational Skills Survey Letter

Knowledge recording form (see Appendix A). Student pre-assessment results were compiled using the district and Iowa Early Learning Standards and leveled their ability (See Appendix B). Students performing in each category (reinforcement, progressing, meets, exceeds) were placed at random to either participate in the letter name or letter sound explicit instruction. The Letter Sound group was comprised of 6 females and 4 males, 2 students designated English Language Learner, and none with identified special needs. The Letter Name group was comprised of 5 females and 5 males, 2 students designated English Language Learner, and 2 students beginning the suspicion of disability assessment process (see Table 1). Students who received traditional instruction focused on learning letter names were considered the control group for the purpose of this study. Students who received instruction focused on learning letter sounds were considered the treatment group.

Table 1

Student Demographics

	Letter Sounds	**Letter Names**
Gender	6 females, 4 males	5 females, 5 males
ELL	2 English Language Learners	2 English Language Learners
Special Needs	0	2 beginning SOD (suspicion of disability)

Measures

During the action research, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Quantitative data was collected using the Really Great Reading Letter Knowledge assessment form (Appendix A). Qualitative data was collected through researcher observations and anecdotal notes. Finding and identifying themes or common occurrences such as unknown letter

names or consistently miss-pronounced sounds, were used to drive explicit small group instruction in future learning opportunities. Data was collected over a period of 5 weeks, beginning February 8, 2021, and completed March 11, 2021. This was the equivalent of twenty school days for the early childhood center.

Variables

The independent variable was the form of explicit instruction used during small group learning. The variable was categorical, with two possible outcomes: explicit instruction focused on letter sounds, or explicit instruction focused on letter names.

The dependent variable was the skills students were assessed using the Really Great Reading Foundational Skills Survey Letter Knowledge. Skills included in the assessment were identification of uppercase letters, identification of lowercase letters, and production of letter sounds.

Procedures

Students were selected for each group as a result of their performance on a letter name and letter sound assessment provided through the preschool literacy curriculum Really Great Reading (see Appendix A) and guidance from our preschool essential standards in the area of literacy (see Appendix B). This information was used to divide students into two groups with a comparable mix of students identified at above proficient, proficient, and below proficient in letter name and letter sound knowledge.

Each of the focus groups was then broken down farther to allow for more intentional teaching time on the intended explicit instruction focused on letter names or letter sounds. Each small group met with the researcher for a minimum of thirty minutes weekly, broken into two fifteen-minute periods. Additional time was given to below proficient students on the days their

small group did not meet. Focus for the individual instruction revolved around the letter sounds or letter names they were having difficulty producing or identifying. The researcher provided warm-up activities for students to complete, focusing on the letters or sounds in individual student names. Additional activities documented on a researcher designed planning form (see Appendix C) provided targeted instruction on skills where students needed reinforcement. Intentional language was differentiated for each explicit focus group. Students who received letter name instruction heard teacher language using only letter names when reviewing student names, writing simple words or phrases. Students who received letter sound instruction heard teacher language identifying the sound of the letter they were identifying. Examples of teacher instruction for each small group can be seen in Table 2: Explicit Teacher Language.

Table 2

Explicit Teacher Language

Letter sound	**Letter name**
We are going to spell the word cat. I need three lines because I can hear three sounds when I say the word /c/ /a/ /t/.	We are going to spell the word cat. I need three lines because I know there are three letters in the word cat.
___ ___ ___	___ ___ ___
I know the first sound says /c/, that sound looks like C. What sound do I/we hear next?	I know the first letter is C, what letter do I/we need next?

Data Collection

Once students were placed into either the letter sound or letter name group and intentional and explicit instruction began, the researcher observed student progress and performance. Student information gathered during this action research was labeled with the student's first name only for researcher purposes, and presented with their corresponding group

number. The ten students who participated in letter sound instruction were labeled with S1-S10. Similarly, the ten students who participated in the letter name instruction were labeled N1-N10. During this research study, weekly anecdotal notes were taken during small group on individual students. Anecdotal notes guided instruction and allowed the researcher to identify students that needed continued reinforcement and students that were ready to move to more advanced activities. At the conclusion of this research study, the researcher again assessed students with the Really Great Reading Foundational Skills Survey Letter Knowledge recording form in the areas of uppercase letters, lowercase letters, and letter sounds (see Appendix A). Student progress in letter sounds and letter names was recorded and compared using student pretest scores and post-test scores.

Data Analysis

As research was conducted, explicit literacy instruction was given to each small group using letter sounds or letter names. The researcher met with small groups twice each week and compiled anecdotal notes that were reviewed to drive further small group instruction. Mean scores were collected from a pre and post assessment using the Really Great Reading Foundational Skills Letter Knowledge assessment (see Table 1). Each figure identifies the letter sound instruction group, denoted by S1-S10 and the letter name group, denoted by N1-N10. Each area of assessment is represented by its own graph containing the results for all twenty students. The researcher conducted a four-way factorial design to analyze the test outcomes from the letter name (control) and letter sounds (treatment) groups in each of the three areas: letter sounds, uppercase letters, and lowercase letters. The researcher wanted to determine what instruction method provided the most student growth in the instruction period allotted for the

action research. The level used to determine significance was less than or equal to p = .05, as is common in social science research.

Table 1

Letter Knowledge Survey Mean Scores

	Letter Sound Mean Scores				Letter Name Mean Scores			
	Number of Students	Sounds	Uppercase	Lowercase	Number of Students	Sounds	Uppercase	Lowercase
Pretest	10	12.2	16.3	14.1	10	12.6	16.3	15.2
Posttest	10	15.3	17.9	17.4	10	15.6	17.4	17.2

Letter Sounds

Data from the letter sound assessment pretest for the letter sound group (M = 12.2, SD = 8.941) and letter name group (M = 12.6, SD = 9.834) showed no significant difference $t(18) = -.095$, p = .925. Students started at an academically equal level in prior knowledge of letter sounds.

Students in the letter sound group showed significant difference between the letter sound assessment pretest (M = 12.2, SD = 8.941) and posttest (M =15.3, SD =9.741), t(9) =-3.768, p = .004. As a result of explicit instruction in letter sounds, students in the letter sound group showed growth between the pre and posttest on letter sounds (see Figure 1). Of students in the letter sound group, student S6 & S9 had no change. Student S4 acquired 8 new sounds.

Students in the letter name group showed significant difference between the letter sound assessment pretest (M =12.6, SD = 9.834) and posttest (M = 15.6, SD = 9.582), t(9) =-3.308, p =.009. As a result of explicit instruction in letter names, students in the letter name group showed growth between the pre and posttest on letter sounds (see Figure 1). Of students in the

letter name group, student N5, N7 & N 10 had no change. Student N2 & N3 acquired 7 new sounds.

Data from the letter sound assessment posttest for the letter sound group (M = 15.3, SD = 9.741) and letter name group (M = 15.6, SD = 9.582) showed no significant difference $t(18) = .069$, p = .945. Students ended the study at an academically equal level in knowledge of letter sounds regardless of the type of explicit instruction they received.

Letter Names

Uppercase Letters. Data from the uppercase letter name assessment pretest for the letter sound group (M = 16.3, SD = 9.393) and letter name group (M = 16.3, SD = 10.944) showed no significant difference $t(18) = 0$, p =1 . Students started at an academically equal level in prior knowledge of uppercase letter names.

Students in the letter sound group showed significant difference between the uppercase letter name assessment pretest (M =16.3, SD = 9.393) and posttest (M = 17.9, SD = 9.803), $t(9) = -2.587$, p = .029. As a result of explicit instruction in letter names, students in the letter sound group showed growth between the pre and posttest on letter sounds (see Figure 2). Of students in the letter sound group, student S1, S9 & S10 had no change. Student S5 acquired 6 new uppercase letter names.

Students in the letter name group showed significant difference between the uppercase letter name assessment pretest (M = 16.3, SD = 10.944) and posttest (M = 17.4, SD = 10.689), $t(9) = -2.282$, p = .048. As a result of explicit instruction in letter names, students in the letter name group showed growth between the pre and posttest on uppercase letter names (see Figure 2). Of students in the letter name group, student N5, N7 & N10 had no change. Student N8 regressed by 1 uppercase letter name and student N1 acquired 4 new uppercase letter names.

Data from the uppercase letter name assessment posttest for the letter sound group (M = 17.9, SD = 9.803) and letter name group (M = 17.4, SD = 10.689) showed no significant difference $t(18) = -.109$, $p = .9143$. Students ended the study at an academically equal level in knowledge of uppercase letter names regardless of the type of explicit instruction they received.

Lowercase Letters. Data from the lowercase letter name assessment pretest for the letter sound group (M =14.1, SD = 8.824) and letter name group (M = 15.2, SD = 10.799) showed no significant difference $t(18) = -.249$, $p = .805$. Students started at an academically equal level in prior knowledge of lowercase letter names.

Students in the letter sound group showed significant difference between the lowercase letter name assessment pretest (M = 14.1, SD = 8.824) and posttest (M = 17.4, SD = 9.264), $t(9) = -3.850$, $p = .003$. As a result of explicit instruction in letter names, students in the letter sound group showed growth between the pre and posttest on lowercase letter names (see Figure 3). Of student in the letter sound group, student S1 & S9 had no change. Student S2, S3, & S5 acquired 6 new lowercase letter names.

Students in the letter name group showed significant difference between the uppercase letter name assessment pretest (M = 15.2, SD = 10.799) and posttest (M =17.2, SD = 10.768), $t(9) = -2.927$, $p = .016$. As a result of explicit instruction in letter names, students in the letter name group showed growth between the pre and posttest on lowercase letter names (see Figure 3). Of students in the letter name group, student N5 & N10 had no change. Student N8 regressed 1 lowercase letter name and student N1 & N9 acquired 5 new lowercase letter names.

Data from the lowercase letter name assessment posttest for the letter sound group (M = 17.4, SD = 9.264) and letter name group (M = 17.2, SD = 10.768) showed no significant

difference *t*(18) = -.044, p = .964. Students ended the study at an academically equal level in knowledge of lowercase letter names regardless of the type of explicit instruction they received.

Figure 1

Letter Sounds

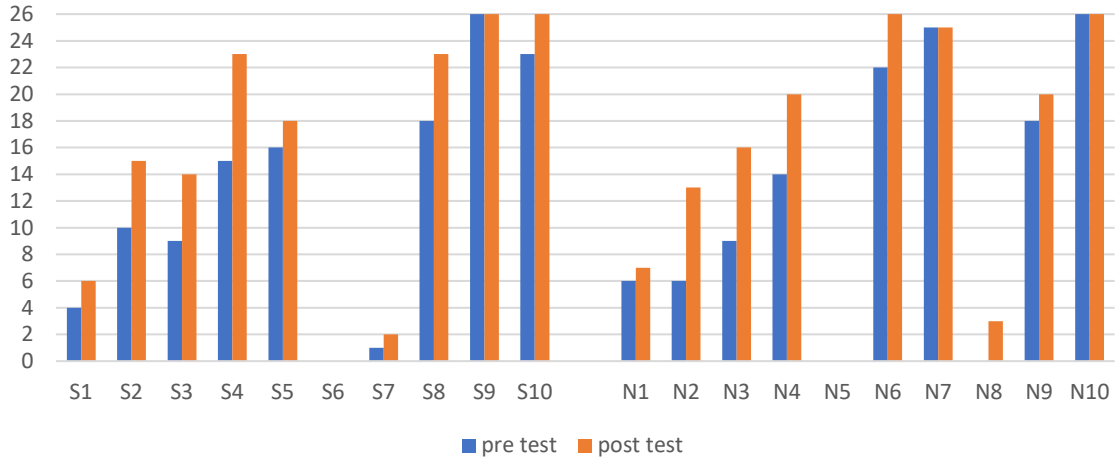


Figure 2

Uppercase Letters

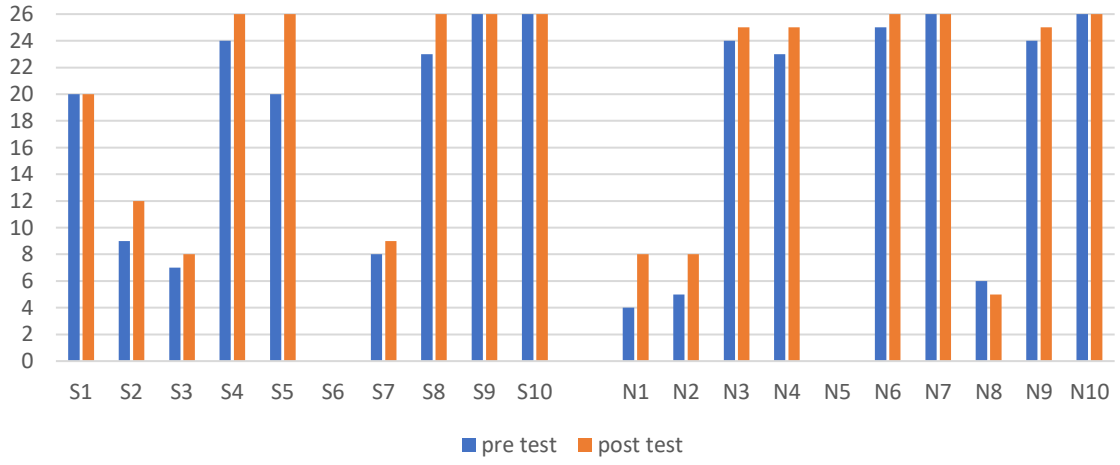
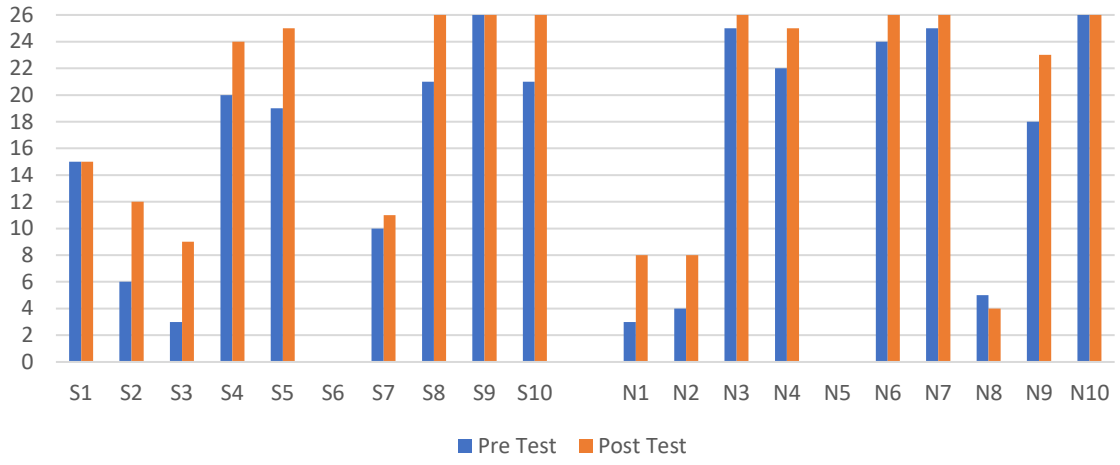


Figure 3

Lowercase Letters



Student S9 and Student N10 had already mastered all sounds and letter names prior to the intervention. Similarly, Student S6 and Student N5 did not make gains in response to small group and individual instruction. Student S6 joined the class when explicit instruction started and came from a non-English speaking home and spoke primarily in their home language, but had started using some simple English phrases. Student N5 used both their home language and English in class, but was also being evaluated for additional academic support. Student N8 dropped one point in two areas, losing an uppercase and lowercase letter name. This student was also being evaluated for additional academic support and behavioral support.

Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine how explicit literacy instruction focused on letter names and letter sounds affects student growth. Data analysis of this study showed that significant academic gains were made by students in the areas of letter sounds and letter names. The data did not sufficiently show a difference between the posttests of the letter name (control

group) or letter sound (treatment group) in any of the three assessed areas. The conclusion can be made that there was not statistically enough evidence to conclude that one instruction method was superior to the other. Students ended the study at an academically equal level in knowledge of letter sounds regardless of the type of explicit instruction they received.

Limitations of the Study

This study was impacted by seasonal weather conditions. Due to extreme cold temperatures and snowfall, the time that students were present in the classroom was shortened and instruction was condensed. Students were also limited by personal illness and prolonged family-related absences. Individual student behavior effected individual performance and the willingness to participate in small group activities.

The study was also impacted due to the allotted timeframe for the study to be completed. The research for this study was conducted six months into the school year, providing students with ample exposure to curriculum and learning revolving around the research study content. Students continued to receive the district literacy curriculum Launchpad by Really Great Reading throughout the study period. The curriculum was a required aspect of daily learning and taught or reviewed different letter sounds and their accompanying letter name with visual cues daily. Over the course of the twenty days students were present, seventeen sound and letter lessons were presented. The skills assessed and explicitly instructed in small groups are important for early literacy. Each of these skills independently are important in the early stages of learning to read, and each skill contributes to progress and growth of the others (Roberts et al., 2020).

Future Research

Provided opportunity to repeat this research study, more consideration world be given on the initial implementation of explicit instruction. The current research project was conducted after students had been receiving instruction in a classroom setting for approximately six months. The potential growth for students who are only beginning to be exposed to letters and sounds would be considerably higher.

Conclusion

Early childhood literacy instruction provides students with a good foundation for future learning and is the strongest predictor of later reading ability (Piasta et al., 2010). The goal of the research project was to determine practices that are most beneficial to early childhood students in the area of literacy. Reflecting on all of the data collected, the researcher has determined that both methods provide beneficial instruction to students in an early childhood setting.

Appendix A

Foundational Skills Survey **Letter Knowledge** RECORDING FORM A

Name _____ Grade _____ Age _____ Date _____

Assessor _____

Letter Names: Uppercase

						Number Correct
O	A	E	U	I		/ 5
Y	W	P	M	J		/ 5
S	Z	D	F	T		/ 5
G	N	B	R	K		/ 5
C	L	Q	H	V	X	/ 6

Comments:

Total Number Correct: / 26

Letter Names: Lowercase

						Number Correct
a	e	i	o	u		
c	b	g	n	j		
l	m	r	s	v		
w	f	y	z	p		
k	x	d	h	t	q	

Comments:

Number Correct: /26

Letter Sounds

						Number Correct
/ā/	/ē/	/ī/	/ō/	/ū/		
/k/	/b/	/g/	/n/	/j/		
/l/	/m/	/r/	/s/	/v/		
/w/	/f/	/y/	/z/	/p/		
/k/	/ks/	/d/	/h/	/t/		
/ch/	/sh/	/k/	/th/	/w/	/kw/	

Comments:

Number Correct: /31

Appendix B

Iowa Early Learning Essential Standard		
Early Literacy 6.2.PS Children engage in early reading experiences.		
IELS benchmark (learning target)	6.2.PS.8- recognizes most upper and lower case letters (letter knowledge).	
Pre-requisite skill	Identify own name	
	Continuum of Learning	Common Assessment
Exceeds	Identifies and names 11-20 upper- and 11-20 lowercase when presented in random order	Student is able to identify and name letters. Teachers will show students individual letter cards in uppercase and lowercase in random order. Letter cards will not have additional pictures on them. Students will identify by verbally naming each letter. Answers given with additional information (Andy, apple, A) will not be counted.
Meets	Recognizes and names as many 10 letters, especially those in own name	
Progressing	Recognize and names a few letters in own name	
Reinforcement	Unable to identify letters	

Iowa Early Learning Essential Standard		
Early Literacy 6.2.PS Children engage in early reading experiences.		
IELS benchmark (learning target)	6.2.PS.9- produces the sound of some of the letters she or he knows (phonics)	
Pre-requisite skill	Participates in language activities (songs, nursery rhymes, speaking)	
	Mastery for Skill	Assessment
Exceeds	Produces at least 1 correct sound for each letter in the alphabet	Checklist Students will produce letter sounds in random order Launchpad assessment
Meets	Produces the correct sounds for 13-20 letters	
Progressing	Produces the correct sound for 3-12 letters	
Reinforcement	Produces sounds for 2 or less letters	

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Appendix C

Students:	Date:
Activities	Notes
Name Practice	
Name puzzle	
Magnetic letters	
Whiteboard writing	
Letter/Sound Practice	
Match letters/sounds to name	
Match to alpha chart	
Find letters/sounds on alpha chart	
Working with Letters/Sounds	
Letter sort	
Sound picture sort	
Clapping syllables	
Magnetic letters & Elkonin boxes	
Write the letter/sound	
Reading Simple Text	
Only use for students who know majority of letters and sounds	
Title:	
ID beginning of words	
Frame and read	
Write simple sentence.	

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