

Rethinking Alphabet Instruction in Preschool Classrooms

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During the first half of the 20th century, teaching the alphabet and letter sounds was not considered a priority for children in nursery schools, kindergarten, and even some first grade classes (Johnson, 1996; Pratt, 1948; Pratt & Stanton, 1926; Wolfe, 2000). Then, on October 4, 1957, the Russian government launched Sputnik 1, the first artificial earth satellite that orbited the earth until December 25, 1957. The United States government believed that the country was falling behind in science and technology and a push for more rigorous standards in all education subjects began. This included a downward push of academic standards that eventually made their way to kindergarten and preschool. Before that time, the nursery school curriculum was more concerned with social emotional development and learning through play. By the late 20th century, most parents and preschool programs expected children to learn at least some letters by the time they entered kindergarten (Teale, 1995). In 2021, most states have standards or benchmarks for children learning the alphabet and “The Head Start Outcomes Framework—‘Identifies at least 10 letters of the alphabet, especially those in their name’” (McKay & Teale, 2015, p. 19) before children enter kindergarten.

The purpose of this article is to describe the current trend for teaching the alphabet, report evidence based approaches for teaching the alphabet and letter sounds, explain other important research findings related to teaching the alphabet, discuss teaching the alphabet and letter sounds using children’s names, describe teaching the alphabet and letter sounds with environmental print, and to show other ways to continually support children’s alphabet/letter learning throughout the year.

How Many Teachers Teach the Alphabet

There are many ways preschool teachers approach alphabet learning but one of the most popular is “letter of the week” (Aldridge et al., 2020; Lusche, 2003; McKay & Teale, 2015; Meier, 2010). “Letter of the week” is so popular according to McKay and Teale (2015) that “an online search reveals 144 million sites that offer resources to teach letter of the week” (p. 1). Approaches like the teaching of one letter per week “waste valuable time that could be spent on more meaningful and evidence-based practices” (Aldridge et al., 2020, p. 45). Many preschool teachers are reluctant to give up teaching a letter per week for several reasons. Some teachers may not know of more effective ways to teach letters and sounds. For others, the entire process of teaching the alphabet seems overwhelming and teaching one letter a week may seem more manageable. After all, in 26 weeks a teacher will have taught all the letters of the alphabet. One letter per week also is a simple lesson to plan for the week and teachers can usually create hands-on activities such as having students glue materials on pre-cut letters. The artifacts that are the result can be sent home with the children and placed on the refrigerator.

So, what is wrong with teaching one letter per week? A letter per week is not an authentic way of teaching or learning, meaning it is not what occurs in the “real world” in everyday activities (McKay & Teale, 2015). Further, this approach is inefficient and wastes time. Children who already know the letter of the week should be allowed to learn other letters and sounds instead of wasting valuable time on letters they already know. Further, students should be taught the names of letters *and* the sounds and there also should be a focus on phonological awareness. If a preschool teacher follows The Head Start Outcomes Framework, children should be learning letters associated with their names. This is a more efficient way to teach because children are interested in their own names and other children’s names (their friends) and the names of items within their environment. There also are more natural ways to learn, focusing on what children see every day, which includes learning through environmental print (Kirkland et al., 2007). After children have learned the letters and sounds in their names and their friends’ names, and learned letters and sounds through environmental print,

there are further ways to continually support children's learning of the alphabet and letter sounds (Aldridge et al., 2020; McKay & Teale, 2015).

10 Evidence Based Findings about Teaching Children the Alphabet and Letter Sounds

Since the launch of Sputnik 1 in 1957, there has been a plethora of research on teaching children the alphabet. The following findings are some of the most salient:

1. Children who know both the names of letters and their sounds are more likely to succeed in early literacy than those who do not (Adams, 2010; Hammil, 2004).
2. Further, "children who know lots of letter names also tend to score better in their knowledge of letter sounds" (McKay & Teale, 2015, p. 9). When teachers teach letter names, they also should teach their sounds.
3. Children most often learn letter names before they learn their sounds unless they are taught by a method that focuses on the letter sounds first such as the Montessori Method (McKay & Teale, 2015).
4. Knowing letter names facilitates phonological awareness. Phonological awareness involves the ability to isolate sounds. *Onset* is the initial consonant sound while *rime* is the vowel and consonants that come after the onset. Phonological awareness is an important skill in learning to read (Foy & Mann, 2006; Wagner et al., 1994).
5. Another important research finding is "alphabet instruction requires phonological awareness" (McKay & Teale, 2015, p. 13). Most teachers use a key word for a letter to help children learn that letter and its sound. A child must be able to hear the individual sound of that letter in order to associate that sound with the key word. An example is, "C is for cat." A child must hear the hard "c" sound or "k" sound in cat in order to associate it with "cat."
6. Children learn the letters in their names or nicknames and the letters in their friends' and families' names faster probably because they are interested in their own names and those of others (Aldridge et al., 2020).
7. There is no magical or perfect sequence for teaching the order of the alphabet. However, teaching the alphabet in sequential order, using one letter per week, is an inefficient and less effective way to teach the alphabet than other methods (Aldridge et al., 2020; Lusche, 2003; Meier, 2010). As McKay and Teale (2015) suggested, "A letter-of-the-week approach is problematic if it focuses mainly on letter-naming and letter-sound activities without also including sufficient systematic instructional attention to phonological awareness in conjunction with letter knowledge" (p. 20).
8. Preschool children tend to learn the first half of the alphabet slightly faster than the second half (Justice et al., 2006).
9. Students are more likely to learn letter names that start or end with the sound (phoneme) in the beginning (initial) or final position of the letter's pronunciation. For example, b /be/--the sound at the beginning or f /ef/, the sound at the end. Other letters, such as "y" have no sound relationship to the letter. In other words, the "y" sound is not heard in the name of the letter "y" (McKay & Teale, 2015).
10. Some children learn the alphabet (letters and sounds) faster when the teacher, parent or caregiver incorporates environmental print (Aldridge et al., 2020; Kirkland et al., 2007).

Translating Evidence-Based Findings Related to Teaching the Alphabet and Letter Sounds

There are other salient findings that reinforce these 10 basic research findings about teaching children the alphabet and letter sounds. These include:

1. Children who know 10 letters of the alphabet by the end of preschool or the beginning of kindergarten are more likely to be successful in learning to read in first grade and children who know 18 or more letters are likely to do well in literacy learning three grades later (Piasta et al., 2012).

2. Intentional and systematic instruction of letters and sounds is more successful than incidental instruction (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Phillips & Piasta, 2013).
3. “Exposure and practice: repeated, varied, and not too much” (McKay & Teale, 2015, p. 24) are important for children learning the alphabet and letter sounds (Piasta & Wagner, 2010). While instruction should be systematic and intentional, the importance of repeated and varied practice cannot be overstated. However, once children have learned a letter and its sound(s), there is no need to continue teaching that letter.
4. For typically developing preschool children, small group instruction is more effective than whole class instruction or individualized learning (Piasta & Wagner, 2010). Whole class and individualized instruction should not be eliminated, but small group instruction is more efficient for children learning the alphabet (McKay & Teale, 2015).
5. Children with delays or disabilities may need additional individualized instruction (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).
6. Children learn the alphabet and sounds of letters better when letters and sounds and phonological awareness are taught together (simultaneously) (Institute of Education Sciences (2006).
7. Instead of one letter per week, teachers should consider teaching one letter a day with constant review over time, remembering that this review should be repeated and varied but not overused. When students learn a letter and its sound(s), there is no need to continue reviewing that letter (McKay & Teale, 2015).
8. Interactive writing and print focused read alouds are effective tools in reinforcing alphabet and letter sound learning (Craig, 2006; Justice et al., 2010). “These instructional activities can be profitably incorporated into any early childhood classroom to promote a variety of aspects of early literacy learning, including alphabet knowledge” (McKay & Teale, 2015, p. 30).
9. Because there is no one best way to teach the letters and sounds of the alphabet, teachers must be reflective decision makers and determine what works best for them by carefully considering evidence-based approaches (Aldridge et al., 2020; McKay & Teale, 2015).
10. Three approaches that have been effective for many children in learning letters and sounds include:
 - a. *Focusing on Children’s Names*. Teachers can spend the first part of the year teaching children’s names as an effective tool for alphabet learning (Aldridge et al., 2020).
 - b. *Using Environmental Print*. Environmental print (print found in everyday life) can be used in class meetings and throughout the day to teach letters and sounds (Kirkland et al., 2007).
 - c. *Teaching letters from MOST frequent to LEAST frequent in terms of use*.
The most used to least used consonants are r, t, n, s, l, c, d, p, m, b, f, v, g (hard), g (soft), h, k, w, x, z, j, q, y. The most used vowels to least used are: i, a, e, o, u. (McKay & Teale, 2015). Teachers need to remember that letter names and sounds should be taught together. When some teachers see this list of most to least used letters, they question why the letter “y” is at the end of the consonants. After all, “y” is in all of the days of the week and the word “today.” However, “y” in these words is silent and NOT used as a consonant. When “y” is used as a consonant, it is the least used of all as a consonant.

Each of these specific approaches to teaching letters and sounds is described in detail in the sections that follow.

Teaching the Alphabet and Letter Sounds Using Children’s Names

Children are interested in their names and those of their friends. Using children’s names to teach the alphabet and letter sounds is an effective approach in preschool. Names can be used systematically throughout the day. For example, children can sign in when they arrive at school and also sign up for choices throughout the day such as centers and the lunch menu. The classroom can have a check out system for the books in the class library and children can identify and discuss children’s names and the sounds of letters in their names each day during circle time. Children’s names can also be used in their classroom areas and activities such as their individual cubbies, book bags, and self-portraits which can be drawn at the beginning or end of each calendar

month. Photographs also help children connect names to faces. Every child can write her or his name on the morning message and every child's name can be placed under the correct beginning letter on a room word wall.

Teaching the Alphabet and Letter Sounds with Environmental Print

Environmental print is an excellent tool for teaching the alphabet. Environmental print is defined as print children see in the natural setting throughout the day. This includes stores, food cans, billboards, traffic signs and any other print children encounter throughout the day. "Children see environmental print everywhere" (Kirkland et al., 2007, p. x) and this print can be used to help them learn letter names and sounds. Further, environmental print can be used to help bridge the transition from home to school. "Children can actively participate by bringing in print from the environment and sharing it with others" (Kirkland et al., 2007, p. xi).

At the beginning of preschool, teachers can explain to parents the value of environmental print and encourage them to help students learn the names of letters and sounds they see in the environment. An important part of environmental print is the environmental print box that is in a designated place in the classroom for children to bring print with which they have had a recent experience. For example, if Maria went with her grandmother to a particular restaurant, Maria could bring a napkin from that restaurant with the logo on the napkin. During morning meeting or circle time, the teacher pulls items children have brought to place in the box and the class discusses it and the letters/sounds of the print are discussed with the children and written in standard manuscript. "Maria went to Jarton's Barbecue with her grandmother." What sound do you hear at the beginning of Jarton's? What sounds do you hear in the middle? There are so many lessons on letters and sounds that can be derived from environmental print that the children bring to the classroom.

Continuing to Support Children's Learning of the Alphabet and Letter Sounds

Using children's names and environmental print are two effective ways to help children learn the letters and sounds of the English alphabet. After considerable time has been spent using both approaches, what does the preschool teacher do to continue supporting children's letter and sound knowledge? Some children will need to review the letters and sounds. Researchers have found that this is most effectively accomplished through direct and systematic instruction. We recommend that this review and continued learning be implemented by going from the most used consonants and vowels in the English language to the least used. This list can be found under item number 10 in the previous section, "Translating Evidence-Based Findings Related to Teaching the Alphabet and Letter Sounds."

While a letter a week is used extensively in preschools throughout the United States to teach children the alphabet and letter sounds, this approach is neither as effective nor efficient as more evidence-based methods. Since Sputnik I was launched, much research about children's early literacy learning has been done. This article has sought to report some of the most important findings related to teaching the alphabet and letter sounds. Three approaches that help children's early literacy learning include using children's names, environmental print, and continual review focusing on letters that are the most commonly used and continuing through the letters that are less common.

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