

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Current Practices for Teaching Letter and Letter Sound Knowledge in Preschool Including Strategies for Improving Instruction in these Areas

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Head Start teachers ($N = 48$) were interviewed about their beliefs and practices for supporting letter knowledge in their classrooms. Results highlighted that teachers believed letter knowledge to be an important skill for preschoolers to develop and articulated a variety of approaches to supporting this skill within their classrooms. Promoting letter knowledge through play and children's name letters were popular approaches; however, teachers missed many opportunities to promote letter and letter-sound knowledge with their children. Thus, in addition to presenting findings from semi-structured interviews, this article provides a range of research-based practices available to promote letter and letter-sound knowledge during preschool.

Keywords: letter knowledge, letter-sound knowledge, Head Start, preschool, teacher practice

Children's knowledge of alphabet letters is a foundational literacy skill and a consistent predictor of later reading achievement (Hammill, 2004; McIlraith, 2018; Schatschneider, Fletcher, Francis, Carlson, & Foorman, 2004; National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008). Children who can name more letters prior to kindergarten entry are less likely to have reading difficulties later (Piasta, Petscher, & Justice, 2012; Torppa, Poikkeus, Laskso, Eklund, & Lyytinen, 2006). Early learning standards (Head Start Resource Center, 2010) and professional recommendations (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000) specifically point to letter learning as an essential component of quality literacy education, particularly for children living in poverty, as they tend to know fewer letters than their wealthier peers (Barbarin et al., 2006; Norwalk, DiPerna, Lei, & Wu, 2012).

Fortuitously, the ways in which early educators approach letter instruction matters for children's development of letter knowledge (Lieberman & Schwartz, 2012; Piasta & Wagner, 2010). Teachers' beliefs about literacy (i.e., views and knowledge about planning, teaching, and evaluating children's skills, Cunningham, Zibulsky, & Callahan, 2009) and instruction seem to drive their selection of instructional practices (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013). To understand more about how children develop letter knowledge, this study examined Head Start teachers' beliefs and instructional approaches for supporting this valuable early literacy skill.

THE PRESENT STUDY

This study engaged 48 Head Start teachers in structured interviews of their beliefs and practices for promoting letter knowledge for prekindergarten age children. All teachers were female and the majority reported Caucasian ethnicity (88%). Teachers reported a highest educational degree of BA/BS (35%), AA (35%), MS/MA (26%), or high school diploma (4%). Teachers were experienced with an average of 17.17 years of teaching ($SD = 8.14$). Children in classrooms were four years old and thus, kindergarten eligible for the following year.

Informational letters were sent to teachers of four-year-old children to invite participation in the study. Individual interviews occurred during a Head Start-led in-service day as to not disrupt teachers during teaching days. To ensure consistency, interviews were conducted by researchers trained in the interview protocol which included seven questions and designated prompts (e.g., “Are there any other ideas you would like to share?”). Open-ended questions were used to gather information about general beliefs and practices; targeted questions were used to identify alignment between beliefs and recommended practices in the field. See Gerde, Skibbe, Goetsch, & Douglas, 2019 (this issue) for specific questions.

To enhance the credibility of the data, at the end of each question, interviewers repeated back to participants the response they heard and asked, “Am I capturing what you intended to say?” (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Interviews were audio recorded to ensure accuracy and transcribed verbatim following the interview. A recursive step-by-step process called Thematic Analysis was used by two coders with at least a MS degree in child development and preschool teaching experience to code teachers’ responses to each question (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews were read by each coder independently to identify patterns of ideas which became themes. Illustrative quotes were captured to exemplify each theme. The coders met to discuss the themes; disagreements were settled via consensus. With themes established, all interviews were coded in full.

RESULTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Results of the study indicated that Head Start teachers identify preschool as a key period of time for children to learn about letters. This is important because teachers are more likely to use practices that align with their beliefs, particularly for literacy (Bingham & Kenyon-Hall, 2013). Further, although teachers do identify some developmentally appropriate approaches to letter learning such as incorporating letter materials (e.g., “fishing for magnetic letters, foam letters in a water table”) and discussions about letters into children’s play (Roskos, Christie, Widman, & Holding, 2010; VanHoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 2014), other approaches identified in the interviews do not align with research-based practices (e.g., “teaching one letter per week”). In addition, numerous recommended practices for letter learning (e.g., “book reading,” Justice, McGinty, Piasta, Kaderavek, & Fan, 2010) were only reported infrequently. Many teachers reported uncertainty about how to approach several aspects of letter learning with children in their classrooms. The next sections provide research-based recommendations for promoting letter knowledge by answering key questions many early educators have about letter instruction.

How Many Letters Should Children Know?

Identifying the number of letters young children need to know prior to kindergarten entry is a common question among teachers and parents alike. It was a point of disagreement among teachers participating in this interview study with reports ranging from 10 to 52 or “at least the letters in their name” to “all of them.” The fact is, letter knowledge is a necessary skill for decoding and a consistent predictor of later reading (McIlraith, 2018; NELP, 2008). Therefore, the more letters a child knows when they enter kindergarten, the less likely they are to have reading difficulties (Schachneider et al., 2004; Torppa et al., 2006). Nationally, 65% of four-year-old children know all letters prior to entering kindergarten (West, Denton, & Reaney, 2000); however, only 21% of Head Start children know all of the letters by that time (Diamond, Gerde, & Powell, 2008), reflecting an important need for guidance. Fortunately, rigorous longitudinal research has identified optimal benchmarks for letter learning. Research recommends children know 18 uppercase and 15 lowercase by the end of preschool to minimize risk to later literacy difficulties (Piasta et al., 2012). Head Start has revised their letter knowledge standard to align with this recommendation. Basically, the more children know about letters, letter sounds, and how letters work together to create words and meaning the better prepared they are to tackle the essential task of reading.

What Letters Do Children Typically Know?

Typically, the first letters children know are the letters in their names, particularly the first initial (Justice, Pence, Bowles, & Wiggins 2006; Treiman & Kessler, 2004). Initials are often the first letters children write; name letters are frequently observed in children’s writing of other words (Treiman, Kessler, & Borousa, 2001). Nearly half of teachers in this study began their letter instruction with name letters citing the personally meaningful nature of these particular letters (e.g., “...because it has greater importance to them personally”). Name letters are a great entre into the world of letters because they are interesting to children as a reflection of who they are; standards promote name recognition and name writing (Head Start Resource Center, 2010), two skills targeting these particular letters. It is important, however, to leverage these name letters into knowing letters beyond their name, to ensure children reach the benchmarks described above (i.e., Piasta et al., 2012). Capitalizing on name letters, teachers can encourage children to notice the letters in peers’ names and use these in meaningful ways to promote letter knowledge and social skills like writing letters to peers, writing peers’ names on play plans (as recommended by curricula including High/Scope, Tools of the Mind), or using charts (e.g., sign in, jobs chart) or classroom labels (e.g., cubby labels) to identify peers’ names.

In What Order Should I Teach Letters?

While no studies to date have examined various instructional orderings for letters, the research literature does provide some guidance. Name letters are not the only early adopters for children. Some features of letters seem to make them easier to learn than other letters (Bowles, Skibbe, & Justice, 2011; Huang, Tortorelli, & Invernizzi, 2014) classifying them as early targets for letter instruction. Children are more likely to know letters in which the letter name and sound align (e.g.,

b, m, p; Cardoso-Martins, Mesquita, & Ehri, 2011; Evans, Bell, Shaw, Moretti, & Page, 2006; Treiman, Kessler, & Evans, 2007), those with placements earlier in the alphabet (McBride-Chang, 1999), or when the letter is meaningful in other contexts (e.g., X and O for tic-tac-toe, Bowles et al., 2011). Importantly, this suggests that letter instruction might benefit from diversity in attention to letters that are more or less familiar to children. The teachers in this study, however, did not report capitalizing on these important letter features to inform their letter instruction, highlighting an important missed opportunity for letter learning.

Alternatively, teachers in the present study did, in general, subscribe to the practice of teaching both uppercase and lowercase letters simultaneously, which aligns with research recommendations (Pence, Bowles, Skibbe, Justice, & Wiggins, 2010). It is important to move away from the traditional focus on uppercase letters only. While uppercase letters tend to be learned before lowercase letters (Drouin, Horner, & Sondergeld, 2012; Treiman & Kessler, 2004), children utilize their knowledge of uppercase letters to inform their understanding of lowercase letters (Pence et al., 2010). Optimally, introducing both uppercase and lowercase in preschool supports later reading (Piasta et al., 2012) and simultaneous presentation is recommended by letter learning approaches (Jones & Reutzel, 2012).

What Pacing Should I Use to Promote Letter Learning?

Letter pacing or how quickly letters are introduced is an important consideration for letter instruction. Recent research, examining various pacing practices for letter learning, discovered that children in classrooms that utilized a faster pace (i.e., faster than letter a week) for letter learning had higher letter knowledge at the end of preschool (Sunde, Furnes, & Lundetrae, 2019). Other work has recommended a one-letter-per-day (e.g., Jones & Reutzel, 2012) or to introduce 3-4 letters each week (Piasta & Wagner, 2010), both offering quicker paces than the traditional one letter per week approach. The commonly used, including by teachers in this study, Letter-of-the-Week approach is just too slow. In such pacing, all letters are not introduced until nearly the end of the school year limiting children's capacity to use these letters in meaningful ways in their play, writing, and routines. It is essential to pick up the pace in terms of introducing letters so that children may begin to see the alphabet as a unit and engage in rigorous comparison across letters that allows for discrimination among letter names, sounds, and forms. Teachers in the present study reported integrating opportunities with letters within children's play, however the slow pacing they used often results in a focus on isolated letters rather than meaningful approaches like asking children as they play in the pretend kitchen, "Which letters will you use to write 'milk' on your grocery list." A quickened pace allows children to access multiple letters in their play, earlier in the school year.

The quickened pace identified by Sunde and colleagues (2019) was particularly valuable for children who began school with lower letter knowledge, demonstrating that this quick pace does not "leave children behind" but rather affords strategies that reinforces letter learning. For example, the speedier pace permits teachers to cycle through the letters multiple times which provides the repetition recommended to solidify children's understanding of letters (Jones & Reutzel, 2012). In addition, reiterating that some letters are easier to learn than others (Bowles et al., 2011; Huang et al., 2014), this pacing approach permits teachers to diversify attention to letters by targeting instruction to letters that are less familiar to children.

How Do I Promote Letter-Sound Knowledge?

Letter knowledge includes both the names and sounds affiliated with alphabet letters (NELP, 2008). Extensive research has identified children's knowledge of letter sounds as a strong predictor of later reading and spelling skills across multiple languages (e.g., Catts, Herrera, Nielsen, & Bridges, 2015; Leppänen, Aunola, Niemi, & Nurmi, 2008; NELP, 2008). The development of letter-sound knowledge is essential to early letter learning because it is the mapping of letter sounds to letters that facilitates children's capacity to decode words and thus, read with fluency (Ball & Blachman, 1991; Carson, Gillon, & Boustead, 2013; Ehri, 2005). The results of the interviews reported above indicated that while Head Start teachers targeted letter names in their instruction, they addressed letter sounds to a far lesser degree. Similarly, families tend to focus on name rather than sound in their letter instruction with young children (Robins, Treiman, & Rosales, 2014). This is not surprising as limited guidance is provided for teaching letter sounds in curricula (Skibbe, Gerde, Wright, & Samples-Steele, 2016). Nevertheless, teaching letter sounds in conjunction with letter names is more effective for promoting literacy development than teaching the skills independently (Lonigan, Purpura, Wilson, Walker, & Clancy-Menchetti, 2013; Piasta, Purpura, & Wagner, 2010). Children benefit from explicit discussions about the connections between speech sounds (i.e., phonemes) and printed letters (i.e., graphemes) (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) and opportunities to use letters and letter sounds in their play (Roskos et al., 2010).

How Do I Learn What Children Know About Letters?

In order to inform instruction, it is important to identify which letters and sounds children know and which are yet to be learned. This can be difficult as children arrive at school with incredibly varied letter knowledge including how many letters they know and which letters they know (Justice et al., 2006; Piasta, 2014; Sigmundsson, Eriksen, Ofteland, & Haga, 2017). Many literacy assessments exist which include only a few items focused on letter knowledge (e.g., *Test of Early Reading Ability*, Reid, Hresko, & Hammill, 2001; Test of Preschool Early Literacy (Lonigan, Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 2007). Others assess all letters and letter-sounds (e.g., *Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening*, Invernizzi, Sullivan, & Meier, 2001), but are time intensive. Assessments which can be administered quickly and easily in the classroom and can be used across the school year to monitor progress are particularly useful (Tortorelli, Bowles, & Skibbe, 2017). For example, the Quick Letter Name Knowledge (Q-LNK) assessment (Tortorelli et al., 2017), based on the work of Bowles and colleagues (Bowles, Pentimonti, Gerde, & Montroy, 2014) offers a quick and informative approach to letter assessment. Using this type of assessment allows teachers to identify 1) which children know most letters, so they can focus on other target skills, 2) which children are at the beginning or middle of their letter knowledge development, and 3) how these children change in this skill at multiple points across the year. This information will allow educators to provide differential instruction for individual children (Piasta, 2014).

CONCLUSIONS

Head Start teachers engage children in a variety of research-based practices for promoting letter knowledge but could benefit from further guidance to engage children in letter instruction that best supports children's development of this essential early literacy skill. Young children learn letters best when they are provided explicit instruction which includes the letter name, letter-sound, and form for both upper and lowercases (Piasta et al., 2010; Jones & Reutzel, 2012; Bowles et al., 2011). In addition, children need multiple opportunities to use these letters in meaningful ways; dramatic play and writing activities represent optimal venues to do this (e.g., Bingham, Quinn, McRoy, Zhang, & Gerde, 2018; Christie et al., 2010). Finally, it is recommended that teachers find out what their students know about letters using assessments that are short and classroom friendly (Tortorelli et al., 2017). Letter instruction that is differentiated by letter and individualized by child will help all children in the classroom to meet their kindergarten readiness goals (Piasta, 2014).

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