

Know Better, Do Better

TEACHING THE FOUNDATIONS
SO EVERY CHILD CAN READ

David Liben and Meredith Liben



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Printed in the United States of America

21 20 19 18 17 1 2 3 4 5 6

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication Data
provided by Five Rainbows Cataloging Services

Names: Liben, Meredith, author. | Liben, David, author.

Title: Know better, do better : teaching the foundations so every child can read /
Meredith Liben, David Liben.

Description: West Palm Beach, FL : Learning Sciences, 2019.

Identifiers: ISBN 978-1-943920-69-3 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Literacy. | Literacy--Study and teaching. | Language arts. | Effective
teaching. | Education. | BISAC: LANGUAGE ARTS & DISCIPLINES / Literacy. |
EDUCATION / Teaching Methods & Materials / Language Arts. | EDUCATION /
Professional Development. | EDUCATION / Aims & Objectives.

Classification: LCC LB1050 .L53 2019 (print) | LCC LB1050 (ebook) | DDC 372.4--
dc23.

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Acknowledgements

So many streams feed into the river of this book. First, to name and thank our primary early reading mentors, to whom we owe debts for generosity we try daily to repay through our work: Chuck Perfetti, Tim Rasinski, Marilyn Adams, Linnea Ehri, Tim Shanahan, Freddy Hiebert, Louisa Moats, David Page, Deb Glaser, and Gwen Stephens.

We've gained insights and encouragement from numerous colleagues, and quite a few of them added responding to these chapters to their hefty workloads. Chief among them are Lorraine Griffith, Francie Alexanders, Joyce Harrison, David Page, Silas Kulkarni, Tori Filler, Carey Swanson, Alice Wiggins, Deb Glaser and Torrey Palmer. We thank you deeply.

We've had the great good luck to get paid for learning (along with working really hard). We've been more fortunate than most in this regard, thanks most recently to our affiliation with Student Achievement Partners. We wouldn't have learned enough to write this book without the opportunities working with SAP has provided.

Our gratitude and deep affection go to the parents, students and staff of The Family Academy. Truly the epitome of 'it takes a village'... To the parents: you trusted us with your children before we deserved it. You stayed with us, shifted quickly to "trust but verify" and always pushed us to be better for your children. We strive still to deserve your trust and the investment you made in us as educators. To our students: you showed us what a school could be when all the students love to read, and what all school communities should be. Our love to you as you continue to work to be your own best selves. To the staff – we built a great curriculum and school together. We worked and played hard. Each of you were instrumental.

Finally, to Luke and Zach, who put up with a reading-obsessed father and step-mom. You grew up alongside the Family Academy with little complaint about how often our attention focused away from you to it. You both added your unique contributions to our understanding of reading's place in a life. Long live *Narnia* and *Farmer Boy*

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Introduction: A Story

On a beautiful late spring day in 1994, we rounded the corner of 113th Street and walked toward the building that housed the alternative public elementary school in Harlem we had started three years earlier. We were met by the sight of the principal from the school downstairs waving us down, and then we saw three New York City television news vans parked in front. Our first thoughts were that some terrible accident had happened with one of our staff or students.

The principal let us know that our young school's first efforts at taking the annual reading test had resulted in the lowest scores in all of New York City, and the press wanted faces and comments to go along with the story. She suggested we go around the back entrance. We did, escaping for just a moment longer the stark reality that we were radically failing our children.

We dodged the television coverage but had to confront the reality of how we were failing. We gave ourselves a year to figure it out and improve our children's outcomes or hand over the reins to better-equipped educators. The learning gathered in this book started on that sidewalk back in 1994.

"We" are David and Meredith Liben, two of the three teachers who opened the Family Academy in central Harlem in the fall of 1991. We had been successful middle and high school teachers in public and private schools, David for 15 years and Meredith for 9, before starting the Family Academy. The third founder, Christina Giammalva, had come to us as a volunteer at the junior high we started in East Harlem and stayed there with us for 3 years, becoming a teacher in the process. None of us had ever taught below fourth grade. We knew nothing about beginning reading, and for much of the first three years of the school, buoyed by the holistic approach to reading instruction known then as Whole Language, knew nothing about how ignorant we were.

The Family Academy was a regular public school, authorized and run under the auspices of Community School District 3, that we got permission to open in the fall of 1991.

The school was designed to answer a very simple question: If an urban school serving 100% students from low-income families had all the money it needed to educate its children as well as suburban children are, what should that school look like? Our answer was a school that was open and running all day and during the summer, provided on-site supports and services for

children and their parents, had high-quality extracurricular offerings, and was 100% made up of students from families from the neighborhood. You can get a good sense of what we were striving for by reading *The New York Times* article about our school.¹

None of those wraparound supports was provided by the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) nor were the comprehensive library, school band, swimming lessons, sports and theater programs, and other services we continued to build and improve. So money had to be raised from private sources, a task Christina gamely took on. At the time we started, there was little competition for educational philanthropy. There were no charter schools in New York, no Harlem Children's Zone, and little competition for support from any other grassroots educational reform efforts. National organizations such as Teach for America were just getting started, and it was the 1990s economic boom in New York City. We were able to raise all the money we needed to create the rich extracurricular programming and wraparound supports we had envisioned.

Parents were ecstatic to have their children in school all day in the same place where they themselves could take adult classes, meet with a social worker, get help with job applications, and take advantage of myriad other services. Because of the small size of the school (two classes per grade and growing just one grade bigger each year), everyone knew everyone. It was in so many respects an ideal environment. We could pay attention to the social and emotional needs, not only of students but also of their parents, and we were doing it in a close-knit community under immediate local control. The Family Academy had everything many reformers have advocated for decades, ingredients we still believe in deeply.²

But we had the lowest reading scores in the city of New York the year our initial class of second-grade students³ took the citywide reading test.

Why?

A good short answer would be that the three teachers who started the school knew nothing about beginning reading. This would be true. A closely related answer would be that even if everything else is done beautifully if you don't have the right curriculum you won't have academic success. The Family

¹ For the article in *The New York Times* that gives a comprehensive look at the design and goals of the Family Academy: <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/01/26/us/school-public-school-harlem-that-takes-time-trouble-be-family.html>.

² See James Comer's *School Power* (1995), in particular, for a summary of the work that influenced our thinking about creating a full-service school for families.

³ The year 1994 was the last one New York City tested second-grade students in reading and math. That meant our first group of students were the only children in the school to take the test two years running because the testing shifted to begin at third grade the same year they became third-grade students.

Academy was a dramatic example of this. But it was not an isolated phenomenon. A recent report from the Brown Center on Education analyzing 2018 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) data show that the median (50th percentile) scores of children of color and children from low-income families fall between the 10th and 25th percentile scores of white and more affluent children.⁴ Sadly, this has been true since a similar comparison was made back in 1996. The major reason for these discrepant results is the same reason we got the lowest reading scores in New York City back in 1994. The instructional approach we used to teach our children how to read, very similar to approaches in place in many schools today, wasn't based on any scientific evidence at all. That proves itself in our collective failure to teach too many children to read. This particularly impacts children who most need their learning accelerated by the schools they attend and the teachers who love and care for them.

*Even if everything else
is done beautifully if
you don't have the right
curriculum you won't
have academic success.*

Tipping our hand here—this whole book is about teaching children what they need to learn about reading on time so almost no one needs intervention. It's our goal that every child in every elementary school in America can read fluently by the end of second grade. This book explains how to make that happen—for all children in all classrooms. They get to play with sounds and the sounds letters make in kindergarten. They get to decode—learn the patterns of the English language—in first grade and come to recognize those patterns automatically and quickly—to rapidly name them. And then in second grade, they learn to read multisyllabic words and grade-level text of all sorts fluently. They do all this while getting read to multiple times a day in school so they fully know the beauty, knowledge, and wonders available to them between the pages of a book, even books they can't yet read for themselves. Then all children can unlock knowledge for themselves all the rest of their lives. That's what we're striving for. Along the way, we hope to show that a research-based reading program is most effective for *all* students. A good one will support teachers in integrating lots of fun and intellect into the rich learning.

So, in this book, we'll teach you what the research clearly points to. The good news is the research findings are consistent and clear. Yet much reading instruction is fuzzy and doesn't acknowledge those findings. Many educators are still recommending and following practices that match their training, without realizing these practices are problematic for vulnerable

⁴ This is the link to the Brown Center report of the 2018 NAEP results: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/2018-brown-center-report-on-american-education-trends-in-naep-math-reading-and-civics-scores/>.

groups of children. And they persist in doing so even though many of their children aren't learning how to read. We'll explain what the right instructional approaches are, why they are much better for all children, and why it has been so hard for teachers and schools to embrace them. We'll share some stories that we hope will bust myths about foundational skills mastery being dreary for young students and their teachers.

We'll look at each of the elements of a research-based beginning reading (foundational skills) program. For each, we will address what it is and how it should and shouldn't be taught. We'll reference the startlingly abundant research behind why each is essential and how best to teach it.

Along the way, you'll see the changes we made at the Family Academy, how and why they worked so well, and how you can make the same changes in your school or community. We'll also share lessons learned and resources developed from the other work we've done around the United States. In the last part of the book, contained in an appendix, we'll take a close look at some core English Language Arts (ELA) programs that get it right and how you can get more information for each.

Spoiler alert! The Family Academy test scores rose to be the highest of any non-gifted school in Harlem. Part of the story of how we did that runs through these chapters, and our work at the Family Academy forms the core of who we are as educators. David was the principal of the school for the first decade. Over the course of that same period, Meredith taught kindergarten, then second grade and fifth grade before becoming the director of the Family Academy middle school.

As a result of our dramatic turnaround in reading results, the school and our work came to the attention of the New York City Education Chancellor, who sent a young man doing pro bono consulting work for the NYCDOE to study what we had done in developing our students to be such robust readers. That young man was David Coleman, one of the primary architects of the college and career ready standards movement. Since then, we've worked on and off with David. When he was chosen by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to be one of the three writers of the ELA standards, he reached out to the two of us to support that work. David (Liben) synthesized the research behind the ELA standards that is captured in Appendix A,⁵ and Meredith ran the two research projects that determined what text complexity meant and what levels were valid for each grade band. That body of research has underpinned all the college and career readiness standards in place across the United States today.

Who is this book for? For anyone concerned about the poor reading results of America's children but primarily for teachers: early career teachers, those

⁵ Appendix A: http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf.

in preservice, or teachers who are dissatisfied with how their students are reading. We wanted parents to be able to read this book and understand the ideas, too, so they can be educated advocates for their children. Because we wanted the concepts and research we're discussing to be accessible, we did our best to keep educational jargon out and stories and clear prose in. We also made the book somewhat interactive by posing questions and ideas to reflect on a few times in each chapter. It is your choice, of course, whether you do those or not, and if you prefer, you can interact directly with us via our website, Reading Done Right. In fact, we hope you will!

Why write this book now? Primarily because we can't stand the fact that not every child in this country learns to read in early elementary school. Children need to learn on time so they can reap all the benefits reading yields ever after. Nearly every child can learn to read. Too many don't, and far more not well enough for future academic and career success. Nonreaders and weak readers can't access the ideas, skills, and knowledge they need to be college and career ready, to engage civilly, and to have the life options they deserve.

Educational outcomes for children who initially struggle to learn to read don't have to stay low. If we follow the research into good literacy practices and use instructional materials tightly aligned with those practices, they won't. Our hope for this book is very simple: more teachers and schools will start to use the right approaches for beginning reading, and children will benefit.

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Letter Recognition and Alphabetic Knowledge

This is Meredith's story. Ella impatiently motioned for me to move out of her way. "I can't see how to make the 'B,'" she said. "It's on the wall over there, above the door, but I can't see it with you in the way." She gestured at the alphabet chart running across the side wall of the classroom.

I moved as asked. Ella studied the alphabet chart briefly, located the card with the banana and 'B_b' on it near the "edge" of the strip as she remembered, and proceeded to write 'b' accurately on her paper (Figure 1).

Ella was in kindergarten and didn't yet have solid alphabetic knowledge. She hadn't had a chance to play with, manipulate, and memorize the shapes of the letters of the English alphabet well enough to write them without a model. By mid-March, the time I was observing her class, she had learned the names of most of the letters and was starting to identify the sounds each letter made, but she couldn't always match the name of a letter to its shape.

It had taken her almost a minute to move me out of her way, locate the 'B' on the chart, and remember how to write it accurately. Meanwhile, the teacher and her classmates had moved on to a whole other section of the lesson. Ella was an intelligent child; what was missing and slowing her down was a knowledge gap because of her history, not any learning disability or intrinsic problem. She was hampered by experiences she hadn't had that most of her classmates had. Whenever the class was discussing and working with phonic patterns and were mapping sounds onto an increasing number of letters and forming words, Ella had to do extra steps *every* time to get to where other children were starting. Because Ella was so resourceful, her teacher had not

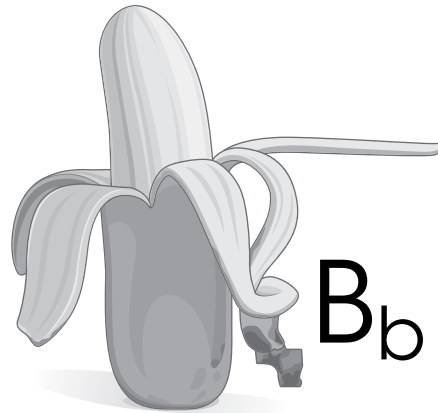


FIGURE 1. Photograph of a banana used in an alphabet chart.

realized her gaps and the toll they were taking until I chanced to be in her way, observed what was happening, and alerted her teacher to what Ella needed to quickly learn to catch up.

What exactly are alphabetic knowledge and letter recognition?

We bet you have a pretty good idea already! Before you go on, write brief working definitions in the space below and then check your definitions against ours.

Letter Recognition:

Alphabetic Knowledge:

Here are our working definitions.

Letter recognition is a subset of alphabetic knowledge. As its name implies, it is the ability to recognize and identify each letter of the alphabet by name in both its upper- and lowercase forms.

Alphabetic knowledge is the ability to recognize every letter of the alphabet in both upper- and lowercase forms, match the 26 names of the English alphabet letters to those forms, and then know the primary sounds each letter makes. Letters in English make sounds other than their names. Think, for example, about the two sounds 'C' makes (/k/ and /s/).

Are These Basic Skills Important in the Scheme of Things? A Story

This knowledge is the building block for reading the English language. It's so simple and straightforward, so loaded with common sense, that it's sometimes in danger of being skipped over in favor of going straight to the sounds those letters make. But these basic skills are essential. Research is clear that "the prerequisites for learning to decode are **letter recognition**, **letter-sound knowledge**, and phonemic awareness" [emphasis added] (Adams, 2011). A recently published

study correlates kindergarteners' letter naming ability with *tenth-grade* reading comprehension ability (Stanley, Petscher, & Catts, 2017). Let's take this stunning finding back to Ella. She couldn't write 'B' without looking, which meant she spent extra time laboring over letter formation. But that also means she couldn't visualize 'B' and 'b' in her mind. It's not very likely 'B' was her only troublesome letter. Ella would be slow to recognize individual letters in print and then would have to recall what sounds were associated with each letter. This would play out during reading lessons, while doing individual work, or in any literacy activity. Slow letter recognition means words are worked out more slowly. Once Ella did all the work to recognize a word, she had to integrate that with all the other words (each labored over in turn) to read a sentence. You can see that all of Ella's working memory and problem-solving capacity was getting taken up by the laborious task of connecting her new learning to the most basic starting point, letter recognition, writing words letter by letter. Smart and resourceful as she was, she couldn't spare much thinking power for actually processing the meaning of words she was writing. If her slow letter recognition wasn't spotted and dealt with, the domino effect on her reading clearly would have damaging long-term effects. That's what this research has so clearly shown.

In short, letter recognition and alphabetic knowledge are important. They are essential building blocks in learning to read and critically important in service to that goal. They are straightforward elements of the foundational skills package, as are concepts of print, the subject of the next chapter.

Exactly Why Are They Important?

They Offer a Common Language

Letter name knowledge allows for a common language when talking about letter sounds/phonemic awareness, decoding, and spelling. Letters are really abstract. They're just symbols in two dimensions. They need to be discussed and thought about, played with and manipulated a lot before they start to make sense for young children. If everyone in the group knows the names of each of the letters, it allows the class to have a shared conversation about letters and what they do. So knowing the names of the symbols that represent sounds in written English allows for a common literacy vocabulary to be built in a classroom.

Letter Names Allow Us to Study Them and Share Insights

Just as students learn that circles are a common kind of shape that share features (no corners, round) or cats are a kind of animal that shares common

features (whiskers, pointy ears), so too they learn that the /m/ sound is represented by the symbol ‘M’ and is named “em.” Then they know what to pay attention to when we’re discussing a word or sound that involves ‘M.’ They can see that ‘M’ can be represented in uppercase (‘M’) and in a lowercase form that looks somewhat different (‘m’). Then they need to learn that some letters look *really* different in upper- and lowercase, as in the case of the symbols for ‘G’ and lowercase ‘g’ (or sometimes ‘g’). All those different forms of ‘G’ still have the same name.

Letter Names Ground Us until Our Letter Knowledge Is Cemented in Our Minds

The names of the letters build connections between all the different ways you know letters in your brain until those connections become automatic and disappear into the background to do their seemingly magical work. You will start to distinguish and have a picture of an ‘M’ when you sing the alphabet song, instead of just sliding through it fast, as “LMNO.” You’ll notice ‘M’s and ‘m’s (and all your learned letters) when you see them on the pages of books read to you or on street and store signs when you’re out in the world. Your brain will remember ‘M’ for you forever so you can always and automatically retrieve and build on what you know about it as you move on to all the other aspects of becoming a reader.

Letter Awareness Is a Step toward Word Awareness

Being aware of letters makes children more aware of printed words because they are made up of groups of letters. Because all words are built from individual letters and the sounds they represent coming together in patterned ways, recognizing the letters in our alphabet is a critical component to reading.

Letter names bridge upper- and lowercase forms of letters and let children know they stand for the same thing.

Automatic Recognition

Being able to name letters rapidly (rapid naming) is a crucial component of decoding. Our brains are hard-wired to recognize physical objects and name them although we vary in how quick we are about it, but learning to recognize and name abstract symbols (letters) is not natural and must be taught and practiced. Some children need much more time practicing this than others will. That’s because people vary in how quick or slow they are at rapidly identifying and naming objects. But practice can improve outcomes. Think about eye–hand

coordination, another trait thought to be fixed. Some people have naturally better eye–hand coordination than others, creating a continuum of abilities for such activities as sewing or playing baseball. If you sew, for example, and want to get better at threading a needle, you can practice threading needles and get better at the task. It’s the same with practicing letter recognition and naming. You might not have natural rapidity, but letter naming, in particular, can be improved through practice. The amount of practice it takes to become automatic with any skill, including letter naming, will vary widely from child to child.

Sound Sensitivity

Many (but not all) letters have a sound correspondence to their names (‘A,’ ‘B,’ ‘C,’ ‘D,’ ‘E,’ ‘G,’ ‘I,’ ‘J,’ ‘K,’ ‘O,’ ‘P,’ ‘T,’ ‘U,’ ‘V,’ and ‘Z’), meaning their name begins with or sounds just like the dominant sound that letter makes in words. So learning the names of letters helps develop phonemic sensitivity (the ability to identify clearly) at the phoneme level. This can ease the transition to focusing on the sounds graphemes (letters) make that are at the heart of phonics instruction. An important note, however: this is not true for all letters. Paying attention to the connection between a letter’s name and the phoneme it is used to represent can help you track students’ confusion. When, for example, they begin writing, if they’re using a ‘d’ for the /w/ sound, that may have everything to do with the name of the ‘W’ (“double ‘u’”). Being aware of this distinction between the name and the primary sound can help you pay close attention to this nuance when teaching. It may also help you figure out what those fertile brains are thinking!

So, alphabetic knowledge, knowing letter shapes, each letter name, and the sounds each letter can make, is critical. It is blessedly easy to teach, and the good news is that this is easy and playful work for nearly all children. It is quick and simple to acquire for most children, but that doesn’t mean it’s not an important ingredient to attend to.

Children need to be comfortable recognizing and naming the 52 letter shapes (26 uppercase and 26 lowercase letters). If they can recognize and name them rapidly, that is a very good sign for their reading progress. *Many* children come into kindergarten with this knowledge from home or preschool, so much so that kindergarten teachers often presume its presence and don’t always check for this knowledge. That oversight leaves children such as Ella scrambling.

How Do You Teach It?

Most children love familiarity and repetition, and we generally enjoy doing things we’re good at. So we don’t have to worry overmuch about children with

letter knowledge losing interest while we're working whole class to make sure all the children gain mastery. Some alphabet activities just make sense to do whole class whereas many other activities can be done in small groups, so children who need more practice opportunities get what they need to help them move forward.

Whole-Class Songs and Activities

The Alphabet Song. Your students will happily sing the alphabet song and will be interested in expanding their knowledge of the alphabet through it. You can:

- ask students to dissect the song elements by focusing on it letter by letter while looking at the visual of an alphabet chart.
- pick students to stand up and take turns pointing quickly at each letter to guide their fellow students in looking at each as they sing its name. Use a fancy pointer to create a festive and fun atmosphere.
- engage everyone. Give each child a letter or two to hold and have each one wave or lift it in turn when it is named in the song as the children sing it slowly.
- laugh together over the “LMNO” blending that we have all done and challenge the class to find those separate letters in the alphabet chart.

Free games for recognizing and naming letters and for learning the sounds each letter makes that are appropriate for whole-class activities abound and can be found with simple internet searches. Most of them, like the alphabet song, are geared to preschool, which is when this set of skills is most appropriately mastered.

Alphabet Books

Read high-quality alphabet books regularly as part of your kindergarten read-aloud program. Some of the most beloved picture books of all time are alphabet books. There are many gorgeous alphabet books students will request repeatedly. Some links to “best of” lists for alphabet books are included in the resources at the end of this chapter.

Because you will probably have some students who have alphabetic knowledge and some who don't, you'll want to be able to provide different experiences via small groups to give all children the experiences they need.

Be cautious when alphabet books are connected to sounds, however. If the goal is letter recognition, this work can be done in many ways, but often authors inadvertently use non-examples when connecting letter recognition to letter sounds (think “X’ is for xylophone” but also “O’ is for oven”).

Small-Group Activities

There are myriad ways to make sure students learn to recognize and write letters. Cycle as many of these teaching processes through your classroom as possible. Children who have not mastered letter recognition and do not have full alphabetic knowledge of the most common representations of sounds that individual letters stand for should be systematically provided with these learning opportunities until they demonstrate mastery. All children should have access to as many of the following manipulatives as possible and be taught how to play with them to maximize their learning: alphabet blocks, books, songs, refrigerator magnets, charts, desk charts, wall charts, coloring sheets, handwriting practice with letters, digital tools, and the encouragement and instruction to write what they want to say using their letter and alphabetic knowledge to spell their words—using “inventive” or “temporary” spelling patterns.

It is vital to know where your students (or your own child) are with alphabetic knowledge and to address any gaps so all children have the necessary knowledge they need to move forward with reading. Make sure you assess and keep track of where each child is in moving toward solid letter recognition and naming and the progress each has made in learning the dominant sound for each letter.

How Do You Assess Letter Recognition and Alphabetic Knowledge?

The two parts of alphabetic knowledge need to be assessed separately.

1. Letter naming: Children should be able to match the spoken names of each letter with both their upper- and lowercase forms. Free online assessment tools only spot check this knowledge. You need to know that *every* child knows the name of *every* letter and can recognize each letter in both cases.
2. Alphabetic knowledge: Children should use letters with increasing accuracy to spell the phonemes they identify in words. The absolutely best way to know if your students are getting more sophisticated at knowing what sounds each letter makes is through regularly analyzing their inventive spelling.

Early on, they might appropriately use letter names as stand-ins for the sounds words make, for example, ‘DA’ (= day), ‘JRF’ (= giraffe), or ‘R’ (= are). These young children are brilliant! They are demonstrating the understanding that letters are integrated into words and that written words represent spoken words. They are applying that understanding in rational, patterned ways. Even though there is more to it than those beautiful one-to-one correspondences

they are creating, these children are abstracting important knowledge and demonstrating what they know.

Starting to isolate more sounds and knowing what letters make those sounds will come along when phonemic awareness and alphabetic knowledge are both activated at once, as should be increasingly the case through kindergarten. You should start to see ‘SKL’ (= school), ‘DNSR’ (= dinosaur), or ‘GRL’ (= girl). Short vowel sounds are much harder to identify than consonant sounds, so don’t worry about missing vowels until children are working with phonic patterns such as CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words (e.g., cat, pop, or lit).

Once children have been taught a phonic pattern though, you should expect to see them produce those patterns accurately in their writing. This is true for whole words you’ve taught by sight, too. If they can’t, it means they didn’t learn them, and your diagnosis here should lead you to provide these children with more practice opportunities to strengthen the weak areas. That is the world of systematic phonics, *and* it touches on phonological awareness, too. We’ll be providing you with lots more detail in upcoming chapters.

How Do You Provide Alphabetic Knowledge for Students with Unfinished Learning in This Area?

Letter recognition is essential for the many shared communications and common references we make to letter names in our classrooms. It’s also essential to know the sounds letters make and to understand what letter someone is referring to when you’re learning to read in English. Although this is a finite area of learning and very straightforward, it’s important to make sure everyone has acquired these skills.

Whether our English learners come to us from a nonalphabetic language (such as Mandarin) or knowing another alphabet, they need to learn the names of the letters in the English alphabet to enable common naming conventions in their quest to learn to read and write English. This is equally true of literate monolingual English speakers who are studying another language, just in reverse. Students learning Russian or Ancient Greek need to first learn the names of the Cyrillic or Greek letters and the sounds associated with them before they can do almost anything else. But this can be done quickly and then dispensed with.

Some Final Things to Keep in Mind

This learning can and should be fun for children! Make it active. Encourage your students to use their whole body, to move to sides of the room for

distinguishing ‘b’ from ‘d’ and ‘p’ and ‘q,’ or jump up in place when they recognize an uppercase letter that matches the lowercase counterpart. The sky’s the limit to making this learning lively.

Uppercase letters are more distinct symbols and tend to be easier to identify and write. Many preschool programs suggest starting with them, but we didn’t find any research with solid recommendations or guidance regarding the benefit to teaching one case before another or on how long to wait between teaching both cases of a letter. We recommend you simply follow the guidance of the foundational skills program you’re using. English is a systematic and reliable language even if it isn’t always straightforward. That’s important to transmit to children at many junctures, along with the promise that system will be revealed to them as they learn it. Any good foundational skills program will help communicate that through its own systematic approach.

The motor component of forming letters—following correct letter formation and using a pencil or crayons on paper—helps build brain pathways for remembering letters. Capitalize on this practice. Say letter names clearly, provide a model of correct letter formation, and ask students to write the letters after you. Honor your students writing; it is their creation, but make sure it’s legible and the letter formation is as accurate as they can manage.

Spread out the introduction to similar-looking letters (‘p,’ ‘d,’ ‘b,’ and ‘q,’ or ‘m,’ and ‘w’), and teach the letters with clearly differentiated shapes earlier. It’s also good to learn the letters early where the sound they stand for begins their names: ‘B,’ ‘J,’ ‘K,’ ‘P,’ ‘T,’ ‘Z,’ ‘D,’ and ‘V.’ Notice we separated ‘B,’ ‘P,’ and ‘D’ because their lowercase forms (‘b,’ ‘p,’ and ‘d’) are confusing to children who haven’t yet grasped that the position of the letter matters nearly as much as its shape. After all, a triangle is a triangle no matter which direction it faces. But letters have to face a certain way. Talk about that directly, but don’t be surprised by how frequently children mix this up at first. After that, you could teach the letters for which the sound they stand for is the second sound children will hear in their names: ‘F,’ ‘L,’ ‘M,’ ‘N,’ ‘R,’ ‘S,’ and ‘X.’ Then, of course, there are the *very* confusing letter names for which there’s no connection between their name and the sound they stand for: ‘H,’ ‘W,’ and ‘Y.’ Of course, if the materials you’re relying on have an order of introduction, it is fine to follow it! Just keep these factors in mind so you can point them out to the children.

Just make sure your students know the name of each letter in each form and grasp the idea that every letter has at least two shapes.

You can move faster than you think. There is research that the “Letter of the Week” approach weakens children’s sound–symbol connection making by focusing *too* much on the symbol and name of each letter in isolation. Introduce two or three letters a week and keep cycling the taught letters with the newly introduced ones until everyone is confident with everything.

Letter identification and naming are in service of learning to read. They are a means, not an end in themselves. Don't overemphasize it as its own area of mastery. Contextualize letters in their roles as sound representatives and their important role as the *things* words are made of.

If you're teaching kindergarten, like Ella's teacher, or even first grade, you can't safely assume your children have alphabetic knowledge. They probably all won't, and glossing over this gap will have serious consequences for those students who don't have mastery of the alphabet. You have to be sure all your students attain mastery on your watch, meaning they're all able to identify every letter by name, recognize them in upper- and lowercase forms, and know the most common sound each letter makes. Make sure you can account for everyone's growth and mastery through the types of assessments we discussed. Otherwise, you're overlooking an important and easy-to-fix element that will stop your students from being positioned to prosper as beginning readers.

Sources for Deeper Learning and Teaching

Excellent two-page article on rapid naming a source of reading difficulty from Tufts Child Development Center

<https://ase.tufts.edu/crlr/documents/FAQNamingSpeedDeficit.pdf>

Good website for alphabetic activities:

Literacy for All Canada from the Edmonton (Alberta) Regional Learning Consortium

<http://literacyforallinstruction.ca/alphabet-phonological-awareness/>

Good resource from Arizona Department of Education with activities at the end

<https://cms.azed.gov/home/GetDocumentFile?id=59397eb63217e108981dda92>

Recorded video of the Alphabet Song with refrigerator magnet letters

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y88p4V_BCEU

Classic alphabet books

ABC, Doctor Seuss (1960)

Chicka Chicka Boom Boom, Bill Martin (1989)

Great alphabet books for older children

Take Away the A, by Michael Escoffier (2014)

The Graphic Alphabet, David Pelletier (1996)

P is for Pterodactyl: The Worst Alphabet Book Ever, by Raj Haldar (2018)

“Best of” alphabet picture books list

<https://www.joyfullythriving.com/best-alphabet-books/>

Teaching alphabet knowledge to older-than-average students

<https://classroom.synonym.com/teach-alphabet-adults-8077909.html>

<https://busyteacher.org/17917-how-to-teach-abc-to-adults-7-proven-ways.html>

Free, quick online assessment tool from Reading Rockets

<http://www.readingrockets.org/article/get-ready-read-screening-tool>

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