Moving Beyond “Letter of the Week”

Studying a letter of the alphabet each week is history. Instead, try focusing on letters and sounds in authentic contexts.

BY BOBBI FISHER

Kindergarten teachers frequently ask me about Letter of the Week. I reply that although I think it’s important for children to know letters and sounds, I believe focusing on one letter at a time for an extended period doesn’t support children in their literacy development. Letter of the Week sends the message that reading and writing is knowing letters and sounds, not the construction of meaning; the children’s interests, rather than a letter of the alphabet, should direct and guide the curriculum.

Limits of letter of the week. “Doing” Letter of the Week with kindergartners means learning and drilling on letter names and letter sounds by focusing on one letter at a time for about a week.

By overemphasizing the graphophonic (letters and sounds) cuing system—and thus minimizing semantic (meaning) and syntactic (grammar) strategies—Letter of the Week conveys the following misconceptions about reading and writing: reading is sounding out; knowing letters and sounds is a prerequisite to learning to read; the graphophonic cuing system is the most important system in learning to read; each letter is equally important in reading and writing; and writing is labeling.

Letter of the Week suggests a sequential view of reading in which letters are learned first, then sounds, and finally words, which are eventually put into simple sentences.

It also requires that all the children participate in the letter activities. This wastes the time and limits the reading and writing development of those who know the letters or who can already read, and decontextualizes literacy for children entering kindergarten as emergent readers or with limited experience with print.

In order to fit a Letter of the Week program, curriculum tends to focus on contrived topics or isolated subjects (usually picked by the teacher) and is limited by a weekly time...
frame, rather than by the engagement of the children. Letter of the Week directs, and therefore limits, curriculum content and the ways that children and teachers generate curriculum, thus restricting children's development as lifelong learners.

**Letters and sounds throughout the day.**
How then do we help children learn about letters and sounds in a kindergarten that does not do Letter of the Week? How do we expand the literacy growth of the children who already know letters and sounds, or who are reading? How do we generate meaningful curriculum for everyone?

The following vignettes describe how children, in varying degrees of literacy development, interact with letters in meaningful contexts in my kindergarten, and how I respond to and evaluate them during these authentic literacy events.

*"In my kindergarten, we spend more time now on letters and sounds than we did years ago when I followed a Letter of the Week program.*

It is 8:40 and the children begin to enter the classroom. Mary puts a note in the basket telling me that she will be picked up. I read it with her and comment that the M in Mrs. Fisher starts like her name. Stevie gets his name strip to copy as he signs in. I acknowledge that he's writing a lowercase e.

When I start singing "The Wheels on the Bus," the children gather at the rug area. Throughout group time, I point to the enlarged texts of songs, poems and big books. I ask children to raise their hands if they have a B at the beginning of their name. Billy and Tom Brown respond. Debby says that she has a b in her name.

For a minute or two, there is chatter about letters in names. The group refocuses as we sing "If I Had a Hammer." I ask the children what they notice and call on individuals so we can all hear what is said. Sam notices the pictures of the hammer and we point to the corresponding word. I ask everyone to count the number of h's on the chart. There is silence. I raise my pointer and the children whisper the answer. Then I move it along the text and we say the sound of h every time we come to a word beginning with h. I say the word.

Someone asks if we will be going outside for recess, and I refer the class to the day's schedule on the board. Ryan has learned to read it. (Recess is important to him.) We talk about looking for the R in recess.

Next, the leader for the day picks the big book *The Enormous Watermelon* (Rigby, 1986) by Brenda Parks and Judith Smith to read to the class. It's a favorite that we've read many times. I decide to focus on the title for a few minutes. Then, I ask, "If you were the author, what word could you use instead of enormous?" As I write the suggestions on the board, we talk about their meaning and spelling. We decide to read the story with the word hungry and I write it on a removable sticky note, which I move from page to page.

**Elsewhere.** In the writing area, Meagan is saying the alphabet as she points to the letters on the wall. She stops when she gets to h and writes it under the house she has drawn on her picture. Then she adds some random letters and turns to Stephanie to tell her about her new house.

Scott asks Dennis if cat begins with c or k, and Dennis writes a c on his paper. Rachel asks me how to spell walk, and I tell her to write it as best she can on scrap paper, before I talk with her about it and provide the conventional spelling.

Several children have returned to the art table for the third day in a row to work on constructing rockets. Yesterday they got some books at the library, and today, I plan to read one of them during story time. I hadn't planned that we would study rockets,

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but I will capitalize on these interests generated by the children. They've begun to make a museum of their constructions, complete with labels, and Devon has joined them to make a model of Saturn. I show him a book about planets and we look for s in the index to find the pages for Saturn.

We noticed that there were a lot of words beginning with s.

The day continues with meaningful opportunities to focus on letters and sounds in authentic contexts.

**Explicit teaching of letters and sounds.** Although discussions about specific letters and sounds occur throughout the day, I also give explicit instruction about them based on what I know as a teacher of emergent and beginning reading, what I notice children are working to gain control over in their reading and writing, and in response to specific questions they ask.

For example, I know many writers use letters from their names as they begin to invent spelling. I notice that Ryan W. is working with w in his writing, both to match the sound to letter; and to write the letter correctly.

During shared reading, we might focus on words beginning with w in a text such as Joy Cowley's *Mrs. Wishy-Washy* (The Wright Group, 1984) and practice tracing the letter in the air or on the rug as I write it on the chalkboard. We might generate a list of w words which I would write on a strip of paper, or talk about any of the children's names with w's in them.

This explicit instruction is always associated with text. We read the text, focus on a feature of the text (in this case w), examine it, and then read the specific feature again in the original text.

**Assessment of letter and sound knowledge.** It's important that I know specifically what letters and sounds the children in my class know so I can help them in their literacy development. In the first month of school, I formally evaluate each child using the “letter identification” materials developed by Marie Clay (1993). On one form, uppercase and lowercase letters are randomly sequenced on the page. The children tell me the ones they recognize and I record their responses on a recording form. I might also ask them for the beginning sound of the letter and/or a word that starts with the letter. I administer this same procedure again in March and share with the children and their parents their growth over the year.

I am continually assessing the children informally throughout the year, observing and recording the letters they use in their writing. These procedures help me plan for both group and individual teaching. They indicate specific letters I may want to make explicit during shared literacy, and identify kids who may need more support during writing, or more time with alphabet books.

In my kindergarten, we spend more time on letters and sounds than we did years ago when I followed a Letter of the Week program. We apply letter and sound knowledge strategically as we read and write for meaningful purposes. We integrate the graphophonemic, semantic and syntactic cues systems as we learn about the world, and curriculum generates from the authentic interests of the children, not from a letter of the alphabet.