

Workshop, Grades K-1

Alphabetic Principle

How the Alphabet Works

Letters work together in a systematic way to connect spoken language to written words. This is the *alphabetic principle*. Once they know the alphabetic principle, children can accurately and automatically recognize familiar words and decode any unfamiliar words they encounter as they read. In short, knowledge of the alphabetic principle contributes greatly to fluent reading. Poorly developed knowledge of the alphabetic principle, on the other hand, is the most frequent, debilitating, and pervasive cause of reading difficulty. If children cannot understand and apply the alphabetic principle, they will find word recognition a struggle, which will impede comprehension (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Prior to phonics instruction, students develop alphabetic knowledge, phonological and phonemic awareness, and learn to connect sounds to letters. Children develop their alphabetic knowledge by learning to identify the names and shapes of letters. To develop their phonological and phonemic awareness, children learn to become aware of and manipulate the sounds of spoken English.

Phonics in **Open Court Reading** is systematic and explicit. Phonics is systematic when there is a clear plan of instruction in which sounds and spellings are organized and taught in a logical sequence. Phonics instruction is explicit when sound/spelling relationships are overtly taught using clear directions for developing these relationships. Systematic, explicit phonics instruction helps children acquire an understanding of the alphabetic principle and apply their knowledge to recognizing and reading words quickly and accurately, which are essential for fluency and comprehension. Systematic, explicit phonics instruction helps students:

- Read each spelling in a word to identify the word and then to determine the word's meaning.
- Decode words by blending sounds and spellings.

Children's levels of *alphabetic knowledge* at the beginning of kindergarten is one of the best predictors of their reading success at the end of kindergarten and first grade (Chall, 1996; Share, Jorm, Maclean, & Matthews, 1984). Alphabetic knowledge is strongly correlated with children's ability to remember the forms of written words and with their ability to understand that words are sequences of letters (e.g., Ehri, 1987). Children with little or limited alphabetic knowledge at school entry are likely to have difficulty later when learning letter sounds and in recognizing words (e.g., Sulzby, 1983).

The level of children's phonological/phonemic awareness is a strong indicator of how successful they will be in learning to read (Juel, 1991; Stanovich, 1986). Such awareness improves both the ability to read words and, consequently, reading comprehension. Phonological/phonemic awareness instruction (including oral blending and segmentation) contributes to children's success. Oral blending is key to children's ability to decode (Adams, 1990), and instruction in segmentation contributes to children's success in learning to spell. Children who are aware of how spoken language works are better able to understand that sounds are represented by letters, and are able to attach the sounds to letters as they read and spell words (National Institute for Literacy, 2001; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Word recognition is the ability to associate a printed word with its meaning. As children begin to read, they need to develop effective word recognition strategies that permit them both to identify words effortlessly and to figure out the increasing number of unfamiliar words they encounter. Without strategies for reading words, children tend to devote too much mental energy to decoding the words, leaving too little energy for comprehension (Stanovich, 1991).

Connecting sounds to spellings is a crucial first step in learning to read and write. An equally important second step is learning to blend the sounds of spellings into words. Blending is important to early reading success, because it provides a strategy that students can use to figure out unfamiliar words on their own. Familiarizing children early on with a particular procedure for blending facilitates reading success (Honig, Diamond, & Gutlohn, 2000).

Conclusion

A thorough understanding of the alphabetic principle is the first and possibly the most crucial step children take in their challenge to become readers. Sufficient time and a systematic and explicit approach to instruction in the alphabetic principle are necessary to ensure the students' success. Accompanied by instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics, instruction in the alphabetic principle lays the necessary foundation.