Word Solvers
Making Sense of Letters and Sounds

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Chapter 2

Learning About Letters

Learning about letters plays a critical role in a child’s literacy progress (Adams 1990). As children learn letters, they learn to distinguish how one letter differs from another. They learn the names of the letters, and they learn the sounds associated with them. Although, as teachers, we often focus our attention on children learning letter-sound associations, it is first necessary for children to learn to see each letter symbol as something distinct from other letter symbols (Clay 1991). Learning to distinguish one letter from another similar-looking letter provides a challenge to the novice reader, especially when the letters are embedded in words (Lyons 1999). Learning to quickly distinguish one letter from another when they are embedded in a word will help children build a strong reading processing system.

Prior to entering school, most children have experiences with objects that remain the same no matter the orientation. For example, no matter how you hold a book, it is a book. When you set it flat on a table, it is a book. When you hold the book upright, it is still a book. Yet this is not so for letters. The orientation of the letter plays a crucial role! The smallest detail changed on a letter also changes the letter. The book remains a book, whether it is thick or thin, a rectangle or a square. Small loops and curves, taller stems, and extra humps can change a letter into a different letter. This of course can create lots of confusions for the novice reader and writer.
Assessing Students' Knowledge of Letters

Several tasks in Clay's An Observational Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (1993a) provide very useful information about individual children's understanding of letters. In Clay's Letter Identification Task the children are each shown fifty-four letterforms. The fifty-four letters include uppercase, lowercase, and the typeset a and g. The children are asked to identify them any way they can: by letter name, by letter sound, or by a word that begins with the letter. In about two or three minutes with each child, a teacher will have a clear idea of the children's ability to identify letters.

In another useful assessment task, the Dictation Task in the Observational Survey, the teacher dictates a sentence to a child and asks the child to say the words slowly and record the sounds. The task enables teachers to determine whether the child can hear and record a letter associated with a particular sound. Teachers may find that some children respond by drawing pictures instead of letters. Some children will make letter-like forms or tell the teacher they know what letter it is but don't know how to make it. These children may have had very few opportunities to learn about letters or to learn how to discriminate sounds and associate letters with sounds.

In a third observational task, Clay's Concepts About Print, the teacher can determine whether children understand the difference between a word and letter, whether they can find a lowercase letter to match an uppercase letter, and whether they can find the first and last letter in a word. The three Observational Survey tasks provide teachers with useful information to help in planning letter-learning activities for their children.

Getting Started

For children who have very little knowledge of letters, their own name is probably a good place to start. McCarrier and Patacca (1999) find that “powerful networks of learning can be built around children’s own names” (45). Young children have a personal connection with their names. For example, my friend's four-year-old son, Zachary, notices the z in pizza and wonders what his name is doing on the pizza box! He feels personally connected to the z and is now learning that the z isn't just for his name but can be used in other ways to make different words. This linking from what is known to
something new provides a more meaningful learning experience, especially for the child who knows very little about print.

Magnetic letters are a great resource for teaching children about the letters in their names and more about letters in general. The tactile, kinesthetic elements of handling the magnetic letters can be very helpful to children. The opportunity to touch and manipulate the letters provides a motor connection and supports children’s ability to remember (Clay 1993b).

Here are some things to try with magnetic letters and the child’s name:

- Place magnetic letters needed to make a child’s name into a sealable plastic baggie, along with a card with the name printed on it. Have the child use the magnetic letters to make the name on the card under the printed name (Figure 2–1).
- Place the child’s name in uppercase letters in one sealable plastic baggie and lowercase letters in another. Have the child match the upper- and lowercase letters.
- Have a group of children make their names with magnetic letters. Then have them find letters their names have in common.
- Have children make each other’s names with magnetic letters. Place a photograph of each child in the sealable plastic baggie along with the magnetic letters and the printed name card.

Figure 2–1 Child making his name
There are many different ways a teacher can help call the children’s attention to their name. Labels over the coat rack and on the children’s desks or tables are very effective. So are cards with printed names for tracing or copying. During interactive writing, charts with chants containing the children’s names and name charts that support hearing sounds in words make powerful instructional tools for literacy learning. See Pinnell and Fountas’s book _Word Matters: Teaching Phonics and Spelling in the Reading/Writing Classroom_ (1998) for more on using a name chart.

**Using Magnetic Letters to Teach Visual Discrimination**

Magnetic letters allow children to look more closely at letters. The following are some activities that can be done with magnetic letters:

- Examine distinctive visual features of letters, such as the parts of a letter that are straight or round.
- Look for the parts of a letter that make it different from another similar-looking letter.
- Recognize the same letter in different forms, such as uppercase and lowercase or the typeset *a* and *g*.
- Build speed at recognizing a letter when embedded in an array of other letters.
- Quickly recognize letters that commonly are confusing to children, such as *b* and *d* and *h* and *n*.

The following activities require a large magnetic easel. Use them with a group of children who have similar letter knowledge.

- Have the children take turns to sort the letters in their names from an array of other letters. Start with letters that look very different from the letters in their names, so as not to confuse the children. After they find the letters, have them make their name. Once the children can do this quickly, have them find the letters in their name from an array of letters that look similar to the letters in their names.
- Place an array of letters that are both tall and short on the magnetic board. Ask the children to separate the letters that are tall from the letters that are short.
• Place letters that are round (o, a, d) and letters that are straight (l, f, t) on the board. Have students separate letters that are round from letters that are straight. Discuss letters that have both features.

• Have children find letters they know from an array of letters placed closely together on the board. Start with letters they know well.

• From an array of letters, have children find all of one particular letter.

• Have children find and match uppercase and lowercase letters. This is a more advanced task and should be done only after they can easily recognize the lowercase letters.

It is easier for children to find the new letter if the other letters on the board are known letters to them or if they look very different from the new letter. In the beginning, use letters that are distinct. (See Figure 2–2.)

Some examples of easier sorting tasks:

• Sort l from m, o, and q
• Sort c from w, j, and t
• Sort y from n, e, and h

Later, have children sort from letters that are similar. It is a more difficult task to find a new letter from an array of letters that are similar in shape and size.

Some examples of more complex sorting tasks:

• Sort h from n, u, and m
• Sort a from e, d, and c
• Sort b from d, q, and p

Early on you may want to have the letters spread apart on the easel. Keep in mind, however, that children need to discriminate letters imbedded in words (Clay 1991). As students become more proficient at finding the letters, place the letters closer together. Look for the speed of recognition to increase.

According to Clay (1991), children beginning to discriminate between letters are developing more than one system for identifying or distinguishing letters—for example, phonemic, alphabetic, and visual. Although naming letters is a way of identifying letters, it is not
the most important understanding of letters. Some children have a
difficult time calling up the name of a letter. Nevertheless, many can
look for, and find, letters when asked. For the children who have a dif-
ficult time remembering the names of letters, ask them to find a let-
ter that you name. When they find it, ask them to say the letter name.

There are many different ways to approach letter sorting. Some
children will not be able to find a letter that the teacher names. Oth-
ers will be able to find a letter, but they will not be able to name it.
Here are four different ways a teacher might ask for the letter r after
placing fifteen letters on the board (Figure 2–3).

1. The teacher pulls out an r. “Here is an r. Can you find some
   more r’s?”
2. “Can you find the r, like the r in rabbit on our alphabet chart?”
3. “Can you find the r, like the r in Erica’s name on the class-
   room name chart?”
4. “Can you find the r like the one in the word run that we know?”

In these four examples, the children do not need to call up the name
of the letter r.

Later, when children know all the letter names, the teacher can
use a different approach:
Sample Lessons

Two Examples of Magnetic Letter Lessons Done in a Kindergarten Classroom

Example 1  The teacher gathers together three children who have very limited letter knowledge. She places an array of letters on the board that includes all the letters of their three names. She makes the first child’s name with magnetic letters.

“That’s my name!” says Ryan.

“Yes!” says the teacher. “Can you find all the letters in your name and make it say Ryan right under where I made Ryan?”

After Ryan makes his name and checks it against the teacher’s version, the teacher replaces the letters for Ryan in the array and has the second child make her name.

After each child makes her name, the teacher replaces the letters, so the array of letters stays large.
Example 2  The teacher had just finished an early emergent guided reading lesson with a group of five students. Using a magnetic tabletop easel, she shows them a group of letters clustered at the top. She pulls down a $c$ from the array, and says, “This is a $c$ like in Courtney’s name. Who can find another $c$?”

The teacher passes the easel around and the children take turns pulling $c$’s from the group of letters. This takes only one minute. They are invited to take time during choice time to return to the easel and find all of the $c$’s.

Two Examples of Magnetic Letter Lessons Done in a First-Grade Classroom.

Example 1  The teacher has grouped together six children who, while reading, often confuse words starting with the letters $d$ and $b$. She places several $d$’s among an array of other very different letters. She asks the children one at a time to find all of the $d$’s. She does this again and again for several days.

After the children have spent several days practicing sorting the $d$’s, the teacher places some $b$’s in the array. Again she ask the children to find just the $d$’s. The teacher does this until the children easily find the $d$’s and pass over the $b$’s without hesitation. Then she begins to have the children find the $b$’s.

Later, when separately sorting the $d$’s and $b$’s becomes quick and easy, the teacher might ask the students to sort the $b$’s and $d$’s into two groups during the same lesson (Figure 2–4).

Example 2  The teacher has noticed that several children are stopping at known words when the words start with a capital letter. On the magnetic board he places several upper- and lowercase $i$’s, $a$’s, $g$’s, $t$’s, and $h$’s. He has each child match the uppercase letter with the lowercase letter. Then the teacher makes the word $go$. He asks the children to make the word $go$ with an uppercase G. “Is it the same word?” he asks.

The children agree it is the same word; it just looks different. They talk about how it looks different. He repeats this with the words, is, it, and, here, and they.

Opportunities for Independent Practice

Name Puzzle

Place the magnetic letters needed to make a child’s name into an envelope. Write the child’s name on the outside of the envelope.
Have the child make, and then scramble and then make again, the name on a magnetic board. Then have the child write the name on a recording sheet. An alternative to using magnetic letters would be to make the child’s name on heavy paper. Cut the name up and place the letters in an envelope with the child’s name on the outside of the envelope.

**Letter Name Search**
Create a letter search containing letters from the names of many different children. Have the children find and circle the letters in their name—or highlight the letters with a highlighting marker.

**Muffin Cup Letter Sort**
Place several copies of three different magnetic letters into a container. Label the cups of a muffin container with different letters. Have the children sort the letters into the correct cups. (Instead of muffin cups you can use other small containers, such as plastic yogurt containers.) Have the children record the number of each of the different letters found.

**Animal Sort**
Place many copies of three different letters in an array on a large magnetic board. Have the children sort the letters. Make three large pictures for use in sorting the letters. For example, you could make
a big cat for the children to sort the c’s, a turtle for sorting the t’s, and a bear for sorting the b’s.

**Letter Search**

Have children look for words around the classroom starting with particular letters. After they find the word starting with the letter, have them write the word on a recording sheet. (See Figure 2–5.)

**Summary**

The fluency, speed, and ease with which children can name and recognize letters are important for facilitating the building of a reading and writing processing system (Lyons 1999). It is important for children to know many things about letters, such as the letterform, the letter sound, and words that begin with the letter. Teachers can provide many opportunities for learning about letters through a variety of reading and writing experiences and through use of magnetic letters for additional practice. It is not enough to be able to recognize and name a letter—the speed of recognition is essential.
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