Balanced Literacy: Is this an Effective Approach to Improving Early Reading Skills Among Kindergarten Students?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of a balanced literacy program, used to teach early literacy skills, on the achievement of a kindergarten class into first grade. The study used the Early Literacy Profile (ELP) to test student progress, a teacher survey to examine the use of the instructional approaches and the effect the approaches have on student academic achievement, and a comparison study between the implementation of the approaches on two small groups of struggling readers. It was found that the balanced literacy approach is an effective means to increasing early literacy skills among young learners.
Introduction

Rationale for the Study

Among educators, administrators, and experts alike, there has been an ongoing debate regarding the most effective approach for reading instruction. There are three basic approaches: phonics instruction, whole language instruction, and balanced literacy instruction (a combination of phonics and whole language). It has been questioned whether it is most effective to use one single approach or a combination of approaches when teaching young learners reading and other early literacy skills. Research has revealed that most educators believe that the best approach is one that takes the top qualities from each and incorporates it into one (Cromwell, 1997).

Research is continuously providing educators and the public with information as to what teaching techniques are most effective and produce the greatest success in the youth of today. The program used by the Kendall Elementary School in Kendall, New York is a balanced literacy program. The school’s reading program incorporates qualities from both phonics and whole language instruction to create a balanced literacy program. This program has resulted in the creation of successful life-long learners.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to determine if kindergarten students taught to read using a balanced literacy program will achieve higher academic success in first grade than those who were not taught with a balanced approach.

Primary Research Questions

There are a few questions to consider when choosing how to teach young children how to read. First of all, what key skills are important for a beginning reader to obtain in
order to become a successful reader? Secondly, is the implementation of certain phonics skills necessary when teaching reading? Thirdly, are certain factors of the whole-language approach important when teaching young children to read? And finally, do students benefit from one particular approach or a combination of approaches?

Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that the students taught to read using a balanced literacy program will exert higher academic achievement in their first grade classroom than those students not taught with a balanced literacy program.

Review of the Literature

Among educators, administrators, and experts alike there is an ongoing debate as to what is the best approach to teaching reading. The debate began decades ago arguing that phonics based instruction (focusing on the relationship between letters and sounds) was the most beneficial approach. Years later, the emphasis shifted to a more whole language based approach (focusing on literature and meaning). Yet, once again, decades later the pendulum swung back and the phonics based approach reappeared. However, experience has revealed that no one mix of instructional approaches to teaching reading will work for every child. Therefore, the two approaches were combined to form the balanced literacy approach (Sousa, 2005). Furthermore, Sousa states that successful reading is the result of the direct interaction between decoding (phonics) and comprehension (whole language).

Learning to read can be seen as, to some extent, a right of passage for children. In order to become a valuable member of society, one must learn to read and utilize this skill frequently. It is something that is expected of all children, and it is the job of the
educator to assist children in reaching this goal. Therefore, the question is: what is the best approach to teaching a child to read? The three most common approaches used today are phonics based instruction, whole language instruction, and balanced literacy instruction (a combination of phonics and whole language). Most educators believe the best approach is one that takes the finest qualities from each and integrates it into one (Cromwell, 1997).

Phonics instruction focuses on the relationship between letters and sounds. It teaches children to use their knowledge of the alphabet to sound out words. Many educators strongly believe utilizing this approach is what lays the foundation for strong readers. Children are taught skills in highly structured and repetitive lessons, allowing these skills to become habitual and automatic in young readers (J. Vacca, R. Vacca, Gove, Burkey, Lenhart, & McKeon, 2003).

The issue is not whether phonics should be taught in the classroom, but rather how it is used within the classroom. It is suggested that phonics be used in conjunction with whole language – as a balanced or combined approach – in order to meet the needs of struggling readers (Dahl & Scharer, 2000).

Whole language instruction aims to make reading enjoyable for children. It immerses the child in literature and relies on their knowledge of the language. Whole language teachers believe in weaving the use of authentic texts for children to read, discuss, listen to, or write about into their teaching. The learning of content and skills is not expected to happen in a rigid, linear way. Instead, students develop skills and strategies at their own pace through the use of supportive dialogue with teachers, practiced demonstration, and active engagement (J. Vacca et al., 2003). Educators do not
teach the connection between letters and sounds directly; rather the students learn incidentally through exposure to text (Dahl & Scharer, 2000).

Balanced literacy is an approach that takes the top qualities of phonics and whole language and puts them into one. Donat (2006) discusses the importance of combining the whole language and phonics approaches to teach reading. Despite the fact that many qualities of each approach were found to be beneficial, it was discovered that students who were taught using only the phonics based approach or only the whole language approach had limited reading success. Donat (2006) also stresses that utilizing a combined approach to teaching reading allows teachers to capitalize on individual strengths. This ability to meet the needs of the diverse learner through the use of a balanced approach resulted in higher reading success.

The balanced approach is specifically appropriate and beneficial to struggling readers. Students need to be immersed in literature at all times; it should not be seen as one separate part of the day. The same goes for reading instruction; educators should immerse the student in both whole language and phonics activities. This will ensure that more students are being reached and that educators are not teaching to the “middle” or majority (Pressley, Roehrig, Bogner, Raphael, and Dolezal (2001).

Teachers who use an integrated or balanced approach to teaching reading, lead to the highest achievement among their students in regards to reading and writing. Classrooms that heavily favor one focus over the other (either whole language based or phonics based instruction) fail to produce the highest achieving students. Furthermore, educators should be taught to blend their approach to teaching reading and writing, rather
than to focus on one technique over another (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, Rankin, Mistretta, Yokoi, & Ettenburger (1997).

An effective approach to teach reading should be one that incorporates phonics into the daily whole language activities. Not all children learn in the same way, therefore, not all information should be presented in the same manner. Meeting the needs of the individual student is what needs to be the central focus when teaching reading (Dahl & Scharer, 2000).

Today, reading has become fundamentally important for success in society. It can open doors to a life of independence and freedom, or shut doors to opportunity. When a child experiences difficulty in reading, he will most likely experience difficulties in other academic areas. Therefore, it is imperative that educators utilize a variety of approaches and strategies to meet the needs of the struggling reader ensuring future success – both inside and outside of the classroom.

**Methodology**

*Research Design*

The design for this study used the Early Literacy Profile (ELP) as a pretest and a posttest. The design used provided a control for most sources of invalidity and there was a random assignment of the incoming kindergarten population to the class.

Comparison instruction was then conducted in a small group setting focusing on either the phonics based or whole language based approach. This instruction began after the initial administration of the ELP. The results from the small group instruction were then compared to assess student growth in the same areas assessed on the ELP.
Data Collection Plan

The study collected data at two times during the course of the year using the ELP. The study analyzed and compared the results to see how much progress there was, if any, in reading and whether students would be able to achieve academic success in first grade.

Data was also collected using small group instruction. Two groups of struggling readers were taught beginning reading skills using either a phonics based or whole language based approach for a period of four weeks. Student progress regarding three focus areas – phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and letter-sound knowledge – was assessed weekly over the four week period of research.

Sample Selection

The selected sample for this study is from the total population of 58 kindergarten students at Kendall Elementary School in Kendall, NY. Students were randomly selected and placed into each of the three kindergarten rooms. The focus sample of this study is from Mrs. Cole’s room.

Instruments

The measuring instruments for this study included the Early Literacy Profile (Appendix A) – adapted from the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening, a teacher survey (Appendix F) regarding instructional practices, and a series of small group phonics and whole language based lessons.

The ELP included tools to assess phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, letter-sound knowledge, and high frequency word identification. The components of the ELP provide help for teachers to take a deeper look at student progress in the essential elements of early literacy.
The teacher survey included a series of questions related to instructional practices used within the classroom. The components of this survey allowed the researcher to make connections between the effectiveness of specific instructional strategies used and student achievement.

The small group lessons focused on phonics based and whole language based practices to teaching reading. Only the struggling readers were used in this portion of the data collection, and were broken down into two smaller groups. Strictly phonics based instruction was implemented with one of the two small groups for a period of four weeks. Student progress in the areas of phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and letter-sound knowledge was monitored and assessed. The second group of students was exposed to the whole language based techniques, and student progress in the same three areas was assessed. Similar to the teacher survey, the components of these lessons allowed the researcher to make connections between the effectiveness of specific instructional strategies used and student achievement.

**Results**

*Data Presentation*

Data was gathered through the use of the Early Literacy Profile (ELP), a common assessment given as a pretest and posttest to all kindergarten students. The ELP was administered in the Fall as a pretest before any direct literacy instruction was implemented. Data was collected and used as a baseline assessment in regards to all kindergarten students’ early literacy skills. Students were then placed in small groups based on their literacy skills. Each group was exposed to a balanced literacy teaching approach (a blend of phonics based and whole language based instruction) to increase
their early literacy skills. The activities and lessons taught were differentiated to each group’s individual strengths and weaknesses. Student achievement was then assessed again in the Spring through the ELP posttest.

Data was also gathered through the implementation of small group literacy lessons. Small group lessons, utilizing either phonics or whole language techniques to increase early literacy skills, were executed to compare student achievement and growth in all areas tested on the ELP. The sessions lasted for a period of four weeks. The participants included in this portion of the study were struggling readers only. The group of struggling readers was broken down into two smaller groups in order for a comparison of the effectiveness between the two techniques could be made. Data related to the students’ early literacy skills was recorded weekly to monitor student progress.

One group of struggling readers focused on phonics based instruction. Students were taught purely with phonics based techniques. These lessons included activities such as: flash cards (names and sounds of letters), letter-sound matching games, picture and sound sorts, alphabet chart activities, and rhyming. It was expected that students would make connections between letters and sounds using direct letter-sound instruction.

The other group of struggling readers focused on whole language instruction. Students were taught purely with whole language based techniques. These lessons included activities such as: emphasizing students' interpretations of text and free expression of ideas in writing (often through daily journal entries), frequent reading with students (in small guided reading groups, to students with read alouds, and by students independently), and reading and writing for real purposes. It was expected that students
would make connections between letters and sounds indirectly through their exposure to text and language.

Lastly, data was gathered through the use of a teacher survey. This survey was created to gather data concerning instructional practices used within the classroom to teach early literacy skills. Teachers were asked to evaluate the effectiveness and amount of use regarding phonics or whole language techniques within their classrooms.

Discussion of the Findings

Based on the results of the ELP pretest, two out of the twenty-one students assessed did not meet the acceptable benchmarks for kindergarten – it is required that students meet two or more of the benchmarks to be considered performing at grade level. When assessed in the Spring, two of the twenty-one students were below the benchmark again. However, one hundred percent of students assessed on the Fall ELP pretest revealed an overall improvement on the Spring ELP posttest (Appendix C). Therefore, it can be said that students exposed to a balanced approach do increase their early literacy skills.

Based on the results of the small group literacy lessons, growth was seen in all four focus areas for both of the groups. Specifically, the results revealed that the phonics based activities and instruction were proven to be more effective with these struggling readers. A greater increase in alphabet knowledge, letter-sound knowledge, and phonological awareness skills was shown in the group that was instructed with phonics based activities (Appendices D and E).

It was also found, through the implementation of the small group lessons, that phonics based instruction lead to more immediate results and whole-language based
instruction lead to a more holistic understanding and better comprehension. Since growth was seen in both groups, it is suggested that utilizing both techniques (as a balanced approach) when teaching reading and other early literacy skills will result in optimal achievement for students.

The teacher survey revealed an overwhelming support for a balanced approach to teaching reading. Ninety-four percent of the teachers surveyed reported using a combination of techniques when teaching reading and literacy skills (a balanced approach). The teachers also stated that they do believe their district should continue to implement it. Eighty-three percent reported students enjoying phonics based instruction (i.e. games and sorting activities) over whole language based instruction (i.e. writing about reading). Ninety-four percent reported phonics based instruction seemed to work best with their struggling readers. Many discussed their beliefs that this is due to the fact that phonics lays the foundation students need to become strong readers. Once students have this foundation, whole language activities become more effective. Again, this supports the fact that both phonics and whole language should be used when teaching early readers.

Limitations of the Study

In an ideal situation, the small group lessons would have been much more effective if there were more time to plan and carry out the various activities. These lessons/activities were created and implemented within a five-week period of time. More time would have allowed for more effective plans, instruction, and possibly a more complete evaluation of the results.
The focus group for this study was also rather small. Having a larger number of students or other teachers and students participating in the project would have provided more feedback to analyze. Despite these limitations, the students made considerable progress. The hypothesis was also supported in that instruction which incorporates qualities of both the phonics and whole language approaches results in higher student success and future preparedness in regards to reading.

Significance of the Study

Students in kindergarten at Kendall Elementary in Kendall, New York benefited from a balanced literacy program in that the students acquired the foundations for learning to read and they are expected to achieve academic success in their first grade classroom. Educators benefited from teaching with a balanced literacy approach in their effectiveness of preparing students for future grade levels and academic areas.

Further Research

It was found that instructing young learners to read using a balanced literacy approach is effective and worthwhile. However, there is a variety of valuable activities that incorporate components of both phonics and whole language. Further research should be conducted to compare and analyze such activities. Observing veteran teachers and their specific teaching techniques can be a valuable way to conduct this research. Observing literacy centers and activities in other classrooms allows for a critique of teaching styles and developmentally appropriate examples of what is the most effective way of presenting information to young learners. It is the job of the educator to investigate all of his/her options, collect these as valuable tools/resources, and to use them – particular to the needs of the specific students.
Action Plan

At the beginning of this research process, a wealth of research-based evidence was found regarding successful techniques for educators to use when teaching students key early literacy skills. As a result, a comparison study was made between the two main teaching techniques: phonics and whole language. The two techniques were used and assessed for their effectiveness in small group settings.

It was found that features of both techniques were seen to be effective in regards to student achievement. In light of these findings, some noteworthy changes have been implemented for the class involved in this study while other characteristics will be kept the same.

Students will continue to be instructed with lessons (in both large and small group settings) that capture the top qualities of both the phonics-based and whole language based techniques. Shared reading, guided reading groups, phonics lessons, games, and word work activities will all continue.

Furthermore, lessons will be differentiated in ways to meet the needs of the individual students. Struggling students will be taught using lessons that have a more phonics-based focus. These lessons will include the use of flash cards (names and sounds of letters), letter-sound matching games, picture and sound sorts, alphabet chart activities, and rhyming practice. Such activities will be used to lay a strong foundation of pre-reading skills for these students. On the other hand, higher achieving students will be instructed using lessons that are more whole-language based. These lessons will include activities such as shared reading/writing, reading/writing for real purposes, written responses (journaling), focused attention on student interpretations of the text, etc. These
activities will begin to move the developing reading into a more advanced stage of reading as they have already mastered most or all of the early reading skills. This differentiation will allow for more effective teaching and greater student achievement based on their specific areas of need.

The findings of this study were seen as relevant and significant in terms of appropriate professional development. This study was also deemed an effective teacher resource by the building principal at the school involved in the study. Therefore, this study will be made available to the Kindergarten and First Grade teams.

The findings will also be shared with the school’s Literacy Committee as the teacher survey used in this study revealed some lack of consistency in teaching reading across the grades. In years past, the Literacy committee has been focused on goals for the entire district. Therefore, it is proposed that the committee makes unifying the district’s implementation of literacy lessons and achievement of literacy-based skills a future goal. As the national teaching standards are currently evolving, reviewing the expectations of the grade above and below will be an effective way to unify teaching.

The effectiveness of teaching styles/techniques is constantly under review. Consequently, it is suggested that further research be made in order to keep up with the constantly evolving world of teaching. What is most effective now may become obsolete in years to come.

Conclusions

As a young educator, I am always looking for ways to improve my instruction. Effective instruction that focuses on the needs of the individual student leads to a higher
degree of student success. One way to improve instruction is to research the variety of techniques and successes experienced by others.

For me, this study has brought forth the importance of utilizing a variety of techniques when teaching young children to read – as not all children learn in the same manner. Some students (mostly the struggling readers) benefited more from phonics instruction, while others (the more advanced readers) seemed to excel when instructed with a more whole language based approach.

These conclusions are not just significant in the area of literacy development; they can be carried across the curriculum as well. Adapting lessons and utilizing teaching techniques that meet the needs of the individual student are effective ways to ensure students success.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Early Literacy Profile

Section 4: Assessment Tools for Children in Emergent and Beginning Stages

This section of the Early Literacy Profile includes tools to assess:

- Phonological Awareness*
- Alphabet Knowledge*
- Letter-Sound Knowledge*
- High Frequency Word Identification

*Materials in Section 4 and associated forms in Section 5 adapted with permission from Invernizzi, Meier, Swank, Juel (1998). Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS). © 1998 by the Rector and Board of Visitors, University of Virginia, 2472 Old Ivy Road, Charlottesville, VA 22903-2495. (http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/curry/centers/pals)
Using The Tools

Recently released research reports indicate that literacy learning is strengthened when children who are at early stages of development learn to name letters of the alphabet, discriminate between sounds in a spoken word (phonemic awareness), learn letter-sound correspondences (phonics), and identify high-frequency words. In light of these reports, the following additional tools are provided in this section of the Early Literacy Profile for children who are in the emergent and beginning stages of literacy development. These tasks are provided to help teachers take a deeper look at student progress in these essential elements of early literacy. It is recommended that the tasks be administered twice during the course of the school year—in the fall and in the spring. Teachers can use the information provided by these tasks to inform their instructional practices. See resources cited in English Language Arts Resource Guide with Core Curriculum for teaching and curriculum suggestions. For classroom activities related to the reading skills assessed in this section, see the PAWS website (http://curry.ed.slu.edu/curry/centers/paws/home.html).

Phonological Awareness

What is it?
Phonological awareness refers to the general ability to attend to the sounds of language as distinct from its meaning.

Why is it important?
Extensive research evidence suggests that phonological awareness is related to reading success, and that training in phonological awareness activities will have a positive effect on beginning reading.

Instructional Implications
Activities that seek to focus a child's attention on various structures and features of oral language (rhyme, beginning sounds, individual words) have the potential to increase the child's early reading ability.

Procedure for Group Rhyme Awareness task
No more than five students should be assessed at one time. Students should be asked not to call out their answers.

—Materials
Teacher copy of the Picture Packet for modeling, Picture Packets and pencils for the students, Student Score Sheets, pen or pencil for scoring.

—Instructions
• Ask the students to sit in a semicircle around the teacher.
• Have students write their names on their Picture Packets (or help them) and open their packets to the practice items.

• Prepare the students for the first practice task:

  “We’re going to find pictures that rhyme. You will find the pictures that sound alike. You will circle the picture that rhymes. Put your finger on the picture of the bag. Touch each picture as I name it. Listen…

  \[\text{bag, nine, tag, cake}\]

  Let’s find the picture that rhymes with bag:

  bag-nine, bag-tag, bag-cake,”
• Repeat directions if necessary.
  "Tag rhymes with bag. Put a circle around the picture of the tag."

• Prepare the students for the next practice item:
  "We're going to find pictures that rhyme. You will find the pictures that sound alike. You will circle the picture that rhymes. Put your finger on the picture of the rock. Touch each picture as I name it. Listen..."

  ![Rock, clock, game, fruit]

  Let's find the picture that rhymes with rock.
  
  rock-clock rock-game rock-fruit."

• Repeat directions if necessary.
  "Rock rhymes with clock. Put a circle around the picture of the clock."

• Prepare the students for the last practice item:
  "Let's practice one more. Put your finger on the picture of the tire. Touch each picture as I name it."

  ![Tire, book, pot, fire]

  Let's find the picture that rhymes with tire.
  
  tire-book tire-pot tire-fire."

• Repeat directions if necessary.
  "Tire and fire rhyme. Put a circle around the picture of fire."

• Check each student's paper and marking for each of the three practice items. If the student has the correct picture circled, say...
  "Yes, bag and tag rhyme; rock and clock rhyme; and tire and fire rhyme."

• If the student has marked the wrong picture, show the student how to put a circle around the correct picture while repeating...
  "Bag and tag rhyme, rock and clock rhyme, and tire and fire rhyme."

• Prepare the students for the first screening item:
  "Now, we'll find some other pictures that rhyme. Put your finger on the picture of the man. Touch each picture as I name it."

  ![Man, five, bed, can]

  Find the picture that rhymes with man, that sounds like man. Listen...
  
  man-five man-bed man-ran

  Circle the picture that rhymes with man, that sounds like man."

• Repeat directions if necessary.

• Prepare the students for the next item:
  "Ready for the next one? Put your finger on the picture of the sail. Touch each picture as I name it."

  ![Sail, whale, tree, cow]
Find the picture that rhymes with sail, that sounds like sail. Listen...
sail-whale  sail-tree  sail-cow
Circle the picture that rhymes with sail, that sounds like sail.
* Repeat directions if necessary.

* Prepare the students for the next item:
  "Ready for the next one? Put your finger on the picture of the coat. Touch each picture as I name it.
  coat  duck  hand  goat

Find the picture that rhymes with coat, that sounds like coat. Listen...
coat-duck  coat-hand  coat-goat
Circle the picture that rhymes with coat, that sounds like coat.
* Repeat directions if necessary.

* Prepare the students for the next item:
  "Ready for the next one? Put your finger on the picture of the picture of the bug. Touch each picture as I name it.
  bug  hat  rug  tape

Find the picture that rhymes with bug, that sounds like bug. Listen...
bug-hat  bug-rug  bug-tape
Circle the picture that rhymes with bug, that sounds like bug.
* Repeat directions if necessary.

* Prepare the students for the next item:
  "Ready for the next one? Put your finger on the picture of the dog. Touch each picture as I name it.
  dog  nail  frog  boy

Find the picture that rhymes with dog, that sounds like dog. Listen...
dog-nail  dog-frog  dog-boy
Circle the picture that rhymes with dog, that sounds like dog.
* Repeat directions if necessary.

* Prepare the students for the next item:
  "Ready for the next one? Put your finger on the picture of the ball. Touch each picture as I name it.
  ball  tent  pig  wall

Find the picture that rhymes with ball, that sounds like ball. Listen...
ball-tent  ball-pig  ball-wall
Circle the picture that rhymes with ball, that sounds like ball.
* Repeat directions if necessary.

Note: Have students turn the page.
• Prepare the students for the next item:

"Ready for the next one? Put your finger on the picture of the cat. Touch each picture as I name it.

\[ \text{cat, bat, horse, saw} \]

Find the picture that rhymes with cat, that sounds like cat. Listen...

\[ \text{cat, bat, horse, saw} \]

Circle the picture that rhymes with cat, that sounds like cat."

• Repeat directions if necessary.

• Prepare the students for the next item:

"Ready for the next one? Put your finger on the picture of the lock. Touch each picture as I name it.

\[ \text{lock, boat, sock, pie} \]

Find the picture that rhymes with lock, that sounds like lock. Listen...

\[ \text{lock, boat, sock, pie} \]

Circle the picture that rhymes with lock, that sounds like lock."

• Repeat directions if necessary.

• Prepare the students for the next item:

"Ready for the next one? Put your finger on the picture of the house. Touch each picture as I name it.

\[ \text{house, mouse, bike, fan} \]

Find the picture that rhymes with house, that sounds like house. Listen...

\[ \text{house, mouse, bike, fan} \]

Circle the picture that rhymes with house, that sounds like house."

• Repeat directions if necessary.

• Prepare the students for the next item:

"Ready for the next one? Put your finger on the picture of the box. Touch each picture as I name it.

\[ \text{box, leaf, gas, fox} \]

Find the picture that rhymes with box, that sounds like box. Listen...

\[ \text{box, leaf, gas, fox} \]

Put a circle on the picture that rhymes with box, that sounds like box."

• Repeat directions if necessary.

Have students stop on the page with the STOP sign.
Collect Picture Packets.

---Scoring---

Working with the Group Rhyme Awareness section of the Student Score Sheet and a student’s packet, look at each response. For each item, place a “+” or a “-” on the Student Score Sheet line that corresponds with the Group Rhyme item. Count up the number of correct responses for that student, and record that number on the line marked “score” (see example).
• Prepare the students for the next item:
  “Ready for the next one? Put your finger on the picture of the cat. Touch each picture as I name it.

  cat  bat  horse  saw

  Find the picture that rhymes with cat, that sounds like cat. Listen...
  cat-bat  cat-horse  cat-saw
  Circle the picture that rhymes with cat, that sounds like cat.”

• Repeat directions if necessary.

• Prepare the students for the next item:
  “Ready for the next one? Put your finger on the picture of the lock. Touch each picture as I name it.

  lock  boat  sock  pie

  Find the picture that rhymes with lock, that sounds like lock. Listen...
  lock-boat  lock-sock  lock-pie
  Circle the picture that rhymes with lock, that sounds like lock.”

• Repeat directions if necessary.

• Prepare the students for the next item:
  “Ready for the next one? Put your finger on the picture of the house. Touch each picture as I name it.

  house  mouse  bike  fan

  Find the picture that rhymes with house, that sounds like house. Listen...
  house-mouse  house-bike  house-fan
  Circle the picture that rhymes with house, that sounds like house.”

• Repeat directions if necessary.

• Prepare the students for the next item:
  “Ready for the next one? Put your finger on the picture of the box. Touch each picture as I name it.

  box  leaf  gas  fox

  Find the picture that rhymes with box, that sounds like box. Listen...
  box-leaf  box-gas  box-fox
  Put a circle on the picture that rhymes with box, that sounds like box.”

• Repeat directions if necessary.

  Have students stop on the page with the STOP sign.
  Collect Picture Packets.

—Scoring

Working with the Group Rhyme Awareness section of the Student Score Sheet and a student’s packet, look at each response. For each item, place a “+” or a “−” on the Student Score Sheet line that corresponds with the Group Rhyme item. Count up the number of correct responses for that student, and record that number on the line marked “score” (see example).
Scoring Example: Group Rhyme Awareness

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<td>hat</td>
<td>rug</td>
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<td>pie</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>house</td>
<td>mouse</td>
<td>bike</td>
<td>fan</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>box</td>
<td>leaf</td>
<td>gas</td>
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</table>

Score: 5

Benchmarks
Fall: Kindergarten = 5-8, 1st Grade = 9-10
Spring: Kindergarten = 9-10, 1st Grade = 10

Alphabet Knowledge

What is it?
Alphabet knowledge is the ability to recognize letters of the alphabet.

Why is it important?
Among the reading readiness skills that are traditionally studied, the one that appears to be the strongest predictor of later reading success is letter identification (National Research Council, 1998).

Instructional Implications
Alphabet books provide an opportunity to discuss the letters and objects that are typically presented in a bright and colorful way. Children may enjoy singing the alphabet song while tracking the letters in the book. Regular work with children’s names also provides good practice with the names of the letters.

Procedure for Lower Case Alphabet Recognition task

—Materials—
Lower Case Alphabet Recognition sheet, Student Score Sheet, pencil or pen for scoring.

—Instructions—
• Tell the student that now you want him or her to tell you the name of the lower-case letters. Ask the student to put his or her finger on the first letter on the Lower Case Alphabet Recognition sheet. You then say...
  “See these letters? Put your finger on each letter and name it. If you don’t know the name of a letter, skip it and go on to the next letter.”
• Make sure the student is touching the letters in the proper sequence and that the student does not get off track.
• If a student does not know a letter, tell him or her to skip that letter and move to the next one.
• If a student skips a line, redirect the student to the next letter in the correct sequence by touching the letter yourself.
**Scoring**

Use Lower Case Alphabet Recognition section of the Student Score Sheet. Circle each incorrect response. Self-corrections are counted as correct answers. Reversals, such as saying "b" for "d", are counted as incorrect.

Calculate the student's score: Count the number of letters the student identified correctly. Record the score in the appropriate section of the Student Score Sheet.

**Scoring Example: Lower Case Alphabet Recognition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>b</th>
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<th>x</th>
<th>w</th>
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<td>p</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>z</td>
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Score: 16

**Benchmark:**
- **Fall: Kindergarten = 10-20, 1st Grade = 24-25**
- **Spring: Kindergarten = 23-25, 1st Grade = 26**

**Letter-Sound Knowledge**

**What is it?**

Letter-sound knowledge is the ability to recognize letter-sound correspondences.

**Why is it important?**

Research suggests that knowledge of letter sounds facilitates early reading acquisition. In (A) Letter-Sounds, explicit knowledge of letter sounds is measured by the pronunciation of individual correspondences.

(B) Spelling measures the application of letter-sound knowledge.

**Instructional Implications**

Teachers can help children learn and apply letter-sound knowledge by engaging them in activities such as those featured on the PALS web site (http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/centers/pals/home.html) and in the resources cited in *English Language Arts Resource Guide with Core Curriculum*, Appendix: Instructional Materials.

**Procedure**

This section contains two tasks: (A) Letter-Sounds and (B) Spelling.

(A) **Letter-Sounds Task**

- **Materials**
  
  Letter Sounds sheet, Student Score Sheet, pen or pencil for scoring.

  **Instructions**
  
  - Tell the student that now you want him or her to tell you the sound each letter represents. Say...
    
    "See these letters? Touch each letter and say the sound. I don't want the name of each letter, I want the sound the letter makes. If you don't know the sound a letter makes, skip it and go on to the next one. Here's an example: This is the letter 'M.' That letter makes the /m/ sound, so when I put my finger on the letter "M" I will say the mmmmm. Ready?"
  
  - Ask the student to put his or her finger on the first letter of the Letter Sounds sheet.
  
  - If the child gives the letter name, restate that you want the sound the letter makes, not the name of the letter.
  
  - If student gives a word that starts with that letter (e.g., the child says "dog" for "d"), say to the child...
“What sound is at the beginning of dog?”
- If the child gives the long vowel sound for a vowel, say...
  “That’s right, “A” does say /æ/, but “A” has another sound too. Vowels have two sounds. What is the other sound “A” can make?”
- If the student skips a line, redirect the student to the next letter in the correct sequence by pointing to the next letter.
- Use the pronunciation guide below to help guide you to the correct responses to vowel sounds and other letters that make two sounds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronunciation Guide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A as in apple not ape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E as in each not etch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I as in igloo not ice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O as in octopus not oak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U as in umbrella not unicorn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G as in gas not giraffe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C as in cat not city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y as in you not was</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Scoring
Circle all incorrect responses on the A. Letter-Sounds section of the Student Score Sheet. It may help you to write what the child said next to the letter. If you neglected to probe a letter that makes two sounds, go back at the end of the task and ask the child for the other pronunciation. Accept only the sounds indicated in the pronunciation box as correct.

Calculate the students score: Count the number of sounds the student said correctly. Record the score in the appropriate section of the Student Score Sheet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scoring Example: A. Letter Sounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Letter Sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>T</td>
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<td>Ĺ</td>
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<td>Ĺ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Score</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Benchmarks:
Fall: Kindergarten = 4-12, 1st Grade = 21-24
Spring: Kindergarten = 19-23, 1st Grade = 24-25

(B) Spelling task
NOTE: In this section, you will see letters enclosed in slash marks (for example, /m/). This notation refers to the sound that is produced by that letter, not the letter name. Teachers should help students to focus on the letter sounds in this section by stretching out or repeating the sound made by the letter enclosed in slash marks.

- Materials:
  Spelling Sheets (student consumable), pencils for students, Student Score Sheets, pen or pencil for scoring.

- Instructions:
  - Tell the student that now you want him or her to spell some words. First demonstrate the procedure by “spelling” a word out loud. Begin by saying...
"First I want you to write your name on this sheet of paper. Now we're going to spell some words. I'll go first. The word I want to spell is mat. I am going to begin by saying the whole word slowly MM-AA-TT. Now I'm going to think about each sound I hear. Listen. "m". MMM. I hear an /m/ sound so I would write down an “m.” MM-AA. After the /m/ I hear an /a/ sound, so I would write down an “a.” MM-AA-TT. At the end of the word I hear a /t/ sound, so I'll write down a “t.” Now I want you to spell some words. Put down a letter for each sound you hear. You can use the alphabet strip at the top of your sheet if you forget how to make a letter. Ready?"

- Do not demonstrate the sounding-out process beyond the "mat" example. You may prompt the student by saying...

  "What else do you hear? Do you hear any other sounds in the word__________?"

- Ask the student to spell the following words, in this order:
  1. van  2. job  3. rug  4. lip  5. sad

- Probe any letter formations you are not sure about by asking the student what letter he or she has written, or ask the student to point to the letter that he or she meant to write (the alphabet letters are written across the top of the spelling sheet). Write the intended letter above the student's attempt. This may help with scoring.

---

**Scoring**

To score the spelling sample, you will need to compare the child's spelling to the boxes on the B. Spelling section of the Student Score Sheet. Read the grid for each word vertically, column by column, from left to right. Check the box that matches the child's spelling in each column. Only one check per column is possible. Each check is worth one point. If no matches are found in a column, no points are awarded and you should proceed to the next column. Letter reversals are counted as correct. One bonus point per word is awarded for perfect spelling.

Young children who are just beginning to write often confuse the left to right orientation of words. These students often begin spelling words by writing them from right to left. To score a sample that has been written right to left (e.g., NAV for van), use the grid from right to left, and continue to check each box that matches the child's spelling.

Calculate the student's score: Count the number of boxes checked. Add one bonus point for each word spelled correctly. Add all points (number of boxes checked and bonus points). Record in B. Spelling section of the Student Score Sheet. NOTE: Scoring Examples may be found on the following two pages.

**Benchmarks:**

**Fall:** Kindergarten = 3-7, 1st Grade = 15-18
**Spring:** Kindergarten = 10-15, 1st Grade = 17-19
Scoring examples for (B) Spelling task:

Spelling Example #1:
Typical Response
The scoring for this example is as described in the spelling task instructions. The sample has been scored left to right, with a check mark placed on the score sheet in each correct box. The check marks have been added together, resulting in a final score of 7 for this child.

1. \( W N O \)
2. \( J \)
3. \( R J \)
4. \( L P \)
5. \( G B \)

B. Spelling
1. \( v \)
2. \( p \)
3. \( r \)
4. \( t \)
5. \( a \)

BENCHMARKS: 1-7 1st: 15-18 score: 7

Spelling Example #2:
Random Letter Strings
These are examples of children writing random strings of letters. Although some of the letters listed are correct, since they are obviously within a random string they are given no credit. The score for all these examples is 0.

1. \( y V o o N \)
2. \( d b h u v \)
3. \( w h b b \)
4. \( G u h n \)
5. 

B. Spelling
1. \( v \)
2. \( p \)
3. \( b \)
4. \( g \)
5. \( a \)

BENCHMARKS: 1-7 1st: 15-18 score: 0

Spelling Example #3:
Phonetically Correct Letters Out of Order
These are examples of children writing vowels which are phonetically correct, yet placed out of order in the word. These examples should be scored left to right, with credit given for the consonants and the vowels. Bonus points are not awarded.

1. 
2. \( R G o \)
3. \( p e \)
4. 
5. 

B. Spelling
1. \( v \)
2. \( p \)
3. \( t \)
4. \( y \)
5. \( e \)

BENCHMARKS: 1-7 1st: 15-18 score: 6
Spelling Example #4:
Correct Initial Letter Followed by a Random String of Letters
The child has correctly indicated the initial consonant sound, but followed it with a random string. Credit should be given for the first letter, but not the following letters, even if they are correct, because they are part of a random string.

1. VRLLOL
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

Spelling Example #5:
Vowel Placeholder with Correct Surrounding Letters
Using letters “OA” indicates that a child knows a sound is there, but he or she does not know the correct vowel sounds yet. Even though some of the vowels are correct when a pattern is observed, no credit should be given for the medial sounds. Credit should be given only for the correct beginning and final consonants.

1. VOPW
2. JIOB
3. ROAG
4. LOAD
5. COID

Spelling Example #6:
Additional Vowels with Correct Surround Letters
Here, the child has placed additional vowels in the medial position, however, no pattern has been observed. Count only the first vowel as either correct or incorrect according to the scoring guide, and ignore the second vowel. Score the surround consonants. No bonus points should be awarded.

1. JEB
2. 
3. leip
4. Saed
5. 

B. Spelling

1. van
2. job
3. rug
4. lip
5. sad

Benchmarks: 3-7 1st 15-18
High Frequency Word Identification

What is it?
High frequency word identification is the ability to recognize a core group of words commonly found in print. This ability to read isolated words is different from the text-reading behavior which is assessed in the Reading Sample section of the profile.

Why is it important?
Automatic and accurate recognition of frequently-used words is a skill that fluent readers possess.

Instructional Implications
Teachers can support the development of students' word recognition ability by reading continually with and to students, by charting class discussions, by creating "word walls" (lists of words arranged alphabetically or in other groupings and mounted on the classroom wall), and by encouraging students to use word cards with a high frequency word printed on each to make sentences and stories.

Procedure
—Materials
List of 100 Most Frequent Words in Books for Beginning Readers and pencil or pen.

—Instructions
• Tell the student that you are going to ask him or her to read some words to you. Begin with the first 25 words on the list. Starting with the first word and continuing in order, point to a word and ask the student to identify it. Circle the words that are correctly identified, and record miscues. Miscues can provide valuable information about a student's letter-sound knowledge. If the student has five miscues in a row say, "Can you find any words you can read in this row?" Work through the remaining words on the list, in groups of 25 at a time. Depending on age and ability, you may want to use a smaller segment of the list and assess the student over a number of sessions.

—Benchmark
Students should aim to recognize a group of core words, such as those found on the 100 Most Frequent list of Words in Books for Beginning Readers, by the end of first grade.
Lower Case Alphabet Recognition

b g l q v
w h m r c
d i x s n
e j o t y
u f k p a
z
Appendix B: ELP Benchmarks

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<th>SPRING Rhyme Awareness</th>
<th>FALL Lowercase Alphabet</th>
<th>SPRING Lowercase Alphabet</th>
<th>FALL Letter Sounds</th>
<th>SPRING Letter Sounds</th>
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Appendix C: ELP Scores - Fall and Spring

Early Literacy Profile Scores - 2010-2011

Scores

Fall Score

Spring Score

Students

A  B  C  D  E  F  G  H  I  J  K  L  M  N  O  P  Q  R  S  T  U
Appendix D: Early Literacy Skill Improvement (Whole Language Group)
Appendix E: Early Literacy Skill Improvement (Phonics Group)
Appendix F: Teacher Survey on Instructional Practices

**TEACHER SURVEY**

**Phonics, Whole-language, or a Balanced Approach to Teaching Reading?**

1) Do you use a combination of whole-language and phonics based instruction when teaching reading or do you tend to rely on one approach over the other?

2) Which approach do you feel most comfortable teaching?

3) Which approach is most interesting to your students?

4) Which approach seems to benefit the majority of your students?

5) Which approach seems to work best with your struggling readers?

6) Do you think our district would benefit from adopting either a phonics or whole-language approach instead of the balanced approach we currently have? If yes, which approach and why?