

NO MORE TEACHING
A LETTER A WEEK

DEAR READERS,

Much like the diet phenomenon *Eat This, Not That*, this series aims to replace some existing practices with approaches that are more effective—healthier, if you will—for our students. We hope to draw attention to practices that have little support in research or professional wisdom and offer alternatives that have greater support. Each text is collaboratively written by authors representing research and practice. Section 1 offers a practitioner’s perspective on a practice in need of replacing and helps us understand the challenges, temptations, and misunderstandings that have led us to this ineffective approach. Section 2 provides a researcher’s perspective on the lack of research to support the ineffective practice(s) and reviews research supporting better approaches. In Section 3, the author representing a practitioner’s perspective gives detailed descriptions of how to implement these better practices. By the end of each book, you will understand both what not to do, and what to do, to improve student learning.

It takes courage to question one’s own practice—to shift away from what you may have seen throughout your years in education and toward something new that you may have seen few if any colleagues use. We applaud you for demonstrating that courage and wish you the very best in your journey from this to that.

Best wishes,

— *Ellin Oliver Keene and Nell K. Duke, series editors*

NO MORE TEACHING A LETTER A WEEK

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INTRODUCTION

ELLIN OLIVER KEENE

In many ways, this is the book that launched the Not This, But That series. Though it is not the first publication, the practice—teaching one letter at a time, one week at a time—was the first that came to mind when Nell and I began to discuss the series. We were (and are) aware of the number of preschool and kindergarten classrooms around the country in which children are introduced to the alphabet one letter at a time for a week, usually in alphabetic order, and often devoid of meaningful contexts for using the letter. This practice, like others in the series—looking up vocabulary words, taking away recess, summer-reading loss, and directionless independent reading—are ubiquitous largely because teachers haven't yet been exposed to more effective practices. Our hope for this series and, of course, for this book, is to shine a spotlight on more effective practices and to highlight the research that underlies them.

In *No More Teaching a Letter a Week*, Becky McKay, a lifelong early childhood educator, professional developer, and program director, helps us understand why it is so easy to fall into the habit of rolling out a letter a week for twenty-six straight weeks. Becky invites us to look back to our own early experiences and sure enough, there I am back in kindergarten, gluing macaroni in the shape of a letter to construction paper. There I am bending over construction paper with my Elmer's, dragging long strands of hair in the glue, macaroni dangling from the hair. I am concentrating intently, but my shaky attempts to get the lines straight for the letter *W* are spectacularly unsuccessful. I always got a good start, but the second part just never quite fit on that piece of construction paper.

Becky properly acknowledges that the task of teaching children letters and sounds is Herculean. It is extremely difficult to know where to start and how to build a coherent, developmentally appropriate

approach to alphabet learning. And, in the age of Pinterest, we can become completely overwhelmed by ideas and activities that purport to teach the alphabet.

Are any of these practices aligned with the considerable body of research in this area? What were any of us learning when we struggled to get the macaroni to stay in place, and what are children learning now when they slog through one letter a week or engage in isolated activities meant to promote alphabet knowledge?

Dr. William Teale, professor and director of the Center for Literacy Development at the University of Illinois at Chicago, answers many of those questions for us in Section 2 of this book. He helps us understand the strong link between learning letters and phonemic awareness and sheds light on the “variety of factors [that] affect a child’s alphabet knowledge—some related to the appearance of the letters themselves, some related to life circumstances (the name the child happens to have), some related to the child’s existing knowledge from previous experience.”

In the final section, Becky guides us through a wide range of practices that are aligned with research and that pave the way to a more intentional, coherent approach to teaching letters and sounds. You’ll find a rich array of engaging ways to help children learn letters and sounds in meaningful contexts.

It feels gratifying to introduce this book to educators who work with young children or who are interested in understanding the foundations of language learning. Becky and Bill are steady guides toward much more promising approaches to this vital stage of children’s literacy learning.

SECTION 1

NOT THIS

Letter-of-the-Week Doesn't Develop Literacy

REBECCA McKAY

Teaching one letter of the alphabet a week is not the most effective practice, but if that were all that I needed to tell you, we wouldn't need this book. It is *not* an effective approach but it manages to attract new generations of teachers each year (an online search reveals 144 million sites that offer resources to teach letter of the week). If we're going to give up the practice—and I'm hoping that by the end of this book, you'll feel well prepared to do that—first we need to acknowledge why we have such a hard time letting it go.

A Tidy Practice for Grown-Ups

Teaching a letter a week is appealing to many teachers. Why?

First, the responsibility of ensuring that all of their students learn to read and write can, at times, feel overwhelming. When we let that worry sink into our bones, it can sometimes dictate our behavior, making

us less thoughtful than we would normally be. And, so, the alphabet sequence presents itself as if it were a list of skills. This week, we will “do A” and we’ll include three activities that include the letter . . . in some way. The process feels manageable, and we tell ourselves that by the time we reach the letter Z, twenty-six weeks into the school year, our students will be well on their way to reading. We’ve done A to Z. When we say we’ve covered the “A to Z” of anything, it means that we’ve covered everything. There are book titles that promise to inform you of the A to Z of corporate responsibility, the A to Z of fantasy literature. But does A to Z truly cover everything?

It’s also true that many early elementary teachers value tactile and creative experiences for their students. The glue, macaroni, beans, and song making, vestiges of traditional letter-of-the-week instruction, can feel like a hands-on way to teach the alphabet. But during these activities, children may or may not be thinking deeply about the letter they are supposed to be learning.

All those hands-on activities may create “evidence” of children’s learning that we can send home to parents. The feather *F* on the family refrigerator is taken down to make room for the glitter glue *G*. Teaching a letter a week may seem like a way to invite family to participate by discussing the featured letter over dinner or to prepare letter bags containing objects whose names start with that week’s letter. A number of activities like these may feel like instruction, and the collaborative nature of the singing, talking, and gathering can be wonderful. But, does teaching one letter a week help our children become readers and writers?

What Does “Doing C” Mean, Anyway?

We teachers sometimes work unnecessarily hard when what’s needed is not this degree of elbow grease but more information. Working smarter, not harder. Teaching letter-of-the-week typically involves a lot of activity and can even be expensive; I spent quite a bit of time and money to prepare for my letter-of-the-week instruction. And, I even had research

citations to support my practice: students who demonstrate phonemic awareness and alphabet recognition are more likely to become successful readers (Adams 1990; Share et al. 1987; National Reading Panel 2000). But let's note what was missing. The research *didn't* say:

- that children learn the names and sounds of letters by letter-themed activities, such as
 - gluing cotton balls on large construction paper Cs
 - eating foods or bringing in objects from home that start with C, or
- that teaching one letter each week in ABC order is an effective sequence and pacing for alphabet learning
- that teaching one letter each week is a better practice than other ways of teaching alphabet knowledge.

Let's take a moment to consider the gap between intent and practice. My intent was to invite children into the world of print through alphabet learning, but there were some important questions I should have been asking:

- Although I did expose children to the letter C, was I *explicitly* teaching its name, functions, and sound associations?
- Were children gaining more than the awareness that C is a thing without understanding the purpose of letters, both specifically and generally?

Instead of documentable learning, here's what remained of my practice: some wisps of cotton in my hair and images of letters on construction paper (that may have briefly guest starred on the family refrigerator). Some children likely inferred the relationship between letter symbols and their function, but there wasn't much evidence of it in my teaching. And, this absence meant that many children left my classroom lacking not only essential knowledge to succeed but also a meaningful invitation to the world of literacy.

How do children acquire alphabet knowledge?

see Section 2,
pages 11–18

“I Wish I Had Known”

In retrospect, I wish I had known how children acquire alphabet knowledge, so that I could plan around that, rather than around which letter-of-the-week activities I would choose for *C*. In over thirty years of teaching and coaching teachers,

“I wish I had known” is one of the responses I hear most from teachers because they so fervently want to do right by students. I know the grief and guilt one feels at recognizing one’s own ineffective practice. It’s the realization that—opposite of our intention—we’ve taken important time and learning away from children. Teaching is always an approximation; there’s always new learning that becomes an I-wish-I-had-known.

Two teachers in a midsized Georgia school district, Quleria Persons and Berderia Fuller, sensed there was much more to know about alphabet knowledge and decided to lead colleagues in a study group. They read the latest professional books and research articles, talked with colleagues, and studied the children in their classrooms. There was a lot that these teachers didn’t know when they began their work. What they did have was a belief that, by reading professional resources and through talking to other teachers, they could teach alphabet knowledge to every child in their classroom and they’d find the evidence to prove it, day to day and across the year. They began their inquiry into better teaching of alphabet knowledge with the following questions:

What can that look like in practice?

see Section 3
for the details

- What are the skills that define alphabet knowledge?
- How can teachers situate alphabet learning in a meaningful context and structure time so that students receive explicit instruction and varied experiences for practice?

How can teachers assess teaching for effectiveness and identify what to do if children aren't acquiring alphabet knowledge? Over a cup of coffee, I spoke with Joe, a remarkable kindergarten teacher and early childhood expert who participated in Quleria's and Berderia's study group. We shared our respective I-wish-I-had-knowns related to alphabet learning. Joe told me how much he wished he had known about the importance of segmenting and blending sounds in words. "Although I modeled it in writing workshop, I didn't spend enough time explicitly teaching how to do it, and I didn't even know about the different routines for blending." By believing that he, like all of us, might benefit from learning more, Joe didn't place limits on his practice, and he became outstanding. He gained the knowledge about teaching letters and sounds that he needed.

We have to remember that we're not in this work alone and that when we rely solely on the pedagogy from our teaching certification program, we're putting limits on ourselves, on our teaching, and on the learning our students can do. If we embrace the identity of voracious students of pedagogy, like Quleria, Berderia, and Joe, we clear our instruction of the thorny snare of ineffective practice. Research can be our helpmate, our tool; it provides a framework that we can build our practice around and a way of measuring whether our practice is effective. In Section 2, Bill shares his synthesis of the latest research that explains why alphabet knowledge is necessary and how children acquire alphabet knowledge. He highlights what research tells us about effective and ineffective practice. I return in Section 3 to share examples of better practices for alphabet learning that I hope will inspire your own. We can do better than letter-of-the-week. I think you'll find the alternative practices much more fun, meaningful, and effective, so let's not waste any more time. On to the research!