

Abrams Learning Trends: Research Foundations for The Letter People® Programs

Abrams Learning Trends is committed to the publication of educational materials for the elementary classroom and evidence-based educational programs that meet current federal mandates for the early-childhood classroom. Abrams believes that to be most effective, these programs and materials must be research based and classroom tested. The Company is involved on an ongoing basis in research projects ranging from initial validation studies to third-party research.

To demonstrate the success of our Letter People programs and offer information regarding future growth, we conduct, participate in, and apply research in the following ways:

- **Third-Party Research**

Third-party research is crucial to our vision as an educational publisher. In this report, you will find studies conducted by respected researchers, universities, and educational-policy organizations that use random assignment with control groups as their methodology. These agencies strive to provide information that will promote positive literacy programs in early education. (See pages 2–4.)

- **Efficacy Studies/Validation Studies/Prepublication Piloting**

Successful district/classroom-based research of Letter People programs is evident in our ongoing Efficacy Study Program (which has compared, to date, pre/post-test data from over 1,700 classrooms, using a variety of respected assessment instruments); in our initial validation studies (experimental/control and pre/post comparisons of Letter People products conducted immediately following initial publication); and in our pre-publication testing (two full years of pilot testing with prototype materials prior to final publication). (See pages 5–8.)

- **Published Research**

All Letter People programs are based on the most respected current early-childhood literacy research including the areas of oral language, print awareness, phonological and phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, the alphabetic principle and word recognition, writing and spelling, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. (See pages 8–21.)

Finally, Abrams Learning Trends and the Letter People share a rich history in the early-childhood arena, helping to best meet the needs of children, families, teachers, and administrators across the country. (See pages 22–25.)

Third-Party Research

Our commitment to quality educational programs is grounded in an expanding array of third-party research partnerships with respected universities and educational-policy organizations. Most of these studies were funded by agencies of federal and state governments through these third-party organizations.

These studies were supervised by principal investigators who hold at least a Ph.D. among their research science qualifications.

Upon completion of these studies, the results were published in peer review journals. A summary of each study and its results follows.

Evaluation of Curricular Approaches to Enhance Preschool Early Literacy Skills

AGENCY: Administration on Children, Youth and Families, ACF, DHHS

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:
Janet Fischel, Ph.D.

UNIVERSITY AFFILIATION:
Departments of Pediatrics
and Psychology
State University of New York at
Stony Brook

METHODOLOGY USED:
Thirty-five classrooms in six Head Start centers were randomly assigned to one of the two literacy interventions or to the comparison group. There were 9 classrooms in year one, 15 in year two, and 11 in year three of the study.

DESCRIPTION:
Enhancing emergent literacy skills and tracking program outcomes in emergent literacy are emphasized as major tasks for Head Start in the effort to inform program planning and improve child readiness. This project addressed the emphasis on school readiness through a comparative study of two curriculum interventions, each of which addressed emergent literacy in the preschool

years as at least one of its goals. The curriculum interventions selected were *Let's Begin with the Letter People*® and *Waterford Early Reading Program Level 1*. The comparison curriculum was The High/Scope Educational Approach. The selected classes were located on Long Island, New York.

The specific objectives of this project were:

- 1) to compare, with a broad and identical set of metrics, child outcomes across three leading curricula for the development of emergent literacy skills in randomly assigned classrooms of four-year-old children in Head Start;
- 2) to follow all children in the project through kindergarten in order to obtain the broadest evidence-based support for the strengths of one or more of the three curricula on the domains of emergent literacy and school readiness; and
- 3) to identify important issues in the feasibility and practicality of curriculum adoption (intensity of teacher training required, resource costs, amount of time spent on the curriculum) in order to maximize successful and broad dissemination and adoption in interested Head Start locations nationwide.

The broader objectives of the study were to provide Head Start and other Pre-K educational settings with the evidence and programs that are necessary to substantially reduce reading problems through early prevention.

LENGTH OF STUDY: 3 Years

RESULTS:

This study demonstrated the positive effects of *Let's Begin with the Letter People* on code-related skills such as letter knowledge, letter/sound correspondence, book and print knowledge, and emergent writing that underlie the later task of decoding words. *Let's Begin* influenced a greater number of key emergent literacy skills than did the computer-based Waterford curriculum.

An Evaluation of Curriculum, Setting, and Mentoring on the Performance of Children Enrolled in Pre-Kindergarten

AGENCY:

Institute of Education Sciences (IES)

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

Michael A. Assel, Ph.D.

University of Texas Health Science Center
at Houston

Children's Learning Institute

METHODOLOGY USED:

Random assignment of classrooms with two interventions and one control: 76 classrooms in total from universal Pre-K, Head Start, and Title I programs in the metropolitan Houston area. Classrooms with the two interventions were further assigned to mentoring and no-mentoring conditions.

DESCRIPTION:

The purpose of this Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research (PCER) study was to implement rigorous evaluations of preschool curricula to provide information to support informed choices of classroom curricula for early-childhood programs. This program of research sought to determine through randomized clinical trials whether one or more curricula produce educationally meaningful effects on children.

The curriculum interventions selected for this research study were *Let's Begin with the Letter People* and *Doors to Discovery*.

LENGTH OF STUDY: 2 Years

RESULTS:

Classrooms using interventions increased in language comprehension, vocabulary, and rhyming, and print knowledge skills at a faster rate than controls. This finding was more true for Head Start classes than for Title I or universal Pre-K classrooms. In the universal Pre-K classrooms, *Let's Begin* showed "more robust growth" in rhyming and letter identification skills when compared to *Doors to Discovery*.

**What Works Clearinghouse
Intervention Report, July 30, 2007
Let's Begin with the Letter People®**

AGENCY:

Institute of Education Sciences (IES)

DESCRIPTION:

Two studies listed above (Fischel et al. 2006 and Assel et al. 2006) met the What Works Clearinghouse evidence standards and were featured in the July 30, 2007, WWC Intervention Report. In these studies, *Let's Begin with the Letter People* was found to have potentially positive effects on print knowledge and phonological processing.

A Study of Classroom Literacy Interventions and Outcomes in Even Start

AGENCY: Institute of Education Sciences (IES); Conducted by Westat

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:
Robert St.Pierre, Ph.D.
Abt Associates

METHODOLOGY USED:
Random assignment of classrooms with control; 60 classrooms for each of two interventions plus control

DESCRIPTION:
The Classroom Literacy Intervention and Outcomes (CLIO) Study is the fourth national evaluation of the Even Start Family Literacy Program, which was established to help break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy for low-income families by improving the literacy skills of parents and their young children. Its study design called for testing the effectiveness of two promising family literacy interventions in a sample of Even Start projects across the nation. Two versions of each intervention were tested: one that was solely focused on early-childhood education in the classroom for 3- and 4-year-olds, and one that contained the same early-childhood education component along with integrated parenting education and parent/child interactive literacy activities components.

The goal of CLIO was to investigate whether these promising interventions are more

effective than the family literacy approaches currently used in Even Start projects. If the children and parents receiving the experimental interventions performed significantly better than the control group, it would provide Even Start practitioners across the country with information they could use to improve the effectiveness of their projects.

The Center for Improving the Readiness of Children for Learning and Education (CIRCLE), in collaboration with Abrams Learning Trends, was selected as one of the two interventions. This partnership brought together the highly respected professional development model created by CIRCLE for early-childhood teachers, the proven-effective parent education program Play and Learning Strategies (PALS) developed by CIRCLE, and the high-quality *Let's Begin with the Letter People* curriculum.

LENGTH OF STUDY: 3 Years

RESULTS:
The CLIO study demonstrated positive impact on some of the literacy supports in Pre-K classrooms, on time spent on child literacy and on parenting skills in parent education classes, and on children's social skills.

Validation of the Letter People Programs

The Efficacy Study Program

The Efficacy Study of the Letter People Programs, which compares pre/post-test data using a variety of respected assessment instruments, began in 2000 and is ongoing. Its primary purpose is to illustrate the improvements in literacy shown by students who have received instruction from Letter People programs. Positive patterns of progress are evident in the data of all participating schools and districts, which represent diverse urban, suburban, and rural school settings across the country. To date, 27,568 students in 1,737 classrooms in 362 schools in 25 districts have participated in this voluntary study. A copy of the current Efficacy Study is available on the Company website. (See page 25.)

Initial Validation Studies

Following publication, Abrams Learning Trends launched a series of studies to determine the effectiveness of each Letter People program. The following data present the initial results from the first four kindergarten studies.

- In **Hamden, Connecticut**, researchers conducted a year-long investigation to examine the differential impacts of two instructional treatments on the ability of kindergarten children to perform several specific early-reading and writing tasks.

Experimental and control groups were housed in six elementary schools judged to be equal in demographic representation. The experimental group was made up of 152 children who received instruction from *Land of the Letter People*®. The control group was made up of 165 children who received instruction that consisted of the normal activities of a basal reading program that provided exposure to a broad range of language-arts skills embedded in a variety of literature-related activities. (See Table 1.)

	Experimental group (n = 152)	Control group (n = 165)
Gender		
Female	44.7%	49.1%
Male	55.3%	50.9%
Race		
White	71.0%	67.3%
African American	2.6%	13.3%
Hispanic	23.7%	17.0%
Native American	—	1.2%
Other	2.6%	1.2%
SES		
Free/reduced-price lunch	9.9%	17.0%
Primary language		
English	85.5%	92.1%
Kindergarten session		
a.m.	53.3%	64.8%
p.m.	46.7%	35.1%

All students were pre-tested and post-tested to measure skill growth. In addition, all students were given a post-test to measure application of skills. No statistically significant differences were found in the pre-test data. When pre-test and post-test data were compared, both the experimental and control groups showed gains on all subtests. However, **on all subtest measures, the gains in the experimental group surpassed the gains in the control group.** Analysis of variance showed statistical differences favoring the performance of the experimental group on the initial consonant task ($p < .01$), using lowercase letters ($p < .001$), sentence writing ($p < .003$), and name writing ($p < .02$). (See Tables 2–4.)

	Experimental mean	Control mean	Mean difference	t-value	p
Identifying capital letters	16.14	16.48	-0.341	-0.31	.753
Identifying lowercase letters	12.65	12.71	-0.064	-0.07	.948
Identifying initial consonants	4.92	5.14	-0.218	-0.32	.746
Rhyming	2.09	2.35	-0.260	-1.71	.088
Retelling	3.08	3.34	-0.254	-1.49	.171
Spelling dictated words	1.61	1.93	-0.328	-0.88	.378

	Experimental mean	Control mean	Mean difference	t-value	p
Identifying capital letters	23.78	22.68	1.104	1.64	.103
Identifying lowercase letters	22.29	21.45	0.841	1.15	.250
Identifying initial consonants	14.88	12.93	1.948	2.65	.009
Rhyming	3.14	3.20	-0.062	-0.51	.121
Retelling	3.92	4.02	-0.107	-1.10	.097
Spelling dictated words	8.35	7.32	1.034	1.54	.125

	Experimental mean	Control mean	Mean difference	t-value	p
Picture drawing	4.28	4.25	0.025	0.14	.889
Name writing	5.85	5.57	0.280	2.39	.017
Sentence writing	8.50	6.77	1.730	3.05	.002
Using capital letters	2.61	2.12	0.493	1.48	.141
Using lowercase letters	5.28	2.33	2.949	7.50	.000

Given what research has shown with regard to the predictive power of such skills for future success in school, these results are extremely encouraging. The finding with respect to the use of lowercase letters is particularly striking, as work with lowercase letters is sometimes neglected in early-literacy programs and is a special emphasis in *Land of the Letter People*.

- In a study conducted in **Rutherford County, Tennessee**, 1,485 kindergarten children received *Land of the Letter People* instruction for one school year. At the end of that year, a teacher-made assessment of literacy skills was administered. **Overall, 92.8 percent of the children scored at or above the 80 percent mastery level on the three subtests most closely related to phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle:** recognition of beginning sounds, recognition of lowercase letters, and recognition of capital letters. (See Table 5.) Even more striking is the fact that 88.5 percent achieved a perfect score on these tasks.

Table 5
Mastery of kindergarten skills
Rutherford County, Tennessee

School	Total # Students	# Mastery	# Non-Mastery	% Mastered
1	141	134	7	95%
2	77	69	8	90%
3	40	39	1	98%
4	104	99	5	95%
5	129	115	14	89%
6	46	41	5	89%
7	56	55	1	98%
8	125	113	12	90%
9	72	67	5	93%
10	165	146	19	87%
11	43	37	6	86%
12	57	53	4	93%
13	97	91	6	94%
14	91	77	14	85%
15	129	114	15	88%
16	113	109	4	96%
Total	1,485	1,359	126	92%

- The effectiveness of teaching with the Letter People was also investigated in a study conducted under the auspices of the **University of Northern Iowa**. Fourteen kindergarten and first-grade children were randomly selected for assignment to an experimental group, which was taught six letters and sounds using the Letter People, or to a control group, which was taught six letters and sounds by means of direct phonics instruction alone. (See Table 6.) A Mann-Whitney U Test was used to analyze post-test data. **Results showed a significant difference in performance on the task ($p < .01$) favoring the experimental group.**

Table 6
Pre-test/Post-test comparison
University of Northern Iowa

	Experimental group (n=8)		Control group (n=6)	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
# of letters	6	6	6	6
Mean score	.62	5.50	.50	3.50
Standard deviation	.9	.7	.8	1.3

- In yet another study in **Kent, Washington**, researchers administered the *Land of the Letter People* pre/post-test to 206 children in 11 kindergarten classrooms in five elementary schools. The pre-test was administered in the fall, and the post-test in the spring. The test measured student ability in identifying capital and lowercase letters, identifying initial consonant sounds, supplying rhyming words, and retelling a story. Table 7 represents the raw scores of the 206 kindergarten children.

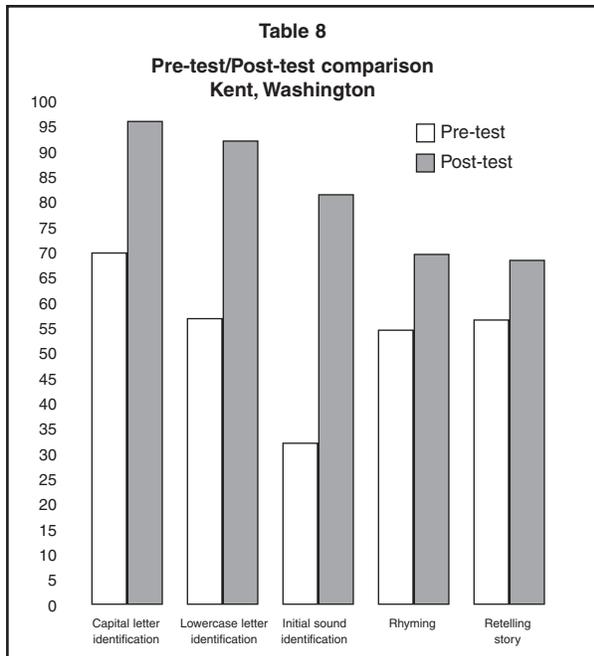
Table 7
Land of the Letter People assessment
Kent, Washington

Average raw scores

	Capital letter identification		Lowercase letter identification		Initial sound identification		Rhyming		Retelling story	
	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring
School A										
Class 1	15.4	25.9	12.5	25.5	8.1	17.7	2.8	3.1	3.6	3.6
Class 2	14.2	22.9	12.7	20.8	6.1	12.7	2.6	2.5	3.1	3.1
School B										
Class 3	23.9	26.0	22.9	26.0	15.8	19.6	3.0	3.3	3.6	3.7
Class 4	18.7	24.7	13.9	24.2	6.7	17.2	2.4	2.9	3.0	3.0
School C										
Class 5	17.4	25.7	14.5	25.4	2.3	17.4	2.1	2.6	2.6	3.0
Class 6	17.9	25.8	14.2	25.3	5.0	17.1	1.4	2.5	2.7	3.0
School D										
Class 7	18.5	25.8	15.1	24.9	7.1	17.6	1.7	2.8	2.5	3.3
Class 8	19.2	26.0	17.2	25.7	8.7	19.2	2.5	2.9	3.3	3.6
School E										
Class 9	13.7	23.4	11.8	21.8	2.5	15.3	1.6	3.1	—	—
Class 10	14.9	22.7	12.3	22.0	7.1	13.7	1.7	2.5	1.3	3.3
Class 11	18.0	24.2	14.6	23.7	3.8	11.0	2.0	2.8	—	—
Total	17.4	24.8	14.7	24.1	6.7	16.2	2.2	2.8	2.3	2.7

A comparison of the pre-test and post-test data (see Table 8) demonstrates the following significant gains:

- Identifying capital letters: **42.6% gain**
- Identifying lowercase letters: **64.1% gain**
- Identifying initial consonants: **141.8% gain**
- Supplying rhyming words: **27.3% gain**
- Retelling a story: **17.4% gain**



The *Land of the Letter People* program provided the kindergarten children in Kent, Washington, with an excellent foundation for first grade by increasing their skills and the ability to apply those skills necessary for successful literacy development.

This early research is indicative of the remarkable power of the Letter People in motivating learning, particularly in the crucial areas of phonemic and print awareness and the alphabetic principle. Phonemic awareness and knowledge of letter names and letter-sound relationships are fundamental literacy skills. Developing such skills and learning to apply them appropriately at the kindergarten level gives children a head start on success in early reading in grade 1.

Prepublication Testing

Let's Begin with the Letter People and *Land of the Letter People* were thoroughly classroom tested before publication. In each case, prototype lessons and student materials were initially piloted in schools across the country for one full school year. Feedback was gathered by means of direct classroom observation, interviews, and questionnaires. The lessons and materials were then thoroughly revised

and reintroduced into classrooms for a second year. At the end of that year, the programs were again revised and rewritten, based on additional input from the pilot classrooms. Only then were the materials published.

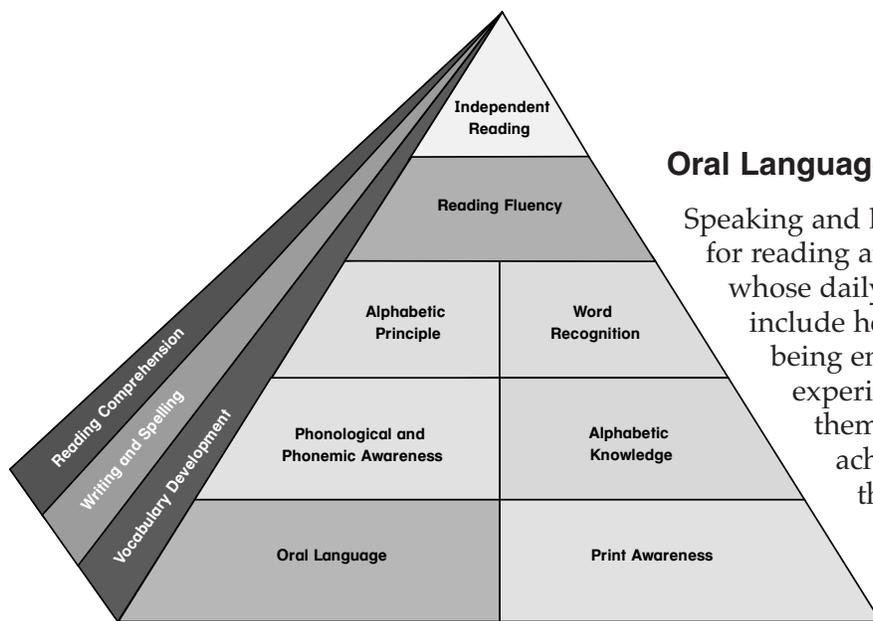
The success of the Letter People programs is not happenstance. Abrams Learning Trends carefully designed its Letter People programs to reflect well-respected scientific research in literacy learning and development together with its own classroom-tested research.

Research Bases of The Letter People Programs

The ultimate indicator of the success of any reading program should not be children who *can* read, but adults who *do* read. From the very beginning, programs must provide carefully orchestrated instruction with the goal of helping children become enthusiastic readers.

Decades of respected, classroom-based research reveal that the most effective instruction for preparing children to become lifelong readers and learners builds progressively on children's understanding and use of both spoken and written language, specifically focusing on the areas of

- oral language;
- print awareness;
- awareness of the sound structure of language (*phonological and phonemic awareness*);
- knowledge of the shapes and names of letters (*alphabet knowledge*);
- the alphabetic principle /word recognition;
- writing /spelling;
- vocabulary development; and
- reading fluency and comprehension.



Early Literacy Pyramid™

Oral Language

Speaking and listening are the foundations for reading and writing. Young children whose daily experiences regularly include hearing a lot of language and being encouraged to use and experiment with oral language themselves are more likely to achieve early reading success than are children whose language experiences are limited. Indeed, children who lack extensive experiences with oral language not only have difficulty learning to read but remain at risk for reading and learning problems throughout their school years (Dickinson and Tabors 2001; Kuhl 2000; Storch and Whitehurst 2002).

What makes oral language development so important to reading success? To begin, oral language is crucial to the development of phonological and phonemic awareness.

Children who can recognize and use large numbers of spoken words can focus more easily on isolating and identifying the individual sounds in those words (e.g., Goswami 2003; Metsala and Walley 1998). Further, knowing large numbers of spoken words gives beginning readers an invaluable resource as they apply the alphabetic principle. When beginning readers have the printed words in their oral vocabularies, they can more easily and quickly sound out, read, and understand them (National Reading Panel 2000).

Finally, Dickinson and Tabors (2001) indicate that the number of spoken words that children recognize and can use in prekindergarten has a significant relationship to their reading comprehension far into the upper elementary grades.

The National Early Literacy Panel

The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) was established in 2002 to identify programs and instructional practices that promote the development of children’s early literacy skills.

The NELP found that these six early and precursor literacy skills have “medium to large predictive relationships” with later measures of literacy development: alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming (RAN) of letters or digits, RAN of objects or colors, writing or writing name, and phonological memory. The NELP also identified five additional variables that moderately correlate with literacy achievement: concepts about print, print knowledge, reading readiness (a combination of alphabet knowledge, concepts about print, vocabulary, memory and phonological awareness), oral language, and visual processing.

The skills identified by the NELP consistently predict later literacy achievement for Pre-K and kindergarten children. The next section demonstrates how closely the Letter People *Early Literacy Pyramid™* correlates to the NELP findings and other respected research, thus enabling the Letter People programs to provide effective teaching in an environment that motivates and supports young learners.

Much of children's oral language learning appears to be "automatic," simply because humans have a predisposition to learn language (Pinker 1984). In reality, the quantity and quality of early-language development depends to a great extent on children's language-related experiences within their homes and families. Indeed, a landmark study of young children from professional, working class, and welfare families shows that the differences in language experiences of young children are dramatic. The study found that at age 3, children from professional families had heard about 30 million words spoken—twice as many words as for children in working-class homes, and three times as many as for children living in welfare homes (Hart and Risley 1995).

To ensure that all children are ready to learn to read, it is crucial for early-literacy instruction to engage children in a variety of oral-language activities. To develop as speakers and listeners, children need many opportunities to talk, listen, and ask and answer questions. Through such activities, they become familiar with new words, which can help them to recognize words more easily and to make sense of written text (Dickinson and Tabors 2001; National Early Literacy Panel 2008; New Standards 2001; Snow, Tabors, Nicholson, and Kurland 1995).

Children also need many opportunities to participate in interactive story reading, story telling and retelling, dramatic play, and, most important, discussions with teachers and classmates (Anderson et al. 1985; Landry 2001; Schwanenflugel et al. 2005). It appears, in fact, that a major difference between effective prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms and less effective classrooms is the type and amount of teacher/student talk. In effective classrooms, teachers engage children in discussions about books and behavior. They capitalize on routine opportunities by giving directions, encouraging children to think, clarifying, predicting, or making connections with

personal experiences. However, effective teachers know when to use discussion: too much teacher/student talk during reading, such as interrupting reading over and over, can interfere with children's understanding and enjoyment of a selection (Dickinson 1994).

Oral Language

The Letter People serve as motivators for oral language by encouraging children to share their personal experiences, feelings, and opinions. The Letter People's personalities, their songs, the problems they face, and the "real-person" modeling provided by teachers, capture children's attention and engage their imagination.

- *The Letter People are willing to listen endlessly to what any child has to say. They allow children to share their personal experiences, feelings, and opinions. Stories are told of children who come to school not talking to anyone—and then meet the Letter People. Before long these children become good listeners and talkers.*
 - *The Letter People lend themselves effectively to English learner instruction.*
 - *The Letter People (as well as the teacher) encourage children to play with words; to experiment with rhymes and alliteration; and to hear and repeat stories, songs, nursery rhymes, and poems.*
 - *Sometimes the Letter People hurt one another's feelings, mostly because they misunderstand something. They need the help of children to resolve their conflicts and to learn how to do better next time.*
 - *Because the Letter People are far from perfect and do not know everything, the children have opportunities to share what they know with the Letter People and with one another.*
 - *In a group setting, children can identify with the Letter People and "speak" for them in a variety of situations.*
-

Print Awareness

Print awareness refers to a child's knowledge of the forms and functions of print. Indeed, children's performance on measures of print awareness is a reliable predictor of their future reading achievement (Tunmer, Herriman, and Nesdale 1988). It is the first step to awareness of letter shapes, names, sounds, and, eventually, words (International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children 1998). Children who have print awareness can begin to understand that printed language is related to oral language; that, like oral language, print is a form of communication and carries messages; and that print and printed materials are sources of pleasure and information. Children who lack print awareness are unlikely to become successful readers (Morrow, O'Connor, and Smith 1990; National Early Literacy Panel 2008; Whitehurst 2001).

Children learn about print from a variety of sources. However, the most important way they develop print awareness is by participating in frequent and interactive reading aloud of storybooks. From these experiences, children gain knowledge of letter shapes and names; become aware that books are read from front to back; learn that text begins at the top of the page, moves from left to right, and carries over to the next page when a page is turned; and learn to distinguish words and the spaces that separate them. Eventually, they learn that it is the print and not the pictures that tells the story. Of perhaps greater importance, they gain an understanding of the why of reading—the enjoyment and knowledge that can be found in print (Anderson et al. 1985; Burns, Griffin, and Snow 1999).

Early experiences with writing can also help children develop print awareness. Children's early efforts to convey a message through writing reflect a developmental progression that moves from random scribbles to the use of scribbles that take on characteristics of the writing system, such as linearity, and leads eventually to the production of letter-like forms, which, in turn, are replaced by letters, beginning usually with the letters in the child's name (Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998; Whitehurst 2001).

Print Awareness

The Letter People programs immerse children in print, helping them develop print awareness.

- *Trade books, Big/Little Book selections, Letter People Song Charts, Rebus and Decodable Books, Take-Home Books, Meeting & Greeting Cards, and Virtual Books show children how books and print work. Through participation in these reading activities, children become familiar with the parts of books, print directionality, capital and lowercase letters, and the boundaries of words.*
 - *Children practice print conventions as they work interactively with teachers to create language-experience stories, class books, graphs, labels, lists, charts, and murals.*
 - *Children are encouraged to learn about print through writing in journals, in picture dictionaries, and at writing centers.*
-

Phonological and Phonemic Awareness

Phonological awareness refers to the ability to notice, think about, and work with the features of spoken language (e.g., Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn 2001). Children who possess phonological awareness can recognize, for example, that words can begin or end with the same sound, that words can rhyme, that sentences are made up of words, and that words themselves are made up of parts (syllables and onsets and rimes). The most advanced level of phonological awareness is the understanding that syllables and onsets and rimes are made up of even smaller parts—individual sounds, or *phonemes*—that can be put together or taken apart to make new words (Adams 1990). Children who possess this understanding—*phonemic awareness*—are able to notice, think about, and work with phonemes in spoken words (National Early Literacy Panel 2008; National Reading Panel 2000).

To clarify further, a phoneme is the smallest unit of speech that makes a difference to the meaning of a word. For example, the word *hen* contains three phonemes, /h/-/ɛ/-/n/. Changing the first phoneme in *hen* from /h/ to /p/ turns *hen* into *pen*, and so changes the word's meaning.

The level of a child's phonological and phonemic awareness when he or she begins formal schooling appears to be a very strong predictor of that child's eventual success in learning to read (Stanovich 1986; Torgesen 1998). More specifically, a child's ability to discriminate and manipulate phonemes correlates strongly with his or her reading success throughout the school years (Juel 1991; Lieberman, Shankweiler, and Lieberman 1989; Shaywitz 2003; Stahl and Murray 1998).

The importance to later reading success of teaching beginning readers to hear and identify individual phonemes has now been shown in research that investigates how the brain functions during reading. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to observe the flow of blood to the brain as people read, physicians Sally and Bennett Shaywitz and their colleagues have found increased blood flow to the brain's language centers in people who know how to sound out words. On the other hand, they have found less blood flow to the language centers in people who cannot sound out words (Shaywitz and Shaywitz 2004).

As important as phonemic awareness is, however, it is not always easy for children to become aware of phonemes. This is because speech has no breaks to show when one phoneme ends and another begins—as we speak, we co-articulate, or overlap, phonemes. As a result, it is difficult to hear individual phonemes in words. In addition, as we listen and speak, we do not usually focus our attention on individual sounds in words. Rather, we focus on the meaning of the words (Adams 1990). Research indicates, however, that phonemic awareness can be taught, and that most children benefit from explicit and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness (e.g., Cunningham 1990; Goswami 2003; Torgesen and Mathes 1999).

Phonemic awareness can be improved through guided activities that involve the following:

- **phoneme isolation**, which requires children to recognize individual sounds in a word. (“What’s the first sound in *fin*? What’s the last sound?”)
- **phoneme identification**, which requires children to recognize the same sounds in different words. (“What sound is the same in *hit*, *had*, and *home*?”)

- **phoneme categorization**, which requires children to recognize the word in a set of three or four words that has an “odd” initial or final sound. (“Which of these words doesn’t belong—*big, bad, put?*”)
- **phoneme blending**, which requires children to listen to a sequence of separately spoken phonemes, then combine, or blend, the phonemes to make a word. (“What is this word— /s/-/ă/-/d/?”)
- **phoneme segmentation**, which requires children to break, or segment, a word into its separate sounds as they say each sound and tap out or count it. (“Tell me how many sounds are in *grin*.”)
- **phoneme deletion**, which requires children to identify the word that remains when a phoneme is removed from another word. (“What is *train* without the /t/?”)
- **phoneme addition**, which requires children to make a new word by adding a phoneme to another word. (“What word do you make when you add /k/ to the beginning of *lip?*”)
- **phoneme substitution**, which requires children to replace one phoneme with another to make a different word. (“*Van*. If you change /n/ to /t/, what word do you make?”)

Participating in such activities can significantly accelerate both reading and spelling growth in children (Armbruster et al. 2001; Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp 2000; Yopp 1992).

Phonological and phonemic awareness instruction should begin before instruction in sound-letter relationships, and it should continue throughout the teaching of these relationships. Complementing instruction in sound-letter relationships with instruction in phonemic awareness promotes growth in both skills (National Reading Panel 2000; Torgesen and Mathes 1999).

Phonological and Phonemic Awareness

In the Letter People programs, phonological and phonemic awareness instruction is systematic and progresses in difficulty.

In all Letter People programs, children listen for and identify words in sentences, syllables within words, onsets and rimes within syllables, and finally phonemes within words. The phonological skills of listening, rhyming, and attending to alliteration are also continually addressed. Throughout the programs, encoding and decoding activities are based on hearing, segmenting, articulating, and blending sounds.

Once children have begun to attach sounds to letters, the Letter People help with the development of phonemic awareness in several ways:

- *Each Letter Person represents a specific sound. Because the Letter People are people, and not just letters, program materials describe the Letter People as “making” or “using” sounds; this is a reference to the fact that letters represent sounds.*
 - *Each Letter Person has a special characteristic and sings a song that reminds children of a specific sound.*
-

Alphabet Knowledge

Alphabet knowledge refers to children's ability to name the letters and to identify their shapes. Alphabetic knowledge has been identified as a strong predictor of reading success. In fact, along with phonemic awareness, beginning-of-year alphabetic knowledge is one of the best predictors of reading achievement not only at the end of kindergarten but well into secondary school (Ehri and McCormick 1998; Share et al. 1984; Treiman and Rodriguez 1999).

Children who can instantly and effortlessly recognize the shapes of all the letters of the alphabet are able to focus their attention on other early-literacy tasks, such as learning sound-letter relationships and how to write letters (Hall and Moats 1999; National Early Literacy Panel 2008). Indeed, unless children can recognize the shapes of letters automatically, without puzzling out what combination of lines makes a specific letter, they cannot quickly recognize words or understand that words are sequences of letters (Ehri 1987; Ehri and Wilce 1985; Roberts 2003).

Children appear to learn about letters beginning with letter names, then letter shapes, and finally letter sounds. This learning begins in the home, where children learn letter names by singing songs such as "The Alphabet Song" and by reciting alphabet rhymes. Playing with plastic letters, alphabet books, and blocks; watching children's television shows; and playing alphabet games on computers lead children from learning letter names to learning letter shapes. Knowledge of letter sounds usually is delayed until after children begin formal instruction (Adams 1990).

Children learn the shapes of letters by distinguishing one character from another by its spatial features. Further, it appears that it is easier for children to learn uppercase letters first (these are the letter shapes they have seen most often in alphabet books, in

puzzles, and on blocks), followed by lowercase letters (the type of letters they most often see in storybooks). Introducing only a few letters at a time enhances mastery (Adams 1990).

Although research has not identified the best sequence to introduce the names and shapes of letters, researchers tend to agree that the more common letters should be taught before the less common ones. That is, *s*, *m*, *n*, and *t* should be taught before *q* and *x*. In addition, some suggest that visually confusing letters, such as *b* and *d*, *s* and *z*, or *p* and *g*, should be taught far apart, with teachers ensuring that children have learned one letter before the other is introduced (e.g., Adams 1990; Hall and Moats 1999).

Research does indicate, however, that the alphabet should be taught explicitly and systematically (Adams 1990) and that instruction should embed letter learning in activities that make clear to children that letters have a purpose (Bredenkamp and Copple 1997; Schickedanz 1998).

As their alphabetic knowledge increases, prekindergarten and kindergarten children may use what they are learning about letters in their own writing. Kindergarten and first-grade children use letters to begin writing words or even to write entire sentences. Encouraging children to use invented spelling allows them to communicate their thoughts by applying what they have learned about letters. As children create their own spellings, they begin to think about the sounds of words and how those sounds relate to spellings. As a result, invented spelling can be an invaluable component of children's reading and writing development (Adams and Bruck 1996).

Alphabet Knowledge

The Letter People, who live in the Land of the Letter People, help facilitate letter identification by making the letters of the alphabet “come to life” for children.

- *Each Letter Person bears a letter name, such as Ms. A or Mr. B.*
 - *Each Letter Person wears a capital letter on the front, a lowercase letter on the back, and a hidden letter to promote letter identification naturally.*
 - *After meeting each Letter Person, children are encouraged to find and name letter shapes in their environment.*
 - *Children are further exposed to letter shapes as they play with a variety of tactile letters in Ms. A’s ABC Center and interact with letters on the Land of the Letter People Floor Map.*
-

The Alphabetic Principle/ Word Recognition

The alphabetic principle is the combination of alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness. It is the understanding that there are systematic and predictable relationships between written letters and letter patterns and spoken sounds. Understanding the alphabetic principle is a necessary precursor to reading with fluency and comprehension (Adams 1990; National Early Literacy Panel 2008). Lack of understanding of the alphabetic principle is the most frequent cause of reading failure (Rack, Snowling, and Olson 1992; Vellutino 1991). Children who cannot understand and apply the alphabetic principle find word recognition a struggle, which hinders comprehension (Juel 1991; Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998).

Research indicates that systematic methods of instruction are more effective in teaching the alphabetic principle than are nonsystematic methods (Adams 1990; Bond and Dykstra 1967; Chall 1967, 1989; Foorman et al. 1998; National Reading Panel 2000). Systematic methods of instruction differ from nonsystematic methods in that they involve the explicit teaching of both consonant and vowel sound-letter relationships in a clearly defined sequence. Nonsystematic methods of instruction do not teach all consonant and vowel sound-letter relationships, do not explicitly teach the relationships, and do not present instruction in a clear sequence (National Reading Panel 2000).

Research has not yet established one best sequence for teaching sound-letter relationships. It seems reasonable, however, to begin instruction with some consonants whose sounds can be pronounced in isolation and with the least distortion, such as /f/, /m/, /n/, /r/, and /s/ (Adams 1990; Stahl, Duffy-Hester, and Stahl 1998). A second consideration in sequencing instruction is to choose sound-letter relationships that make it possible for children to read a great many words as soon as possible. To this end, some sound-letter relationships—for example, /m/, /s/, /ă/, /n/, /r/, and /t/—are more useful than others (Simmons and Kame’enui 1998).

Word recognition refers to the ability to associate a printed word with its meaning (Stanovich 1991). All the preparation children undergo in developing phonemic awareness, solidifying their alphabetic knowledge, and understanding the alphabetic principle is to help them attain the very important goal of becoming independent, fluent, enthusiastic readers who read with comprehension, analyze what they read, and communicate their thoughts and opinions in clear, accurate writing. Children cannot achieve this goal, however, until they are first able to quickly and automatically decode and get meaning from large numbers of words (Chard, Simmons, and Kame'enui 1995).

For children to read words fluently, they must have opportunities to practice applying what they are learning about sound-letter relationships. The most effective practice materials for beginning readers are selections that are made up largely of words that contain the specific relationships the children are learning—*rebus/decodable texts* (Beck and Juel 1995). Children who read stories that contain a high percentage of words with taught relationships are better at word recognition than are children who read stories that do not contain words that match their instruction (Juel and Roper/Schneider 1985). Decodable texts also are a good way to familiarize children with a set of high-frequency words—words that appear often in written language but that are either “irregular” because they do not conform to the sound-letter relationships the children have learned (such as *was*, *said*, and *have*) or are decodable, but contain sound-letter relationships that the children may not yet have been taught (such as *see*, *my*, *she*, and *why*).

Learning word families is another practice activity that can help children increase word recognition. A word family is a set of words that contains the same final spelling pattern, called a *phonogram* or *rime* (e.g., in the word *nap*, the rime is *-ap*). To make a word from a rime, it is necessary to add an *onset*. For example, the rime *-ig* produces the word family *big*, *dig*, *fig*, *gig*, *jig*, *pig*, *rig*, and *wig*. Only 37 rimes are used in some 500 words that children see often in their reading materials (Adams 1990).

It has been demonstrated that children can make analogies from rimes to read and write new words within a word family (Goswami 1995). That is, if they know the rime *-ap*, children may be able to read and write not only words such as *cap*, *lap*, and *nap*, but also less common words such as *trap*, *wrap*, or *strap* (Juel and Minden-Cupp 1998).

However, teaching children to use rimes to make analogies should not take the place of explicit, systematic sound-letter instruction. Children who use this method primarily to decode show less skill in word recognition than do children who can analyze words sound by sound (Bruck and Treiman 1992).

Finally, practice activities in which children are encouraged to write can both reinforce the alphabetic principle and contribute to word recognition. Such activities focus attention on how words are spelled, which requires children to use their knowledge of sound-letter relationships (Adams and Bruck 1996).

The Alphabetic Principle/ Word Recognition

The Letter People programs are designed to teach strategies for using phonemic and alphabet knowledge and skill to help children acquire an understanding of the alphabetic principle and to foster word recognition.

The recommended sequence in which the names of the letters of the alphabet are introduced in Let's Begin with the Letter People follows closely what researchers have found to be the typical sequence of speech-sound acquisition. In Land of the Letter People, it is recommended that the Letter People be introduced in a sequence that reflects the best information about how to help children attach sounds to letters to make words and move into reading and writing words. This leads to children becoming independent readers and writers as they apply and expand their phonemic awareness and knowledge of the alphabetic principle through extended reading and writing.

- *Each Letter Person's special characteristic, made memorable by that Letter Person's song, reminds children of the connection between the letter and a specific consonant or short-vowel sound.*
- *Letter People stories make the process of analyzing sounds and mapping sounds to letters clear to children.*
- *High-frequency words, called "Everyday Words," are taught explicitly.*
- *Word-family analogies and systematic sound-letter instruction are used as approaches to the word-recognition/decoding task.*
- *Throughout the program, children have continuing opportunities to build words with the Letter People, to read rebus/decodable text, and to write and spell on activity sheets and in independent writing.*
- *Decoding opportunities include a series of increasingly challenging books that are introduced by the Letter People. These books, called Ready to Read with the Letter People® and Let's Read with the Letter People® take the form of manageable text, that is, text that incorporates rebuses, decodable words, high-frequency words, and some story words.*

Writing and Spelling

Once children have become aware of phonemes and print conventions, writing is an excellent way to allow them to apply their new knowledge. Writing often emerges naturally as children incorporate it into their pretend play. In fact, many children begin to write before they enter school or begin to read (Durkin 1966). Because of this, it is especially valuable for teachers to link literacy activities and play (Casbergue 1998; Neuman and Roskos 1997).

For kindergarten children, such activities as interactive writing can promote writing development. In interactive writing, children and teachers work together, with children taking an active role by holding the pencil and doing the actual writing. The teacher also takes an active role by asking questions about the writing, by reminding children of what they know about print, and by providing direct instruction as needed (Button, Johnson, and Furgerson 1996).

In first grade, independent writing opportunities help children begin to understand the function of writing—communication—and to pay attention to its form—the importance of writing in complete and coherent sentences and the role of punctuation marks (Adams, Treiman, and Pressley 1997).

In addition to encouraging children to focus on and think about print conventions and the relationship between letters and sounds, early writing activities also can help solidify children's knowledge of the literary elements that are essential to stories—characters, settings, plot conflicts, and resolutions (Burns et al. 1999; Snow et al. 1998). This knowledge also contributes to reading development. Thematic units that focus on a particular type of literature, such as stories or different kinds of informational text, can serve as models for introducing children to the conventions of that type of writing (Graves 1983).

Spelling is integral to writing. In addition, it has a great impact on reading. Research shows a strong relationship between children's ability to spell and their reading fluency, reading comprehension, and vocabulary development (Adams et al. 1997; Ehri 1987, 2000; Moats 1997, 2005/06; Snow, Griffin, and Burns 2005).

In the earliest stages of writing, children may rely heavily on their own created, or invented, spellings. Concerns that invented spelling will interfere with children's learning of conventional spelling appear to be unfounded. Studies have found that children's experience with invented spellings does not obstruct, but rather promotes, their ability to internalize conventional spellings (Ehri 1987; Ehri and Wilce 1985; Uhry and Shepherd 1990).

In kindergarten, instruction should encourage children to use their knowledge of sounds and letters to spell simple words. By middle to late first grade, instruction should steadily move children toward conventional spellings. A progression of instruction that begins with invented spellings and moves through a phonetics stage and into rule-governed conventional spellings from first grade on can ensure that children's spellings of words become increasingly correct and that children can more easily remember the words they study (Moats 1997, 2005/06; Snow et al. 2005).

Writing and Spelling

In the Letter People programs, children have age-appropriate opportunities to practice their emergent writing skills independently.

- *Writing is viewed as a developmental process beginning in prekindergarten.*
 - *Children have many opportunities to express themselves in writing, even before they can use conventional spelling. They are encouraged to apply to their writing their increasing knowledge of sound-letter relationships.*
 - *Children practice correct formation of letters—handwriting.*
 - *Children are encouraged to “write what you hear” as they experiment with spellings.*
 - *When it becomes appropriate, teachers draw attention to the ways words are actually spelled, using interactive techniques to help children figure out spelling patterns.*
 - *Spelling development takes place within a context of writing and reading activities.*
-

Vocabulary Development

Without extensive vocabulary knowledge, children cannot become skillful, independent readers and writers. Skillful reading and writing depend both on knowing a great many words and on being able to deal effectively with new ones (Stahl and Nagy 2000; Stahl 1999).

Throughout the school years, students' vocabulary size is linked to their academic achievement, and the vocabulary problems of students who enter school with poor or limited vocabularies worsen over time (Baumann and Kame'enui 1991). And, as noted earlier, many disadvantaged young children have limited experiences with language at home, and thus enter school with significantly more limited vocabularies than do their more advantaged classmates (Hart and Risley 1995). Moats (2001) refers to this gap in stores of words as “word poverty.” In

her work in a large-city school district, Moats found that a randomly selected sample of kindergarten students scored, on average, at the 5th percentile on an oral test of word meaning recognition. Many of the children were unable to name pictures that showed the meanings of words such as *penguin* or *sewing*.

More specifically, children's vocabulary knowledge and their reading comprehension are strongly related. Indeed, the National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge are integrally intertwined. The relationship is not surprising: Children who are poor readers often do not have adequate vocabulary to get meaning from what they read. Because reading is difficult for them, they cannot do the large amount of reading they must do if they are to encounter and learn new words. This results in what researcher Keith Stanovich (1986) calls “the Matthew Effect”: Good readers read more, become better readers, and learn more words; poor readers read less, become poorer readers, and learn fewer words.

The development of strong reading skills appears to be the most effective word-learning strategy available (Baker, Simmons, and Kame'enui 1998; Stahl and Nagy 2000). Reading aloud to children—especially when it is accompanied by discussion before, during, and after reading—is an especially effective way to increase children's vocabularies. Because children's literature often contains vivid descriptive language, reading books aloud can be an excellent way to focus children's attention on the power of words. However, reading aloud by itself is not sufficient either to build children's vocabulary or to increase their comprehension. Some researchers argue, in fact, that the real value of read-aloud activities for vocabulary growth lies not in the reading, but in the teacher-student talk that accompanies the reading. Beck and McKeown (2001) emphasize that it is through the talk surrounding read-aloud activities that students gain experience with “decontextualized” book language—that is, the language that represents ideas and concepts.

Although familiarizing children with the sometimes “rare” words found in literature is important, for prekindergarten and kindergarten children, vocabulary instruction should also include ample exposure to words related to common concepts, such as colors, shapes, and numbers. Through such instruction, children increase both vocabulary and general knowledge levels (Hiebert and Martin 2001; National Early Literacy Panel 2008; Neuman 2006).

Vocabulary Development

The Letter People programs are rich in vocabulary-learning opportunities.

- *Reading-related discussion helps children acquire new vocabulary. Repeated readings of trade books, story books, informational texts, and big books familiarize children with new words.*
 - *The 2009 edition of Let’s Begin with the Letter People extends the vocabulary focus to include essential words, content words, and wonderful words. Over 540 words are taught in the course of the year.*
 - *For English learners, the Letter People are perfect partners for vocabulary instruction.*
 - *Children are encouraged to ask and answer questions in order to gain and share information, to summarize reading passages, to make predictions, to draw conclusions, and to express opinions.*
 - *Through talk with the Letter People, children have many opportunities to try out new words without fear of ridicule—and with gentle guidance.*
 - *Stories about the Letter People serve as memorable introductions to, and powerful reminders of, an array of facts about words. Indeed, it turns out that the very lives of the Letter People revolve around their interest in words—how they are formed, read, and written.*
-

Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension

Helping children develop an understanding of the workings of both spoken and written language must lead to one ultimate goal: enabling them to read independently with fluency and with comprehension.

Fluency refers to the ability to read with speed and accuracy. *Comprehension* means getting meaning from what is read.

When fluent readers read, they use their knowledge of sound-letter relationships to recognize words automatically, and to quickly connect the words with their meanings and so understand what they read. When fluent readers read aloud, they read effortlessly and with expression. Readers who have not yet developed fluency, however, read slowly, word by word. They must focus a great deal of attention on identifying words, and so have little attention left to give to understanding the text. Their oral reading is slow and choppy (Armbruster et al. 2001).

In a large study, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that 44% of a sample of fourth graders lacked fluency (Pinnell et al. 1995). Students who scored lower on measures of fluency also scored lower on measures of comprehension, suggesting that building fluency is neglected in many American classrooms, and that the reading comprehension of many children may suffer as a result.

Teachers can help children become more fluent readers by modeling fluent reading themselves and by monitoring and guiding children as they read and reread a text orally. Repeated oral reading is most effective when it gives children many opportunities to practice reading with a high degree of success (Samuels 2002; Osborn, Lehr, and Hiebert 2003). Therefore, children should practice orally rereading text that contains mostly words that they know or that they can decode easily. That is, the texts should be at the child’s independent reading level. If the text is more difficult, students

will focus so much on word recognition that they will not have an opportunity to develop fluency (Armbruster et al. 2001; Kuhn and Stahl 2003).

In addition, teachers can contribute to children's fluency by providing them with opportunities to read books on their own that are at their independent level. The National Reading Panel (2000), however, has urged caution in the use of some widely promoted instructional strategies, such as independent silent reading during class time. The Panel points out that readers who have not yet attained fluency are not likely to make effective and efficient use of silent, independent reading time. For these students, independent reading takes time away from class time that is needed for explicit reading instruction.

To build comprehension, the most valuable activity by far is reading itself. The amount of reading that children do is related directly to their growth in reading comprehension across the elementary school years (e.g., Cunningham and Stanovich 1990; Guthrie, Schafer, and Huang 2001; Pressley 2000). For preschool and kindergarten children, this reading "practice" comes in large part from participating in read-aloud activities with an adult. As with vocabulary development, however, comprehension development requires that read-aloud activities be situated in contexts in which children not only listen to, but talk about, the reading with the adult (Beck and McKeown 2001).

From kindergarten on, children's comprehension can also benefit from explicit instruction in specific reading strategies that skillful readers use (Duke and Pearson 2002). For young children, the strategies that seem most useful for comprehension include how to identify elements of story structure and how to ask and answer questions related to the text (Stahl 2004).

Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension

All the components of the Letter People programs work together to promote both fluency and comprehension. Specific instruction in decoding skills and a variety of reading strategies give children the tools to read and comprehend books written on their level. Children are motivated to read the stories to learn more about their Letter People friends. Whole- and small-group instruction and interest/learning-center activities provide many opportunities for children to read orally and to talk about what they have read.

- *Children begin to build fluency through the reading of rebus books that familiarize them with high-frequency words, called Everyday Words.*
- *Children increase their fluency by reading decodable books that provide them with a place to apply their growing knowledge of sounds and spellings.*
- *The shared reading of big books increases children's interest in reading, builds vocabulary, and provides children with opportunities to join in as they recognize more and more words in print.*
- *Repeated reading of rebus/decodable text, big books, and trade books contributes to children's comprehension and fluency.*

Instruction that helps children develop an understanding of the workings of both spoken and written language sets them firmly on the path to becoming enthusiastic readers and writers. Such instruction provides children with the skills to read with fluency, to understand and analyze what they read, and to communicate their thoughts and opinions in clear, accurate writing.

The Letter People programs lay a firm foundation in the skills necessary for successful reading and writing. But the programs do much, much more—always balancing skills instruction with "real" reading of good literature and always including the Letter People, who make learning to read a joyous adventure.

Who Are the Letter People?

The Birth of the Letter People

In 1964, in a temporary classroom set up at the end of a school hallway in Nanuet, New York, a first-grade teacher struggled daily to focus the attention of her 24 students. The school was overcrowded; the children were typical first graders, eager and rambunctious; and the hallway classroom was full of distractions for them—not ideal conditions for teaching children to master reading, writing, and social development. But the teacher, Elayne Reiss, was determined, and working in collaboration with an early-childhood coordinator, Rita Friedman, created a program that more than focused the children’s attention; it made them eager, involved learners—in spite of the classroom circumstances.

The program developed by the two reading specialists revolved around 26 anthropomorphic characters who represented the letters of the alphabet. Each character had a distinguishing feature that served as a mnemonic device to help children remember the most typical sound represented by that letter. The characters were painted on large, two-dimensional portrait cards. Each character was given an engaging personality to help the teacher bring her or him alive in the classroom, and each character had a song to help children recall the distinguishing feature and sound. And so, the Letter People were born.

The children responded immediately to the Letter People. The improvised classroom came to life. Learning became fun, and with more focused time on task, children learned more quickly and retained what they learned. As the children shared stories about the Letter People at home, parents became more involved in their children’s learning. Parents, children, and teachers worked together to suggest the special characteristic of each Letter Person to be communicated on the portrait cards.

Although the original Letter People were a non-ethnic-specific community, they were not balanced in terms of gender. In those early days, 21 Letter People “boys” represented consonants and five Letter People “girls” represented vowels—however, the children soon learned that there could be no word without a Letter Person “girl.”

From the beginning, the children viewed the Letter People not merely as letters of the alphabet, phonics devices, or toys, but as real people. On one occasion, when the Letter People had to be shipped to another school, the children insisted that holes be placed in the boxes so that the Letter People could breathe as they traveled.

*The quality of being **real** is more than an anecdote; it is the essence of what makes the Letter People such powerful learning tools. As children become deeply engaged with their nonjudgmental “friends,”*

- *The Letter People support children’s phonological and phonemic awareness and stimulate oral interaction.*
 - *The Letter People foster social development, problem solving, and conflict resolution.*
 - *The Letter People make learning enjoyable and memorable.*
-

In 1969, the Letter People found homes in classrooms throughout the United States when a publisher, New Dimensions in Education, Inc., introduced a first-grade Letter People program called *Alpha One*®. In 1974, New Dimensions followed the first-grade program with a Letter People kindergarten program, *Alpha Time*®. In this program, the Letter People were transformed from two-dimensional figures on portrait cards to three-dimensional, age-appropriate, inflatable, vinyl figures called Huggables®.

The New Generation of Letter People

Abrams Learning Trends acquired the educational publishing rights to the Letter People in 1990. Recognizing the uniqueness of the Letter People as motivational and educational tools, the Company immediately set about to build around them a completely new series of Letter People programs—programs that incorporate findings from the most respected and replicable research on the ways in which children develop socially and intellectually and on how they learn and acquire literacy skills.

Although the Letter People have always lived in the imagination of children, they acquired a real place to live in the kindergarten program, *Land of the Letter People*, which was published in 1996 and revised in 2002. In 1999, *Let's Begin with the Letter People* (revised in 2004) brought the Letter People into the Pre-K classroom for the first time. In 2009, Abrams Learning Trends continued its commitment to the Pre-K classroom by launching *Let's Begin with the Letter People* © 2009.

The Letter People continue to be a non-ethnic-specific community of characters belonging to all children, but in the new generation, they have attained gender equality—with 13 females and 13 males. Vowels and consonants are no longer distinguished by gender. Instead, vowels are identified as LetterLights® who light the way to making words.

In 2005, Letter People Hand Puppets were introduced, to the delight of tens of thousands of teachers, parents, and children. These new companions to the preschool and kindergarten programs bring the motivational power of the Letter People to new heights in early language and literacy learning. In 2006, the Letter People became available in yet another teacher- and child-friendly format—Finger Puppets.

How the Letter People Programs Work

To ensure strong and steady literacy development, each of the new Letter People programs has been designed to balance the broadest possible range of age-appropriate literacy experiences with carefully sequenced instruction in oral language, print awareness, phonological and phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, the alphabetic principle, word recognition, writing and spelling, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension.

To ensure strong and steady social development, the Letter People programs take full advantage of each child's individual background preparation, stage of social development, and intellectual potential. For example, virtually every whole-class activity in the programs begins by identifying where the children are, inviting them to share their knowledge, experience, or skills in a particular area. Once needs are identified, the programs tailor individual and small-group activities to particular children. Ample opportunities for small-group and partner work allow children to interact socially and to learn from one another. The Letter People are an integral part of this, helping children from varying backgrounds work together for mutual learning and encouraging children to participate in activities and to take chances in learning. For example, an activity that one child might think too challenging is made much more friendly by the involvement of a Letter Person.

In designing its new prekindergarten and kindergarten programs, Abrams Learning Trends soon realized that in addition to having value in helping children with social and literacy development, the Letter People also held great potential for helping young children begin to learn about a broad range of subject areas. In more traditional schools, information about the world is divided into a discrete set of subjects, leading children to view science, social studies, math, language, art, music, and so on, as separate and distinct areas of knowledge. Research has shown, however, that this is not children's natural way of looking at the world. Rather, children create their own sets of connections between the bits of information that they experience in their everyday lives and schooling. As they mature and are exposed to a broader range of experiences, children modify and expand these connections. To address this developmental process effectively, information should be presented to children in an integrated way.

Thus, *Let's Begin with the Letter People* and *Land of the Letter People* have been designed to be core, or comprehensive, curriculum programs that incorporate into literacy learning concepts and skills from a range of subject areas. The programs present experiences for learning concepts and skills in an integrated fashion, using a thematic approach.

Abrams Learning Trends Background

Abrams Learning Trends is the publisher of the Letter People programs and other educational products, preschool through grade 3. Abrams is dedicated to making a constructive, lifelong difference in the lives of young children. To this end, the Company designs and produces classroom materials that serve a two-fold purpose: (1) to help children develop a firm foundation in the essential literacy (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) and content area skills; and (2) to help children develop self-esteem and respect for others, appreciating that when people believe in themselves, their potential is more fully realized and that when they empathize with others, they help shape a more tolerant world.

The Company's educational materials recognize and reflect these beliefs:

- Each child brings to the classroom a unique potential for learning.
- Each child contributes a unique family and cultural background to the classroom experience and the learning process.
- Teachers and families must work as partners with a child to develop fully the child's potential for intellectual, emotional, and social development.

Abrams Learning Trends further believes that to be most effective, educational materials must be research based and classroom tested. However, materials that are research based and classroom tested are of limited instructional value if children and teachers find them dull. Abrams Learning Trends believes strongly, therefore, that age-appropriate educational materials should be fun-filled as well as challenging and stimulating to the intellectual, emotional, and social development of children. At Abrams Learning Trends, these beliefs are put into practice by means of the Letter People.

Abrams Learning Trends educational materials:

- *Encompass an array of learning activities to facilitate each child's unique potential.*
 - *Recognize and respect the richness of diversity in all its dimensions.*
 - *Facilitate the teacher-family partnership through easy-to-use, hands-on support materials.*
 - *Encapsulate not only traditional wisdom but also the most current findings in educational research. In-depth pilot testing of product prototypes and teaching strategies in classrooms across the country over several years ensure that the materials are effective, are teacher friendly, and reflect classroom reality.*
 - *Are validated using initial studies, ongoing Efficacy Studies, and continued involvement with third-party research projects.*
-

Summary

Children across the country have fallen in love with the Letter People. The lives of over 35 million children, parents, and teachers have been touched by them. The testimonials of many of these teachers, parents, and children universally bear witness to the Letter People's effectiveness in motivating children to experience the joys of learning and the skills of literacy—speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Yet, personal testimonials are far from our only method of establishing the effectiveness of Letter People programs. Third-party, medical-model research enables us to state with confidence that children who learn with the Letter People increase their chances for reading success. In addition, ongoing Efficacy Studies, dating from 2000 and

involving more than 1,700 classrooms, to date, from diverse populations across the country, ensure that annual yearly progress continues to increase with the use of Abrams Learning Trends materials. In addition to meeting federal mandates, the Company continues to base its instructional materials upon respected research findings and repeated classroom testing to assure that Letter People programs and educational materials address current and future classroom needs.

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