

RESEARCH SUPPORTING OUR CURRICULUM AND ITS FEATURES

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH SUPPORTING OUR CURRICULUM?

After rewriting and revising the curriculum, based on feedback from a number of preschool classroom teachers in programs in Georgia between 2014 and 2016, the developers conducted an action research project in coordination with selected pre-schools in the Archdiocese of Atlanta. The director of the parish preschools for the Archdiocese selected seven of the 32 schools under her supervision to participate in the pilot study. All teachers in the study were provided complete curriculum printables and trained in the curriculum's use. The pilot continued throughout the 2016-2017 academic school year. Teachers provided weekly feedback to the Archdiocese preschool director and the curriculum developers via email. At the end of the study, the curriculum was found to be more effective with students than the phonological awareness programs and materials used by the schools in the control group. The Callaway Foundation of LaGrange, Georgia, provided the funding for the development of the curriculum and for this action research project. The Georgia Preschool Association, which is the oldest preschool association in Georgia, sponsors the free curriculum. Ideally, every reading curriculum program would undergo rigorous experimental research, but the enormous cost, time, and labor intensity of doing so make it prohibitive for most programs. Louisa Moats, the pioneer and research giant in the science of reading, has stated in a Webinar interview with Liz Brooks, "I think that the most important thing (in programs) is alignment—alignment with the tenets of research—alignment with what we know about language learning." (Moats, L., April 24, 2023) Our curriculum is tightly and rigorously aligned with the science of reading. It was updated and expanded in 2023.

WHY DOES OUR PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS CURRICULUM USE SO MANY LESSONS WITH PICTURES?

In our phonological awareness curriculum, we recognize that, while phonological awareness is an auditory skill, there are a variety of factors that can affect a child's development of this skill. These factors include age, attention span, motivation, and being an English language learner. To support children's phonological awareness development, we incorporate pictures into our activities, which make the activities more game-like and engaging. This, in turn, builds children's confidence and aids with memory recall. Furthermore, pictures indirectly aid in developing a child's vocabulary, which is especially helpful for English language learners. When pictures are used in a lesson, the next lesson in the module usually presents a similar phonological activity that omits pictures. Research on the development of the kindergarten version of the Test of Phonological Awareness-second edition:2+ (Torgesen and Bryant, 2004) determined that pictures to assess a child's ability to isolate and match or delete initial and ending phonemes was appropriate for use in this nationally normed assessment measure. Significantly, the phonological awareness activities developed for classroom use by the Florida Center for Reading Research (2014) and co-copyrighted by the Florida Department of Education use pictures throughout its curricula for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten.

WHY IS OUR PHONOLOGICAL CURRICULUM TAUGHT IN SMALL GROUPS (2-5) OR ON A ONE-TO-ONE BASIS?

Our phonological curriculum is taught in small groups of 2-5 or on a one-to-one basis because the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) found in their report, *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National*

Early Literacy Panel (2008), that adult-directed instruction focused on children's involvement in using the skill being taught in small groups or on a one-to-one basis yielded the best results (Lonigan, C. and Shanahan, T, 2010). Our curriculum aligns with this finding in order to provide effective instruction for phonological awareness development.

DO CHILDREN WHO START THE CURRICULUM BEFORE KINDERGARTEN NEED TO BE TAUGHT DIFFERENT SKILLS THAN CHILDREN WHO BEGIN IT IN KINDERGARTEN?

Surprisingly, the answer to the question is no. Although there is limited research on age and phonological development, the research that does exist indicates that both preschoolers and kindergarteners benefit from similar phonological awareness instruction (National Early Literacy Panel Report, 2009). The sequence of instruction is similar for both groups, although the scope of instruction will typically be less for early preschoolers and pre-kindergarteners than for kindergartners and older children.

With this research in mind, we urge you to use our curriculum's pacing guide as just that: a guide. Many factors can and do influence when an adult uses the curriculum with children. For example, in a research article from Komoda Health (March 14, 2023), the medical writers state that post pandemic pediatric speech disorders more than doubled in children between the ages of 0-12. The largest percentage of increase in children with diagnosed speech disorders were between the ages of 0 and 5 years old.

This finding will have an impact on many of these children's acquisition of phonological skills in view of research that children's phonological skills develop rapidly during their very early years (Lonigan,C. et. al.1998). This early phonological skills development was more recently

confirmed in research summarized just prior to the start of the pandemic (Gillon, 2018). it is too early to know the full impact of the pandemic on children’s phonological development and its subsequent impact on their reading skills. The important thing to keep in mind is not when you teach phonological awareness but that you teach this foundational skill that research (Adams, 1990) has found to be one of the two most important indicators of children’s success in learning to read.

WHY DO YOU USE UNCONVENTIONAL PRONUNCIATIONS FOR THE PHONEMES REPRESENTED BY SUCH LETTERS AS Q, W, AND Y?

By pronouncing those phonemes as koo, woo, and ye respectively, they shift from stop sounds to continuant sounds. Continuant sounds can be held much longer than stop sounds. That makes them easier for many children to hear and for a young child to articulate. When uttered as the initial sound of a word, these unconventional phoneme pronunciations blend smoothly with the sounds that follow them to make whole spoken words. (Engelmann, Haddox, & Bruner, 1986). Examples such as blending “ye” with “ard” to form the spoken word, “yard” and “oow” with “ill” to form the spoken word, “will” illustrate this technique.

Words that end with w or y often have different sounds, but that variation is taught in phonics instruction, not in our phonemic awareness curriculum lessons. Phonemic awareness is not phonics, but its development makes learning and using phonics much easier.

The use of our pronunciations of the sounds of the letters of the alphabet (known as sound card pictures in our curriculum) has proved particularly helpful to young, naïve readers and children who struggle with learning to read (Shaywitz and Shaywitz, 2020). The authors suggest the use of *Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons*

(Engelmann, et. al., 1986) as a phonologically based, explicit, systematic reading program taught on a one-to-one basis for such readers.

It's acceptable if you choose to use the more conventional articulated phonemes for the sound card pictures. However, be sure not to add a vowel sound at the end of any consonant phoneme you teach (e.g. buh, duh, hih). This distortion makes phonics harder to learn and use later on in school. View our sounds pronunciation section of our curriculum for specifics on this matter.

WHY DOES THE CURRICULUM INTRODUCE LETTER NAMES STARTING WITH MODULE F?

THE CURRICULUM DOES NOT DO THIS! Please note CAREFULLY the directions for the activities in Modules F through Module I. The lower-case alphabet cards are referred to as sound picture cards, NOT letters. They are never referred to as letter names in these Modules. This decision is based on the developer of Direct Instruction, Siegfried Engelmann's, use of the term, "sounds writing", instead of letter writing in his book, *Teach your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons (1986)*.

As Sally and Jonathan Shaywitz have noted, letters by themselves are meaningless marks of circles and lines. They are meaningful only as visual symbols representing the sounds of speech. (Shaywitz, S. and Shaywitz, J., 2020). Adams, et.al. used sound card letters in the last part of their book, *Phonemic Awareness in Young Children: a classroom curriculum (1998)*. The research findings of the National Early Literacy Panel (2009) indicated that combining phonemic awareness training with print-related activities enhances learning outcomes. Therefore, our curriculum first introduces letter names in Module J because of the need to teach long vowel sounds, which are the same as the vowel letter names. The curriculum does not dwell on phoneme grapheme

associations in any depth until Module L, which is the last module of the curriculum and bridges the child to reading words. In this final module, the emphasis is on the substitution of initial, final, and medial sound picture cards to form simple CVC words. If the user prefers, they may use the Module L word lists for oral adding, deleting, or substituting of sounds in CV and CVC words. However, since the goal of phonological awareness is to make reading easier to learn, we agree with Clemens, et. al. (2021) that there is a questionable trend toward advanced phonological training “in the dark” when a child may be better served to realize that they can READ!

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To Whom it May Concern:

I am writing in strong support of Developing Sound Sense, the free, online phonological awareness curriculum at SightWords.com being approved as a core curriculum for kindergarten use. As a former Fulton county public school kindergarten teacher, instructional resource teacher, and director of early childhood programs for the Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta, I have dedicated my career to nurturing early literacy skills. In my role at the Archdiocese, I provided curriculum oversight, quality assurance, and training for the Archdiocese's 32 early childhood programs.

In 2014, I was invited to join the Executive Board of the Georgia Preschool Association. The Georgia Preschool Association (GPA) had previously voted to sponsor the Sightwords.com website's free content that provided parents and teachers materials and methodology to help children learn sight words. Shortly after I joined the Executive Board, the Board received a request to sponsor a new phonological awareness curriculum being developed by Sightwords.com. The Georgia Preschool Association, which serves teachers and parents of children from birth through age eight, has long been a strong proponent for fostering early literacy skills. The Board was interested because of the tremendous success of the original program it had sponsored. However, the members wanted to see the phonological awareness curriculum evaluated, as did the developers.

Several of the private school directors serving on GPA's Executive Board were anxious to pilot the program in their schools. However, their small number of staff and students precluded getting a good evaluation of the program. I volunteered to approach the directors of some of the schools I oversaw about piloting the study. Seven directors immediately volunteered to be a part of it.

I want to emphasize that neither the Archdiocese nor any of our schools/school personnel involved in the pilot nor I were paid for our participation with the exception of all participating teachers receiving a \$100.00 thank you gift card from the SightWords.com website owner at the completion of the pilot. The only motivation was to determine if the curriculum was effective with students and practical for teachers to use.

I reviewed the curriculum thoroughly and was confident that it aligned with the science of reading. Our participating schools' teachers were provided all the printables needed to implement the curriculum. All participated in comprehensive staff development provided by the curriculum developers at the end of the 2015 school year to ready them to implement the program at the beginning of the 2016-17 school year. The developers continued providing staff development at intervals during the 2016-17 school year.

Each participating teacher had a special computer link that they used at least weekly to report to me on program implementation, questions, concerns, and progress. I read and responded to all teachers in a timely manner and made on-site visits to assure that the program flowed smoothly. All teachers kept detailed notes on the lessons they taught. A very large majority of the teachers were positive about the curriculum's effectiveness with their students.

At the end of the 2016-17 school year, my office compiled the results. Teachers reported increased student engagement and significant increase in phonological awareness skills. Six of the seven schools elected to continue using the curriculum because of the progress they observed with their students, the curriculum's ease of use, and its strong parental support component. When I retired in September 2017, the new director, who had been part of the pilot program, enthusiastically supported the continuation and expansion of the curriculum. Unfortunately, the returning superintendent did not support early childhood education, cut funding for such materials for Parish schools, and reduced the directorship position from a full time to part time one. The data from the pilot year was lost. However, I understand that the original pilot schools have continued to use the curriculum because of the positive results their students experience.

The Georgia Preschool Association chose to sponsor the curriculum based on the pilot study results.

In conclusion, it is my firm professional belief that the Developing Sound Sense curriculum is solidly aligned with the science of reading. It meets the needs of busy teachers, and it supports the English/Language Arts core foundational phonological awareness skills children need to become successful readers. It should be included on the Georgia Department of Education's website as a high quality core curriculum for public school use.

Respectfully submitted,

Terry L. Graham

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