



or... Why kids need to go beyond singing the ABC Song if we want them to be good readers

All of us enjoy teaching the ABC Song to young children. We get excited when toddlers can sing the song all the way through! And it feels like the first solid step in the process of learning to read. And most children can learn the ABC Song! Most can also recite the ABCs from A to Z. But is that enough?

I'm going to say no, it isn't enough.

Having been a Title 1 Director working primarily with children who had reading issues, I had my eyes opened wide to the gaps that arise for children between learning the ABCs and actually learning to read. Letters, and most importantly the sounds they represent, cause a lot of confusion for children and this confusion can persist throughout students' years in school, hampering them in their attempts to become good readers.

The gaps between the singing the ABC Song and reading

What I learned from my Title 1 students was that while they all could sing the ABC Song and recite the alphabet, their functional knowledge of letters and their sounds was missing. In other words, the relationship between those letters and their sounds and how they combine to make words we can decipher was missing.

I was in a very special spot to learn from them, because I had a large population to study (around 75 students a week), and I had a broad array of grades I was working with every week (Kindergarten through 7th grade). I was there to learn from my students what was hard for them, what it was they didn't know or understand, and what types of help would fill those gaps for them.

My fundamental belief was that every single one of "my kids" would be successful if I could just understand what they didn't know. I was probably far more watchful and vigilant to cues and hints from my students than most people are. I was on a mission to learn my kids and was very passionate about it.

Here is some of what I learned about gaps:

1. One thing all kids had in common, no matter their age or grade, was that they **didn't understand that the letters in words actually "say" something**. Each letter or combination of letters makes a predictable sound! I learned this when I had groups in my little room all writing words I called out on the whiteboard-covered walls. I would call out a word and notice the kids all either left out letters, or they would add a random N or a loitering L, and most often when in doubt, they would throw a spare E on the end of the word. This floored me! I could see with my own eyes that they didn't get the relationship between letters (symbols) and their sounds.
2. Most of my students **didn't know short vowel sounds**, so if I called out a word for them to write, the vowel might be missing and if it appeared at all, it was most often the wrong vowel. This is a huge problem because every syllable in every word contains a vowel. Not knowing vowels means screwing up most words.
3. My students were also very confused, some to the point of shutting down completely, over the fact that they could not for the life of them remember phonics rules. They **couldn't memorize** letter sequences (such as on a spelling test) and any words they did happen to remember long enough to score +2 on their spelling test did not carry over into their reading or writing. The words they encountered looked like jumbles of black wires racing across the page. And the older the students were, the further behind they were.
4. I was stunned to recognize that the gaps I uncovered in Kindergartners and first graders were the same gaps that were troubling my middle schoolers. While I was dismayed, I was also encouraged because this told me that the number of gaps were probably few, and if I could identify them and correct them, the kids would not develop new gaps as they got older. It is very encouraging to understand that once we identify problem areas and address them, our students will have the tools they need to succeed!
5. I learned from all my students that rather than cutting their word list in half as we teachers are prone to do with struggling readers, it was most helpful to them the **more** words I showed them that followed the pattern of spelling we were looking at. For example, instead of teaching the students to memorize the spelling of "back" (that was a word on their spelling list and also a sight word they were supposed to learn), I would write a huge column of words that followed the same **ck** pattern: "lack, sack, black, stack, jack, tack, duck, truck, stuck, buck, luck, muck, lick, stick" and so many more! The more often they saw the spelling, the more friendly and familiar it looked. So, my second graders came to our group with a spelling list of 10 words from their teacher. I would expand it to 20 words that followed the same spelling pattern, and those darlings would score 100% on their spelling test. Because they could!

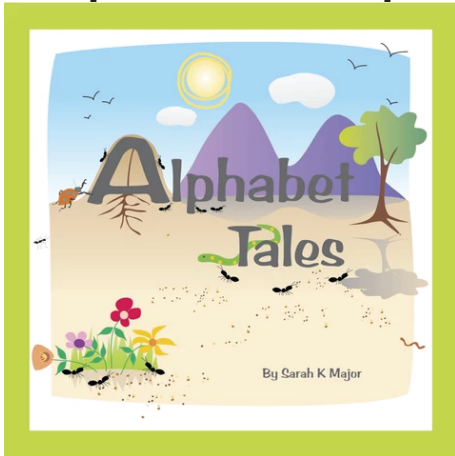
What are the take-aways?

Let's not stop teaching babies to sing the ABC Song! Let them chant the alphabet! But one simple and very powerful thing we can do is show them a little word as we read them a story and identify the sounds the letters represent.

I was reading to my granddaughter, Cookie Jo, when she was two. At the end of the book were the words "The End." Cookie loved to say "The End!" each time a story ended. So, because I couldn't seem to help myself, I pointed to the word "the" and said, "Cookie, this word says 'the'. You wouldn't believe how many times we see that word in our stories!"

And we looked back through the book to locate every "the". Each time we found one, we'd point and say "the." Then, when we reached the end of the book again, I pointed to the word "end" and said, "Cookie, this word says 'end.'" Then I pointed to one letter at a time and said E, N, D (saying the sounds, not the letter names). The lesson was over. No need to belabor the point. But it was a tiny bridge being built between chanting the ABCs and actually using letter symbols as pictures of the sounds we hear in words. I tell students it is like seeing a friend's school picture. The picture isn't really them, but it is a picture of them, just like letter symbols are pictures of sounds.

The power and simplicity of Alphabet Tales



In the beginning I designed the alphabet and wrote the stories while scribbling on a large whiteboard so my Kindergarteners could watch as they listened. I made up each story as I went along. Today, the scribbled stories and pictures are in actual book form. And there is power in this resource.

My goal in creating this book was simple. I wanted adults to be able to read children a story and have the storyline and the illustrations cement in the children's minds the link between the symbol (the written letters) and the sounds they produced. I wanted children to learn, by listening to stories, that words are made of sounds, not letters. I wanted them to be able to enjoy a cozy experience and come away with a strong foundation for reading.

And it works. Children who enjoy Alphabet Tales with their adults do remember. They encounter a letter later and can say its name and the sound because they can remember the story and of course they remember the pictures! Best of all, they didn't know they were learning something!

The purpose of Alphabet Teaching Cards:

The Teaching Cards came later. I found that when I was working with upper elementary and middle school kids who didn't know some basic sounds, reading Alphabet Tales just was not an option. But I could take out a Teaching Card of the letter/sound they didn't know (usually vowels) and show them the picture while saying the sound. When they groaned at the babyish picture, my response always was, "I know, I know, so just take one little peek and I'll put it away." And it worked every time. Teaching Cards are also a good resource to have on hand to quickly remind a child of a sound they forgot for a second.



The Teaching Cards are also a handy resource for the adult. On the reverse of the card is the mini-lesson, the hand motion, and the activity. While you can show your students the front of the card, you can sneak a peak at the back and remember all the stuff you wanted to say and do.

Final Words:

If I had to summarize what I have learned from kids who struggle with reading it would be two things. One is that kids can learn. And just because they are older doesn't mean they are incapable. It just means they still haven't had anyone discover what they don't know. And what they missed in Kindergarten is still missing. Two is that much of the struggles around reading have to do with not having been taught to listen to the sounds words make and then represent those sounds with the corresponding symbols. We aren't even taught this stuff in school!

The good news is that these resources (mostly Alphabet Tales to begin with) will teach for you. Just make the time to read the Tales. I would read them after recess when the kids needed to cool off and just enjoy calming down as they listened to a story. With my grandkids it was bedtime or after lunch or when they were supposed to be napping or just any time at all.

And when your kiddos know Alphabet Tales inside and out, you will be ready to follow up with the Spelling and Phonics Kit which will guide you as you teach sounds and their symbols from Kindergarten to adult level spellings!