

We Skoolhouse

Why No Letter of the Week





The Ineffectiveness of "Letter of the Week" in Early Childhood Education

In early childhood education, the "Letter of the Week" approach has been a longstanding method used by educators to introduce young children to the alphabet. This structured method involves dedicating each week to a specific letter, incorporating activities and lessons that revolve around that letter to reinforce recognition and phonemic awareness. While this approach may seem logical and organized from an adult's perspective, recent studies and educational research have highlighted significant drawbacks, questioning its overall effectiveness in promoting comprehensive literacy development.

Several reasons why "Letter of the Week" is Ineffective:

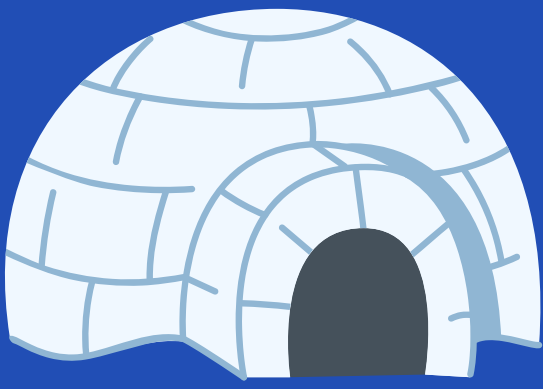
- Lack of Context & Meaning
- Misalignment with Authentic Learning
- Developmental Readiness and Variability
- Limited Learning Through Rigid Planning

LACK OF CONTEXT & MEANING

One of the primary criticisms of the "Letter of the Week" method is its lack of meaningful context. Dr. Rebecca McCathren, in a study published in the *Early Childhood Education Journal*, found that isolating letters from their natural language context can hinder children's understanding of how letters function within words and sentences. McCathren observed that when letters are taught in isolation, children may memorize them without truly comprehending their application in reading and writing.

McCathren's research emphasizes that young children learn best when new concepts are integrated into meaningful and relevant contexts. When letters are presented in isolation, children do not get to see how they interact with other letters to form words and convey meaning. For example, understanding the letter "B" becomes more meaningful when children see it used in the context of a story about a "bear" or when they can relate it to words they use in their daily conversations. Pointing out "S.T.O.P." on a stop sign that's passed frequently, while children physically stop, provides a far greater and meaningful connection. Isolated learning does not support the development of deeper literacy skills, such as phonological awareness, comprehension, and the ability to decode new words.





Igloo



Iguana



Ice Cream

MISALIGNMENT WITH AUTHENTIC LEARNING

From an adult's perspective, the idea of highlighting a collection of words and images that share the same initial letter, such as "I" for igloo and iguana, appears to be a straightforward way to reinforce letter recognition. Adults understand the underlying concept: by associating the letter with various objects, children will presumably learn to recognize and remember it more effectively. This method seems logical because adults have the ability to quickly see patterns and make connections between the initial sounds of words and their corresponding letters.

However, young children do not process information in the same manner. Their cognitive and perceptual abilities are still developing, and their understanding of the world is primarily rooted in concrete, familiar experiences. When a child is shown an image of an igloo or an iguana—objects they rarely, if ever, encounter in their daily lives—they may struggle to identify and make sense of these unfamiliar items. Their primary focus shifts to decoding the unfamiliar images rather than concentrating on the initial letter of the words.

With these formal lessons, which are often not relevant or intrinsically motivating to many young children, we might follow up with a craft project, such as making an igloo, to reinforce the concept. However, we again must consider the child's developmental stage and natural interests. Young children are more authentically engaged with the sensory experiences and physical actions. Their focus is on exploring and experimenting with materials and tools rather than on the representational task of creating an igloo as a symbol for the letter "I." This disconnect means that the intended lesson may be lost as the child is more immersed in the tactile and exploratory aspects of the activity, not thinking "I am going to make an "igloo" because it is representational of the letter "I."

DEVELOPMENTAL READINESS & VARIABILITY

Another significant drawback of the "Letter of the Week" approach is its one-size-fits-all nature, which does not account for the developmental variability among children. Dr. Javier Ramirez's longitudinal study, featured in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, examined the diverse developmental timelines of young learners in acquiring literacy skills.

Ramirez's research emphasized that the rigid pace of "Letter of the Week" may not align with all children's readiness levels. Children develop at different rates, and their literacy skills can vary widely. There is no "magic week" when children will suddenly internalize the letter "K," nor is the letter "K" only meaningful for one week out of the school year. Some children may be ready to move beyond basic letter recognition and need more advanced literacy experiences to keep them challenged and engaged. Conversely, other children may need more time and diverse approaches to grasp fundamental concepts. This is where having a fixed, rigid "one size fits all approach will miss the mark on majority of the children's needs and stages of development.



LIMITED LEARNING THROUGH RIGID PLANNING

Another significant limitation of the "Letter of the Week" approach is that it restricts spontaneous, meaningful learning opportunities. When educators rigidly plan and isolate letters in a structured format, they are less likely to highlight these letters in natural, everyday contexts. The same issue applies to thematic units planned far in advance. If a curriculum is predetermined and mapped out for the entire year, educators may find it challenging to deviate from their plans to follow emergent interests that arise from the children's natural curiosity.

For instance, if the curriculum dictates focusing on the letter "M" for a week, but children express a keen interest in a nearby construction site or treasures maps (for example), the rigid structure of "Letter of the Week" might prevent educators from seizing these teachable moments. This predetermined agenda can stifle the organic flow of learning and exploration that is crucial in early childhood education. Children benefit more from an emergent curriculum that allows educators to integrate literacy learning into topics that genuinely interest the children, making the learning process more dynamic and responsive.





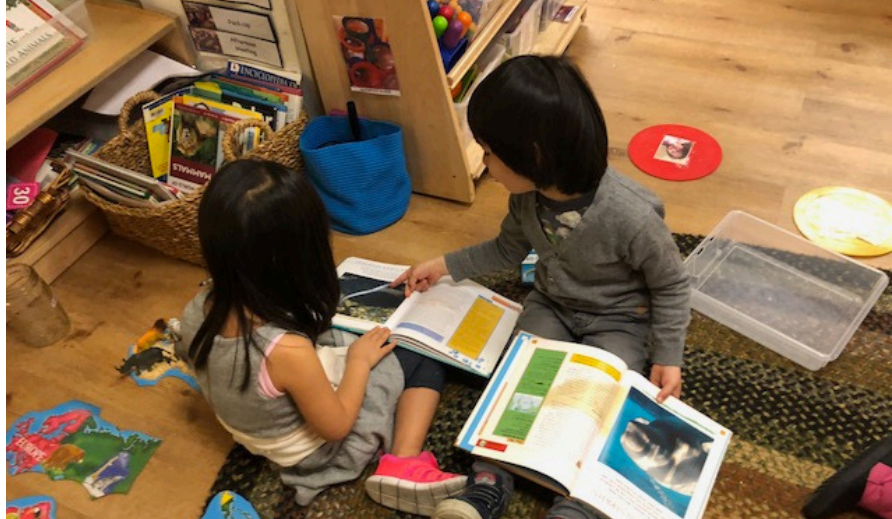
EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVES TO “LETTER OF THE WEEK”

Play-Based Literacy Learning

Play-based literacy learning integrates literacy skills into play, making learning enjoyable and meaningful. This approach respects the natural way children learn and develop, emphasizing exploration, creativity, and social interaction.

Implementation Tips:

- **Dramatic Play Areas:** Set up dramatic play areas such as a grocery store, post office, or doctor's office (ideally the emergent interest). Include literacy materials like shopping lists, letters, prescription pads, and signs to encourage reading and writing during play.
- **Story Retelling:** Use puppets, props, and flannel boards for children to retell stories they heard. This promotes comprehension, sequencing, and oral language skills.
- **Environmental Print:** Incorporate familiar logos, signs, and labels into the classroom. Children can practice recognizing and reading these prints during play.
 - If children are capable, you can have them make signs as much as possible!
- **Play-Based Literacy Games:** Create games that involve letters and words, such as letter hunts, matching games, or word puzzles. These games can be incorporated into daily routines and free play.
- **Interactive Read-Alouds:** During read-aloud sessions, encourage children to participate by predicting what will happen next, acting out parts of the story, or discussing their favorite parts. This interaction helps deepen their understanding and engagement with the text.

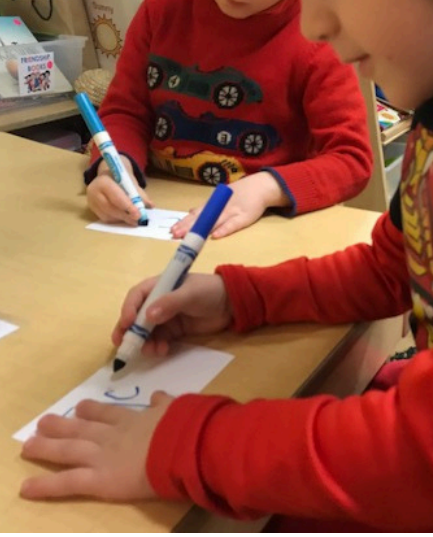


Literacy-Rich Environments

A literacy-rich environment immerses children in written and spoken language throughout the classroom. This approach emphasizes the natural integration of literacy into daily activities and routines.

Implementation Tips:

- **Label Everything:** Label objects and areas in the classroom with words and pictures. This practice helps children associate written words with their meanings and promotes word recognition.
 - Keep labels simple and small as we don't want to visually overwhelm the classroom and children.
- **Print-Rich Displays:** Create displays of children's writing sample, anecdotes, etc. These displays should be interactive and change regularly to maintain interest.
- **Daily Read-Alouds:** Incorporate daily read-aloud sessions. Choose stories that are engaging and relevant to the children's interests and include discussions about the story to enhance comprehension and vocabulary.
 - It is very important to re-read the same books several times over again to support comprehension and associations.
- **Sing Songs:** Singing songs supports literacy by enhancing phonological awareness through rhythmic patterns and rhyming lyrics, which help children distinguish between sounds and develop early reading skills. Additionally, singing fosters vocabulary development as children learn new words and concepts through song lyrics, enhancing their language comprehension and expression.
- **Writing Opportunities:** Provide ample opportunities for children to draw and write throughout the day. This can be achieved by setting up a literacy themed table, while also having pencils and paper in every center of the classroom.
- **Oral Language Development:** Encourage conversations, discussions, and storytelling. Use open-ended questions and prompts to promote language use and vocabulary development.



Emergent Curriculum

An emergent curriculum is a flexible, child-centered approach that builds on the interests and inquiries of the children. This method allows for spontaneous learning opportunities and adapts to the children's developmental needs and curiosities.

Implementation Tips:

Observation and Documentation: Regularly observe and document children's interests and play. Use these observations to plan activities and projects that build on their curiosity and questions. For example, if children show interest in animals during outdoor play, educators might plan activities like creating a "zoo" in the classroom. This project could involve reading books about different animals, writing labels for animal enclosures, and researching animal habitats.

Project-Based Learning: Develop projects that stem from children's interests and involve literacy concepts. For example, if children are curious about plants and gardening, educators might initiate a gardening project. This project could include reading books about plants, sketching/writing observations in a plant journal, and creating signs for different plants in the garden. Children could also write letters or emails to parents or experts asking for advice on how to care for plants, integrating literacy skills into real-world applications.

Child-Initiated Activities: Allow children to take the lead in their learning and provide materials and resources that support their interests. If a child expresses interest in dinosaurs during free play, educators might offer books about dinosaurs, encourage children to draw and label pictures of dinosaurs, and create a dinosaur excavation site with sensory materials like sand and fossils. This approach allows children to explore literacy concepts such as vocabulary, writing, and storytelling in a way that is meaningful and engaging to them.

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE LITERACY PRACTICES

This chart outlines developmentally appropriate literacy practices for children from birth to six years old. It highlights specific strategies and activities that support literacy development at different age ranges. It's essential to recognize that "sooner" does not mean "better" when it comes to literacy learning. Each child develops at their own pace, and it's crucial to be mindful of individual developmental readiness. By implementing these practices thoughtfully and flexibly, teachers and parents can create meaningful and engaging literacy experiences that foster a lifelong love of reading and learning.

Age Range	Developmentally Appropriate Practice for Literacy Development
0-12 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading Aloud: Choose board books with large, colorful pictures and simple text. Hold babies close so they can see the pictures and hear your voice clearly.• Rhyming Songs and Lullabies: Singing helps with language rhythm and bonding. Use songs with repetitive sounds and melodies.• Exploring Textures: Introduce touch-and-feel books to engage babies' sensory exploration.
1-2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interactive Books: Use board books with flaps, textures, and simple stories.• Encourage toddlers to lift flaps and touch different textures as they explore.• Repetitive Rhymes: Nursery rhymes and songs with repetitive words or sounds help toddlers anticipate what comes next.• Storytelling: Use simple props and encourage toddlers to imitate actions or sounds from stories.
2-3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Picture Books: Introduce picture books with more detailed illustrations and simple narratives. Point out details in the pictures and ask open-ended questions about the story.• Story Retelling: Encourage children to retell stories using pictures and props. Provide storytelling props like puppets or felt boards.• Letter Recognition: Begin introducing letters through play and labeling cubbies, furniture, etc.

Age Range	Developmentally Appropriate Practice for Literacy Development
3-4 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonological Awareness: Focus on rhyming, alliteration, and sound recognition. Play rhyming games, clap out syllables in words, and emphasize beginning sounds. • Emergent Writing: Provide opportunities for scribbling and drawing letters. Offer large paper and writing/coloring utensils. • Labeling: Label objects and spaces in the environment with words and pictures.
4-5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Literacy Skills: Practice writing their name and recognizing letters and simple words. Offer activities like tracing letters in sand or forming letters with playdough. • Emergent Reading: Encourage (not pressure) children to "read" familiar books using pictures and context clues. Ask questions about the story and predict what might happen next. • Interactive Storytelling: Engage in conversations about stories. Ask open-ended questions like "What do you think will happen next?"
5-6 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonics Instruction: Introduce letter-sound correspondence and basic phonics rules. Use games and activities to reinforce phonics skills, such as matching words to pictures or sounding out simple words. • Writing Skills: Support development of sentence structure and simple storytelling. Encourage children to write short sentences or stories based on their experiences or interests. • Independent Reading: Encourage children to review or read simple books independently. Provide a variety of books at their reading level and create cozy reading corners in the classroom.





MADE FOR CHILDREN. DESIGNED FOR YOU.

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