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# NAMES - A NATURAL FOR EARLY READING AND WRITING

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When and how to begin reading instruction has been a subject of controversy for many years. Early studies (Morphett and Washburne, 1931; Dolch and Bloomster, 1937) suggested that a mental age of six or seven years was required before children were ready to begin to read. This resulted in reading instruction being delayed for many children and in many developmental activities such as distinguishing shapes and colors, sequencing pictures and even such physical activities as crawling and skipping being considered "reading readiness".

In the seventies, we went through a period in which readiness for reading focused on a long list of isolated skills. Correlations between letter-name knowledge and reading success (de Hirsch, Jansky and Langford, 1966) and a belief that letter-sound knowledge was essential to beginning reading success resulted in programs in which children were expected to learn all letter names and most of the sounds before they were ready for reading instruction. But letter-name knowledge does not insure success in reading. Many experts (Venezky, 1978; Gibson and Levin, 1975) suggest that the ability to name the letters is indicative or symptomatic of a vast amount of linguistic knowledge. Children who know letter names and some letter sounds are generally children who come from "print-rich" environments in which children are read to and given implements for and encouragement to write at an early age (Durkin, 1966).

Research in the seventies and eighties (Mason, 1980; Clay, 1972) indicates that children can learn to read at early ages and that opportunities to write words and letters

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contributes to children's early development as readers. Mason (1984) summarizes the research and trends in reading readiness and early reading and then draws the following conclusions:

Many children begin to learn about how to read at a very early age through being read to, learning to identify and name letters and words and learning to print, spell and use printed labels in their drawings. This early knowledge is positively related to later reading and should be encouraged in kindergarten and preschool programs. Hence, preschool teachers should not transform first grade materials but should rely on program ideas arising from a less formal approach to learning. (pp. 536-537)

To try to develop a less formal yet structured approach to early reading, I have worked with many kindergarten and first-grade teachers over the past several years. Our goal was to put kindergartners and beginning first graders in situations in which they could learn about print. Of course, we included many book-reading and language experience activities. We wanted to find a way, however, to get the children to read and write some words which were meaningful to them. Through reading and writing the words, we hoped they would learn letter names and sounds in the "natural" way children appear to who learn to read before being given any formal instruction. We also wanted children to learn the print conventions (left to right, top to bottom, etc.) and to come to understand the terms or jargon (word, letter, same, different, first, last, etc.) we use as part of our reading instruction. We wanted to use words in the beginning that would be important or "key" words to the children.

Five- and six-year old children are very egocentric beings. Their worlds revolve around them and their friends. We decided to capitalize on this egocentrism by using the names of all the children in the class as the first words they would all learn to read and write. From these words, we would develop letter-name and sound knowledge, visual discrimination, auditory discrimination, print conventions and jargon and a host of other skills.

If you could visit the classrooms in which teachers are using the names as a springboard to literacy, you would

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find a great variety in the ways in which these names are used and in the types of activities done. In order for you to have some ideas about the variety of possible activities and the linguistic understandings that can be built using the names, this article presents one possible ten-day sequence of activities.

Prepare for these activities by writing all the children's first names (with initials for last names if two names are the same) with a black permanent marker on sentence strips. Cut the strips so that long names have long strips and short names, short strips. Each day, reach into the box and draw out a strip. This child becomes the "special" child for the day and the child's name becomes the focus of many activities. Reserve a bulletin board and add each day's names to the board. (Some teachers like to have children bring a snapshot of themselves, or take pictures of the children to add to the board as the names are added.)

Day One. Draw out one name. Once you have drawn the name, there are many activities you may do each of which develops different skills and concepts. You may have the special child come up front and have the children ask that child questions about his favorite things to do, foods to eat, family, etc. This develops oral language and questioning skills and allows the children to get to know each other at the beginning of the year. Some teachers write an experience chart story based on what the child answers to the questions. As children watch you write, they observe that talk can be written down and the conventions of how language is written.

To develop specific skills, you will want to focus children's attention on the name and the letters in the name. To illustrate, let's assume that the first name drawn is David. Tell the children that this word is David and that it takes many letters to write the word David. (Young children are often confused about what words and letters are and can be helped to understand this jargon using the concrete examples of the names.) Have them count the letters as you point to each. Say the letters in David, D--a--v--i--d, and have the children chant them with you. Help them to see that David begins and ends with the same letter and that the d looks different because one is a capital D and one is a small d. (Again, notice all the jargon--begins,

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ends, same, different, capital, small - children must learn!)

Take another sentence strip and have children watch as you write David once more. Have them chant the spelling of the letters with you. Cut the letters apart and mix them up. Let several children come up and arrange the letters in just the right order so that they spell David. Have the rest chant to check that the order is correct.

Give each child a large sheet of drawing paper and using crayon, have them write David in large letters in crayon on one side of the paper. Tell them where to begin to write. (Some teachers make a star on the left side of the paper.) Model at the board how to write each letter as they write it. Do not worry if what they write is not perfect and resist the temptation to correct what they write. Young children who write at home before they come to school often reverse letters and make them in funny ways. The important thing they are doing is understanding that names are words you can write and you use lots of letters to write them. Have them chant the letters in David as they point to each letter they have written. Let them each draw a picture of David on the back of this paper and let David take all the pictures home.

### Day Two

Draw another name--Catherine. Have Catherine come up and do whatever oral language and experience chart writing you want to do. Say the letters in Catherine as you point to them and have the children chant them with you several times. Help the children to count the letters and to notice which letter is first, last, etc. Help them to see that Catherine has two e's and that they look exactly the same because they are both small e's. Write Catherine on another sentence strip and cut it into letters. Have children arrange the letters to spell Catherine and chant to check that it is correct just as they did with David.

Put Catherine on the bulletin board under David and compare the two. Which has the most letters? How many more letters are in the word Catherine than in the word, David? Count to see. Which is the longest word? Which takes the longer to say and more space to write? Does Catherine have any of the same letters that David has? What different letters does Catherine have? (Again, notice

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the jargon--most, more, longest, same, different!)

Finish the lesson by having everyone write Catherine as you write it on the board. Have Catherine pictures drawn and let Catherine take them home.

### Day Three

Draw the third name--Debbie. Do the oral language and chart activities as you wish. Do the chanting and letter rearranging. Be sure to note the two e's and b's and to talk about first and last letters, etc.

As you put Debbie on the bulletin board, compare it to both David and Catherine. This is a perfect time to notice that both Debbie and David begin with the same letter and the same sound. Say some other words and have the children point to David and Debbie if the words begin with the same sound as David and Debbie. Compare all names to see which is longer and which letters in each are the same and different.

Finish the lesson by having the children write Debbie as you model at the board and draw pictures for Debbie to take home.

### Day Four

Draw the fourth name - Mike. Do all the activities as before, including comparing the four names. David has lost the status of having the shortest name but his is still the only name with a v! Be sure to help children see these distinctive features as they become quite involved with this. If you have a Zeb in your room, he is apt to point out that he will soon unseat Mike as shortest and Veronica will point out that she too has a V. Everyone is eager for the special day when their name is drawn!

When you have a one syllable name with which there are many rhymes (Mike, Joe, Sue, Pat, etc.), seize the opportunity to help the children listen for words that rhyme with that name. Have Mike come up and say pairs of words (Mike/bike; Mike/ball; Mike/cook; Mike/hike). If the pairs rhyme, everyone should say "Mike". If not, they should shake their heads, "No."

### Day Five

Review the four names and the concepts taught. There are many fun review activities. Begin by having the children

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chant and write each of the names. Review who has the longest, shortest name, etc. Help the children look for the names that have an a - b - c - d - etc. You may want to go through the alphabet song and notice that with just four names, you have names containing half the alphabet letters. Make up some riddles about one of the four children. (This is a girl. She is very helpful. Her name has the most letters.) Let the children guess who it is and then make up their own riddles.

Give five children large sheets of paper on which you have written--one to each sheet--the letters in David. Let them come up and arrange themselves in the correct order so that they spell David's name. Have the other children close their eyes and mix up the order of the children. Let a child come and reorder them so that they again spell David. Continue this with different children arranging themselves to spell the other three names.

Begin a word bank for each child. Each child should have a shoe box. Give each child four index cards on which you have written in permanent marker the four names. Let the children take turns spelling one of the names and having the others find that name and hold it up.

### Day Six

Draw another name--Ceretha. Do the various activities you do for each name and the comparative activities with all the other names. This is a perfect opportunity to help children develop very early a set for diversity when it comes to letter-sound relationships. Both Catherine and Ceretha begin with the letter c but they do not begin with the same sound. Many words that begin with a c have the sound you hear at the beginning of Catherine, but some words have the sound you hear at the beginning of Ceretha. Have Catherine and Ceretha stand at different parts of the chalkboard. Tell the class that you are going to say words that begin with the letter c. Some of these c words have the sound you hear at the beginning of Catherine. Others have the sound you hear at the beginning of Ceretha. Say some words (cat; celery, circus; candle; city, etc.) and have the class point to Catherine or Ceretha to show which beginning sound they hear. Write the words next to Catherine or Ceretha as the children point.

### Day Seven

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Draw another name--Bill. When you have done the activities you do with all names, take advantage of the many words that rhyme with Bill to review the concept of rhyme. Say pairs of words (Bill-hill; Bill-fort; Bill-tall) have the children say "Bill" if they rhyme and shake their head if they don't. Next, let both Mike and Bill come up. Say words which rhyme with one or the other and have the children point to the child whose name makes the rhyme. You may want to do some riddles. (This is a word that rhymes with Mike and is something he can ride. This is a kind of sour pickle and it rhymes with Bill).

### Day Eight

Draw another name. Show the children the strip but not the name. Have them guess whose name it could be based on the size of the strip. Then, let them play a version of "20 Questions" to figure out whose name it is. (Is it a boy? Does it have a t? Etc.) When someone guesses the name, Joseph, continue with the other activities.

### Day Nine

Draw another name--Zeb. Do the usual activities. Then have the class listen as you say words (zoo, bear, zebra, camel, zipper) to hear if they begin like Zeb. Have Zeb and two other children whose names have clear initial consonants such as Bill and Mike come up. Say words that begin with z, b, or m. Have everyone write the first letter of Zeb, Bill or Mike to show they can hear which name it begins like. To help children isolate the sound they are listening for, say something like, "Yes, banana begins with a b like Bill. If banana began like Zeb, it would not be a banana, it would be a zanana!" This is silly but so are five- and six-year olds and it does hold their attention!

### Day Ten

Review all eight names. Do many of the activities you did on Day Five. If you go through the alphabet to see how many letters you have, you will find that will the eight names, you have letters for all but f, g, q, u, w, x and y. Be sure and count to find longest names, letter used in most names, etc. Many teachers like to graph this information. You may want to count to see how many letter all eight names have together or to do some simple addition. (Mike + Zeb;  $4 + 3 = 7$ ) You may want to make a ditto

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with the letters of the names scrambled and have the children cut the letter apart and paste them in the correct order. Be sure to give the children the four names to add to their word banks. This word bank is tangible, mounting evidence to the children that they can read!

Teachers who systematically use the names of the children in their classrooms to develop a store of key words children can read and write and to teach the many linguistic concepts children need to progress in reading report that the children are universally enthusiastic about their names and successful in learning the names and other concepts. There are as many variations on the name activities as there are different teachers who use them. All teachers feel, however, that in order for the children to learn the names and the other linguistic concepts, the program must be done systematically and regularly and a variety of activities must be carried out with each name. The chanting of the letters in the names and the writing of the names are especially important because they allow the children to learn the names through auditory and kinesthetic channels as well as the more common visual channels. The comparative activities help children develop many important linguistic concepts as well as an understanding of the jargon we use as we teach reading. Children learn the highly abstract idea of beginning sounds and rhyme better when they can attach these to the concrete person who sits next to them. The current thinking and research about early reading and reading readiness suggests that children become ready as they read and write words that are meaningful to them. To promote this interaction with print, the names are a natural and available commodity in all classrooms.

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