Structured Literacy in a Full Day Kindergarten Program

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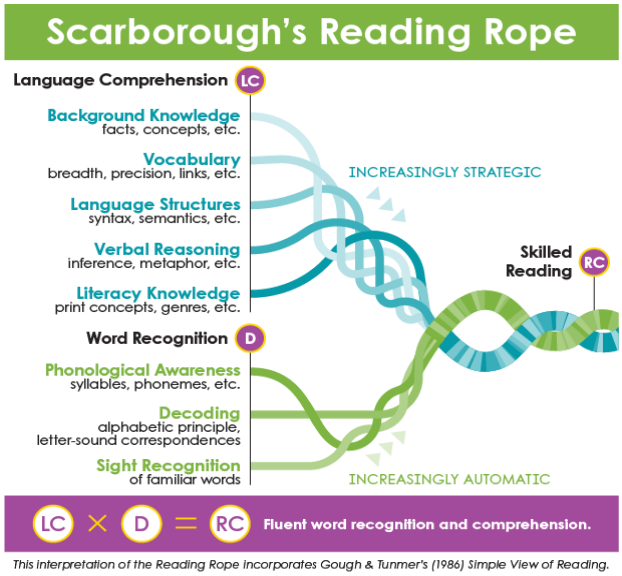
There is a significant shift occurring in Ontario's education system as a result of a report released by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC, 2022). The Science of Reading (SoR) is the research that "provides us with the information we need to gain a deeper understanding of how we learn to read, what skills are involved, how they work together, and which parts of the brain are responsible for reading development" (Ordetx, 2021). While the research has been around for decades, the Ministry of Education in Ontario has recently been made aware of the need to change the way students are learning to read (OHRC, 2022). The knowledge to be gained from the SoR will help educators to make informed decisions and use evidenced-based approaches for teaching children to read. This paper is meant to serve as a starting point for Kindergarten educators who are beginning to understand how the SoR impacts their program, and provide ideas for structured literacy instruction.

Science of Reading

Scarborough's Reading Rope illustrates the elements that need to be taught in order for children to become successful readers. The Reading Rope along with the Simple View of Reading (Decoding x Language Comprehension = Reading Comprehension) provide educators with information they will need to begin to understand the Science of Reading.



https://www.reallygreatreading.com/content/scarboroughs-reading-rope

https://www.thebigdippers.org/general/the-simple-view-of-reading/

Educators are being encouraged to move toward a structured literacy approach, because "structured literacy is the most effective way to teach early reading" (OHRC, 2022, p.24). By the Fall of 2023, there will be a new Language curriculum that will provide a revised set of expectations for each grade based on the SoR. This shift will be quite significant for many educators, and arguably the most

significant for those working in the Full Day Kindergarten (FDK) Program. It is never too early to begin teaching literacy and instruction "should focus on the cognitive elements that research has shown to be crucial to the process of developing decoding skills" (SEDL, 2001, p.32).

Teaching Reading in Kindergarten

The FDK Program in Ontario is a two year program for children that are four and five years old. The Program is play-based, as "play is how children make sense of the world and is an effective method of learning for young children"(ELECT, 2007, p.15). Students must be turning four years old by the end of the calendar year, so some children are still three years old at the beginning of the school year. This age range brings variability in what each individual student can do and how they learn, but this is not a barrier to what teaching and learning can occur. In fact, a study of three and four year olds showed that kindergarten students have demonstrated phonemic awareness and an understanding of rhymes, syllables, and sound segmentation (Wasik, 2001). Children in kindergarten are curious and capable. They are developmentally ready to focus their attention, engage in sustained interactions that increase in duration, and increase their phonological and phonemic awareness, letter knowledge, and writing letters and words (ELECT, 2007).

Young children do not separate academic learning and play (OME, 2016). It is the educators' role to provide many learning opportunities for children, and to weave play and academics together in meaningful ways. While many educators find it challenging to balance the academic aspects and play aspects of the program, there is a role of play in learning that "can change, with opportunities to support children's social, emotional, and academic development within the context of play-based learning" (Pyle & Danniels, 2017, p. 24). The implementation of structured literacy is making its way into the FDK classrooms, and a meta-analysis of research conducted by the NICHD (2000) found that systematic and direct instruction in phonics significantly increased kindergarten students' abilities to read and spell (p.2-111).

One common misconception is "that play-based learning that follows the children's lead means that the educators do not take an active role in designing children's learning experiences as they collaborate with them in play or that they do not intentionally and purposefully inject planned opportunities for challenging and extending children's thinking and learning" (OME, 2016, p.27). The reality is quite the opposite: educators in the FDK classroom are responsible for planning and creating play-based learning opportunities for students. Teaching reading and writing can incorporate play-based elements, and it is important to remember that the SoR shows us that reading is best learned through explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction (IDA, 2015). This instruction can take the form of direct instruction or play-based activities, and may look different based on the needs of the students in the classroom. Pyle & Danniels (2017) discuss a continuum for play-based learning that involves a range of opportunities from child-directed play, to collaboratively created play, to teacher-directed play, which all contribute positively to students' personal, social, and academic growth. The development of literacy skills in kindergarten can easily be accomplished within the play-based learning continuum.

Instruction and The Big Six

The Big Six, as coined by Deslea Konza (2010), are essential components of reading instruction. They are: oral language, phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. In a structured literacy approach, each of these is addressed explicitly and in a cumulative and systematic way. With a scope and sequence, each skill builds upon itself as students progress. When educators are planning for literacy instruction, there should be an emphasis on incorporating play and there should be "a seamless connection between regular classroom activities and those that emphasize sounds in words" (Wasik, 2001, p.130).

Oral Language

For children to understand language in print, "oral language competency is a necessity" (Konza, 2010, p.1). In a kindergarten classroom, oral language appears throughout the day. This occurs in conversations, when students share ideas, communicate feelings or needs, during read-alouds, in songs, in dramatic play, etc. Educators can enrich the oral language development of their students by using more complex vocabulary with them, encouraging them to use more complex sentences, as well as reading books, singing songs, and playing games. When students are talking about something they did on the weekend, for example, educators can encourage them to use proper grammar and complete sentences.

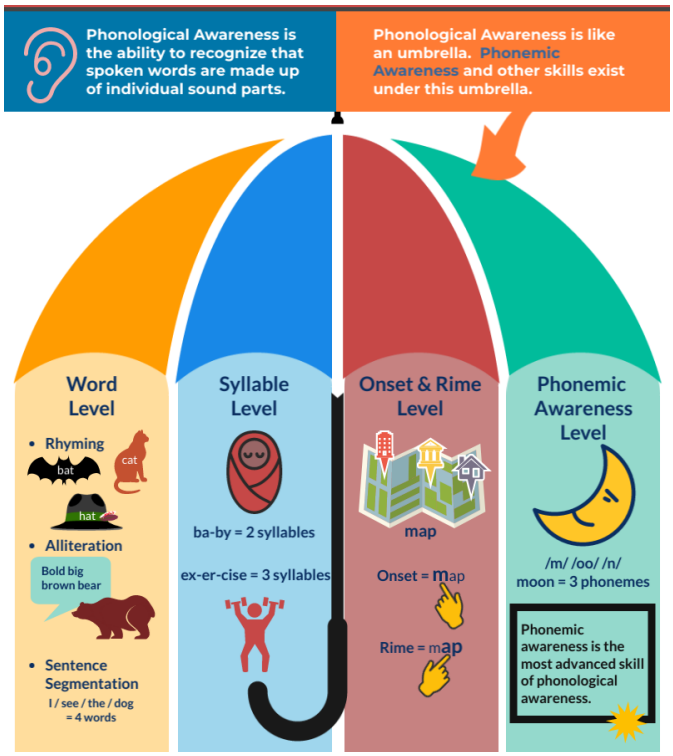
Ideas for Instruction:

- Read non-fiction as well as fiction texts to students, and ask students questions (who, what, where, when, why) about the text
- Offer opportunities for students to interact with you or peers while reading by asking comprehension-type questions (making predictions, making connections, making inferences, etc.)
- Revisit texts multiple times so students hear new vocabulary several times, and have an opportunity to make connections and build comprehension of the text
- Provide lots of opportunities for students to communicate about specific topics, such as in a show-and-tell or explaining how they built something
- Invite students to 'read a book' by telling a story using the pictures

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is an awareness of the sounds in speech and includes an understanding of rhymes, syllables, segmenting sentences, and phonemic awareness (PA). Phonological and phonemic awareness skills have been successfully taught in the kindergarten classroom, and even in pre-school (NICHD, 2000). There are many ways to teach phonological awareness in the FDK classroom, as there are many components which fall under the 'phonological awareness umbrella'. Dr. David Kilpatrick (2018) encourages multisensory teaching strategies, which includes listening, speaking, reading, as well as a tactile component. Research has shown that "poor phoneme awareness is the most common cause of poor reading" (Kilpatrick, 2018, p.13). Kindergarten educators can incorporate instruction and

activities throughout the day, and can reinforce the skills in even the smallest moment, such as during transitions. Emerging research shows that we must teach phonological awareness and phonics in kindergarten, and effective early instruction in these skills "can prevent most reading difficulties" (Kilpatrick, 2018, p.116).



https://improvingliteracy.org/files/briefs/phonological-awareness-infographic.png

Ideas for Instruction

The following activities can be done with the whole group, in small groups, or with students in pairs. The activities you choose should be based on assessments you have done to determine next steps for your students. These activities are flexible in nature, can be used to support the development of many phonological awareness skills, and are a great way to engage students by using silly voices, more movement, songs, or games. Educators should involve phonics and working with letters together with phonemic awareness activities, as "PA instruction is more effective when it makes explicit how children are to apply PA skills in reading and writing tasks" (NICHD, 2000, p.2-6).

Rhyming:

- Read books with lots of rhyming (Dr. Seuss, Sandra Boynton, Nancy Shaw, nursery rhymes) and have students fill in the rhyming words at the ends of phrases or let you know when they hear a rhyme
- Sing lots of songs - nursery rhymes, songs that introduce vocabulary, the name song (Hannah Hannah bo banna, banana fanna fo fanna, me my mo manna, Hannah!), Wallaby Wallaby
- Show a picture of two objects and say the names and ask students if they rhyme
- "I'm thinking of a word that rhymes with…" or "I spy with my little eye, something that rhymes with…"

Initial Sound

- Read alliteration books (ex. Old MacDonald had a Dragon by Ken Baker or Piggies in the Pumpkin Patch by Mary Peterson)
- "I spy with my little eye, something that begins with the sound…"
- "I'm thinking of a friend in our class whose name begins with the sound…"
- Sort toys into piles of items that have the same first sound
- Play a board game with pictures and have students identify the beginning sound of the word they land on (extension: ending sounds, middle sounds)

Syllables

- Clap or drum syllables; use compound words, familiar words like names and animals, and new or complex vocabulary words
- Say a word broken into syllables and have students blend and say the word (throw pieces of the words to them, you drum it and they say it, etc.)
- Jump or march for syllables
- Use toys or manipulatives to show the number of syllables in words
- Practice syllable deletion orally and using visuals or manipulatives (Ex. Say "treehouse"...Now say it again but don't say "tree" *and students would answer* "house"; Say "napkin"...Now say it again but don't say "nap" *and students would answer "*kin")

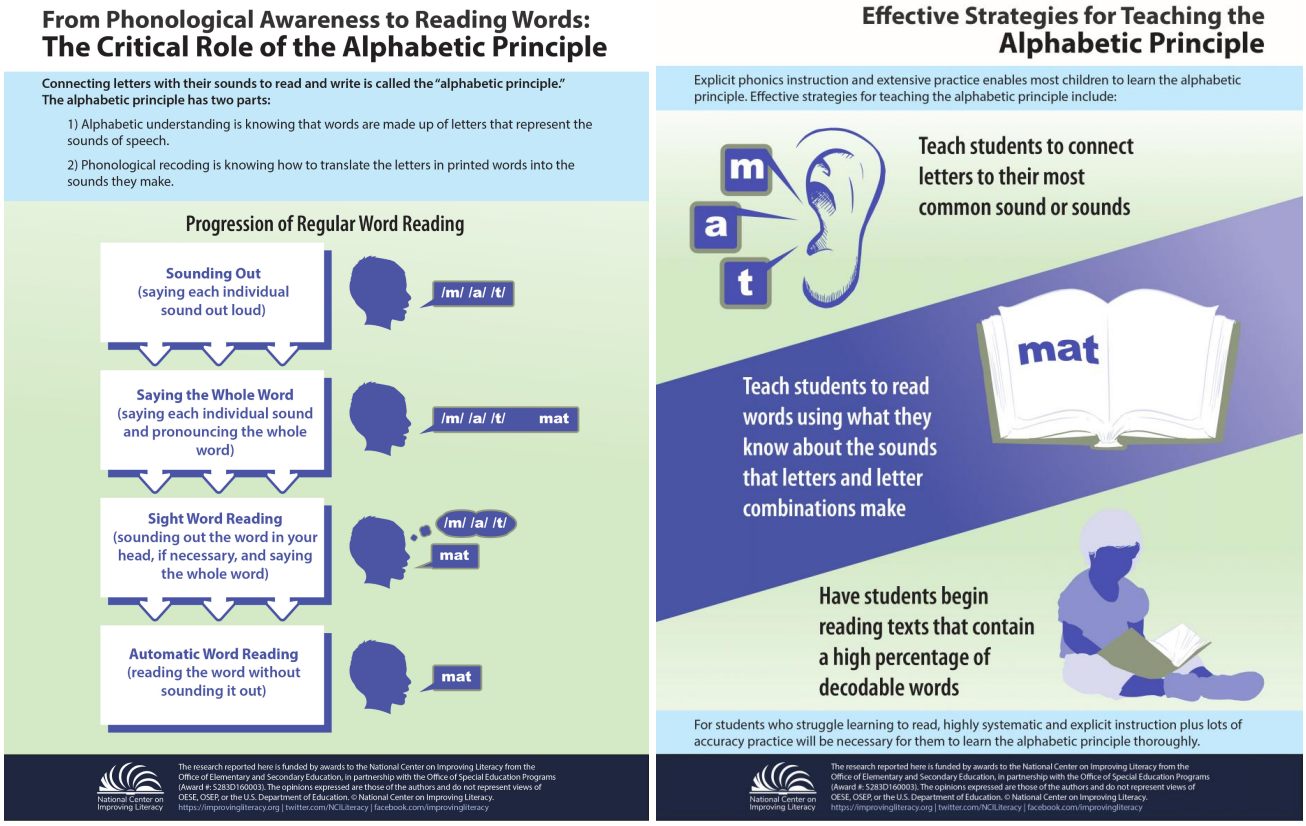
Phonemic Awareness

- Show an object and ask students to segment the sounds
- Sort pictures or objects into groups of words with two phonemes, three phonemes, four phonemes, etc.
- Give clues for students to guess words, "At home I have a c-a-t. What pet do I have?"
    - Invite students to give you clues (their pet, what they ate for breakfast, their sister's name, etc"
- Play a board game with pictures of things that have two or three phonemes and as students move around the board, they have to segment the word they land on
- Use toys or manipulatives to show the number of phonemes in words
    - Practice phoneme deletion and/or manipulation as students are ready
- One-minute Drills (Kilpatrick, 2018) can be done with manipulatives, toys, funny voices, movement of bodies, etc.
    - Use these to punctuate your day in 'spare' moments, such as during transitions out of the classroom, to the carpet, coming inside from recess, etc.

Phonics

As students are developing their understanding that words can be broken up into individual sounds (phonemes), they need to learn the alphabetic principle. The alphabetic principle is simply knowing the connection between the letter symbol and the sound that letter (or letters) makes. Not all words in the English language follow the alphabetic principle. There are many irregular words that are not easy to decode, such as *said, was,* and *know.* "The most common irregular words should be taught early in

reading development so that students will be able to read more expanded and interesting texts that are otherwise highly decodable" (Baker et al, 2018).



https://improvingliteracy.org/brief/alphabetic-principle-phonological-awareness-reading-words

Phonics instruction is teacher-led, direct instruction that includes showing students a letter symbol, modeling the sound that letter makes while drawing attention to the shape your mouth makes, and teaching students how to write that letter. Research has shown that when children are taught to apply phonemic awareness to reading and writing tasks (phonics), they gain more from phonemic awareness activities (NICHD, 2000). When educators are following a scope and sequence for phonics instruction, students will quickly progress to being able to decode (read) and encode (write) short words and nonsense words.

Ideas for Instruction

- Flash cards with letters on them: Show card to students, tell them the sound, have them repeat the sound, ask students for words that begin with that sound
- Give students individual sets of letter magnets or individual whiteboards and markers and have them build words and change words by changing individual letters (sounds)
- Use a strategy such as "I Do, We Do, You Do": Model what to do, then practice with them, then have them do it independently to see they can do it

- Flash cards and posters with irregular words and revisit these words and their spellings regularly
- Model how to write the letters using correct formation in the air, then have students write the letter in the air, on their leg or the floor in front of them, in sand or shaving cream, etc. then with pencils/markers/crayons on paper
- Ask students to form letters using Play Doh, LEGO, string, or loose parts during play/centre time
- Follow a scope and sequence to teach letters in a specific order and incorporate word-reading when students are ready
    - The scope and sequence you follow should accompany a set of decodable books
- Model how to write words using cards in a pocket chart, on a whiteboard or chart paper by asking students to tell you the individual sounds in words, and write them as they say them
- Practice reading syllables and CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words using your own words/pseudo-words, or a set of decodable books

Vocabulary

In the kindergarten program, explicit vocabulary instruction can be more formal and teacher-led, and can take place more organically throughout the day. In an environment that encourages curiosity and promotes inquiry, students will ask what words mean if they hear a new word in conversation, during a lesson or when listening to a book or story. Educators should teach vocabulary directly through stories, non-fiction texts, and when specific topics arise, such as the word *chrysalis* when learning about the life cycle of a butterfly. Exposure to vocabulary increases reading comprehension down the road. “If children know the meaning of a word, they are far more likely to be able to read it and make sense of it within a sentence” (Konza, 2010, p. 4). For example, if a child is reading the sentence, *The child was elated about the invitation to the party,* the reader will not know whether the child was feeling positively or negatively if they are not familiar with the word *elated.*

<u>Ideas for Instruction</u>

- Use more complex vocabulary, such as saying disappointed instead of sad, saying responsibility instead of job, or saying challenging instead of tricky
- Use whole group times to teach specific vocabulary such as emotions, life cycles, STEM vocabulary such as hypothesis or prediction
- Engage with small groups of students during play. For example, f you notice they are building a bridge, talk with them about it and use words like materials, support, construction, and strategy
- Read books with intention and plan for how you will teach students about the vocabulary in the text
    - Write the new word to show them, and say the new word and have them repeat it
    - Discuss the spelling of the word and the sounds they hear, name rhyming words
    - Teach about the morphology or etymology of the word
    - Encourage students to use the new word in a sentence
- Weave vocabulary instruction through your phonemic awareness and phonics lessons

Fluency

Fluency is a reading skill that allows students to read for the purpose of learning and understanding. This is established when students have moved from learning to read, to reading to learn. Fluency is demonstrated when a student decodes with automaticity and reads at a good rate with expression that demonstrates comprehension (Konza, 2010). It is a skill that combines previously learned reading skills. Fluency requires that the reader is spending less time decoding and more time applying their understanding of written language. There are a number of things that educators can do to build students' fluency when reading, and it can begin at the letter level and move through syllables to word-level over time.

Ideas for Instruction

- Model fluent reading and bring attention to the prosody, or expression, you use when you are reading; ask students to tell you if your voice sounds excited, nervous, tired, etc. as you read fiction texts
- Provide opportunities for students to listen to a range of texts, including fiction and non-fiction stories, poems, articles, songs
- Choral reading - you can use a morning message or a short text that you read together each day
- Make a game of timing students as they read letters, syllables, CVC words, irregular words, etc.
- Partner reading - have students read with a partner.

Comprehension

Much like fluency, comprehension occurs when students can apply learned reading skills to a text with automaticity. For comprehension to occur, children require an understanding of the vocabulary, relevant background knowledge, understanding of semantics and syntax, and the ability to make inferences (Konza, 2010). Comprehension strategies such as making predictions, retelling, making connections and inferences can be encouraged by educators during a read-aloud. Educators can also teach comprehension strategies explicitly and check for comprehension after reading a text. In the FDK program, the likelihood of students reading complex texts is low, but when they are able to read decodable sentences and books, their comprehension can be assessed by asking them simple questions about the text. Teaching these strategies, and modeling them as you read, will support students as they become more independent readers and are able to apply these strategies as they read.

Ideas for Instruction

- Model the use of strategies using think-aloud while you are reading: *I wonder… I predict… I think… Based on ___ I can infer that…*
- When you ask student comprehension questions, encourage them to use complete sentences an proper vocabulary, such as the words predict, infer, wonder, connection

- Stop when you encounter a word the students may not know and teach them what the word means, adding morphology, etymology, spelling as it fits
    - Pre-teach vocabulary before reading a text and stop when you get to those words to reinforce comprehension
- Activate background knowledge prior to reading, and teach anything necessary for comprehension

Conclusion

Play is an important component of FDK in Ontario, and is ideal for "enabling children to work out their ideas and theories and use what they already know to deepen their understanding and further their learning" (OME, 2016, p.18). Explicit instruction can be incorporated into play throughout the day, and can occur through direct instruction in whole and in small groups. The Big Six will not always be taught in isolation and can be incorporated throughout the day.

> Teachers can use classroom time effectively by providing an appropriate combination of differentiated instruction that match students' learning needs and instructional focus, including:
>
> - Discrete and relatively short sessions for instruction throughout the day (e.g., in 15-minute blocks)
> - Lessons that follow a scope and sequence progressing from simple to more complex word reading skills
> - Direct and guided instruction of targeted foundational reading skills and multiple opportunities for independent practice, especially for students who need it most
> - Predictable schedules and classroom routines to support students in knowing what the learning is throughout the day
> - Supporting students' engagement in tasks by providing timely descriptive feedback as appropriate
> - Daily integration of reading instruction into all curricular areas (e.g., during a math lesson, through having teachers read from a book on numbers, or using a book on plants for a teacher-directed lesson that introduces vocabulary for science; providing decodable books and materials on a range of topics).
>
> *OME, 2020-2023*

Educators in the Full Day Kindergarten Program in Ontario are at the forefront of their students' reading development. They are responsible for establishing a strong foundation that enhances the development of reading skills that establishes a love of reading in students. With the increasing awareness of the Science of Reading, and access to knowledge on best practices for teaching reading, FDK educators across the province have the opportunity to build this foundation and set students up for long-term success. It is important to find a balance between child-led play opportunities, play-based learning including teacher-led activities (lessons, games, songs), and centres and guided small groups. There is an opportunity for significant growth in reading success when we begin in the right way, with explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction with our youngest learners.

Resources

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