MOVING TO ASSESSMENT-GUIDED DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION TO SUPPORT YOUNG CHILDREN’S ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE

Shayne B. Piasta

Alphabet knowledge is a major component of early literacy. What is known about how alphabet knowledge develops, and how can educators best support children’s learning of letter names and sounds?

The ability to identify letters and their corresponding sounds represents a significant achievement for preschool- and kindergarten-aged children and serves as a cornerstone of their continued literacy development (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Through their interactions with books, songs, games, and environmental print, young children often begin learning about the alphabet well before school entry. Early literacy experiences vary widely, however, and children show substantial differences in their alphabet knowledge development. Thus, children in the same early childhood classroom may exhibit differing levels of alphabet knowledge. Such heterogeneity contrasts

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with the one-size-fits-all whole-class instructional approaches common in early childhood curricula and practice (Diamond & Powell, 2011; McGee & Richgels, 1989; Neuman, 2006) and poses a challenge for early childhood educators seeking to support the plurality of alphabet learning needs evident in their classrooms.

The purpose of this article is to encourage early childhood educators to move beyond whole-class instructional approaches and instead provide alphabet instruction that is aligned with current emphases on assessment-driven decision making (Mokhtari, Rosemary, & Edwards, 2007; Reilly, 2007) and differentiated instruction (Shillady, 2013; Watts-Taffe et al., 2012). Such instruction holds promise not only for better meeting individual children’s alphabet learning needs but also increasing instructional efficiency such that whole-class time can be devoted to other important learning goals, such as language and vocabulary development. First, I briefly review the importance of alphabet knowledge with respect to theory, research, and the current educational context. Next, I present research evidence suggesting that children’s alphabet knowledge development is affected not only by differences among children but also by inter-letter differences that make some letters easier or more difficult to learn. Finally, I present a framework in which assessment guides differentiated alphabet instruction and empirically-validated practices to support such instruction.

**Importance of Alphabet Knowledge**

Alphabet knowledge is defined as “knowledge of the names and sounds associated with printed letters” (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008, p. vii) and is a major component in theoretical models of emergent literacy (Sénéchal, LeFevre, Smith-Chant, & Colton, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) and skilled reading (Ehri, 1987; Scarborough, 1998). Letters and corresponding sounds are the basic building blocks of alphabetic languages such as English. Children who understand the “alphabetic principle,” or insight that printed words consist of letters that can be mapped to sounds, have achieved an important first step in learning to read and write.

Several key research findings empirically support the importance of alphabet knowledge. First, early alphabet knowledge is one of the best predictors of later literacy achievement (Hammill, 2004; Schatschneider, Fletcher, Francis, Carlson, & Foorman, 2004) with significant associations between alphabet knowledge as measured in preschool or kindergarten and reading, spelling, and comprehension in later elementary years (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Second, challenges in acquiring alphabet knowledge are indicative of later literacy difficulties. Children with familial risk for dyslexia tend to have low or delayed alphabetic knowledge (Snowling, Gallagher, & Frith, 2003; Torppa, Poikkeus, Laakso, Eklund, & Lyytinen, 2006), as do other children later identified with reading disabilities (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 2001; O’Malley, Francis, Foorman, Fletcher, & Swank, 2002). Third, learning about the alphabet is a critical component of early literacy instruction. Children who are provided alphabet learning opportunities make greater gains in this area (Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006), particularly with respect to learning letter sounds (Lonigan, Purpura, Wilson, Walker, & Clancy-Menchetti, 2013; Piasta, Purpura, & Wagner, 2010). Finally, the benefits of alphabet instruction appear to extend beyond alphabet learning. Research suggests greater impacts on children’s reading and spelling when instruction includes an alphabet component than when it does not (Ehri et al., 2001; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

**Alphabet Knowledge in the Current Educational Context**

The current educational context draws on this theory and research in recognizing alphabet knowledge as an important learning goal for young children. The joint position statement of the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (IRA/NAEYC, 1998) highlights alphabet knowledge as a key component in children’s early literacy development. Correspondingly, subsequent educational policies also direct attention to developing alphabet knowledge. The Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework, for example, includes alphabet knowledge as one of five specific elements in its Literacy Knowledge and Skills domain.
Alphabet Knowledge Differences Across Children

Early childhood educators likely find it unsurprising that children demonstrate differences in their alphabet knowledge. Many such educators will have anecdotally noted the same patterns validated by research, in terms of those children who often exhibit lower levels of alphabet knowledge. These differences result in a broad range of alphabet knowledge for children starting preschool or kindergarten. This point is substantiated in an ongoing project that I have been conducting with colleagues. We assessed the alphabet knowledge of children at the beginning of preschool and kindergarten. The children attended a diverse array of early childhood programs, including private, parochial, public, and charter schools. We found that children enrolled in the same classroom at the same school showed the full spectrum of alphabet knowledge. Some children started the year knowing no letter names, whereas some of their classmates already knew the names of all 26 uppercase letters and all 26 lowercase letters. Looking across all the classrooms participating in one year of the project, children in the same preschool classroom differed in their alphabet knowledge by an average of 25 letters (14 uppercase, 13 lowercase); children in the same kindergarten classroom differed by an average of 11 letters (5 uppercase, 6 lowercase).

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Differences Across Letters

In addition to differences across children, accumulating research demonstrates differences across letters in how readily these are learned. The familiarity of children with letters included in their own first names, for example, has long been observed (McGee & Richgels, 1989). Research indicates that children are more likely to know the name of an uppercase letter if it is in the child’s name and especially if it is the first initial (Justice, Pence, Bowles, & Wiggins, 2006; Treiman & Broderick, 1998; Treiman & Kessler, 2004; Treiman, Kessler, & Pollo, 2006). This advantage extends to knowledge of lowercase letter names for kindergarteners (Pence Turnbull, Bowles, Skibbe, Justice, & Wiggins, 2010; Treiman & Kessler, 2004) but does not apply to children’s knowledge of letter sounds (Piasta, Phillips, Williams, Bowles, & Anthony, in press; Treiman & Broderick, 1998). Additional research insights concerning differences among letters in children’s alphabet development are described below.

ABC Order

Letters differ in their position within the alphabet, and some research suggests that children may be more familiar with the names and sounds of letters earlier in the alphabet (e.g., A, B, C) than letters later in the sequence (e.g., X, Y, Z; Justice et al., 2006; McBride-Chang, 1999). More specifically, children are particularly likely to know the name...
of the letter A, as well as the letters B and C. These phenomena are generally ascribed to greater repetition of initial letters of the alphabet when singing the alphabet song, reading alphabet books, and referring to “the ABCs.”

**Frequency**
Letters also differ in the frequency with which they appear in print. For example, in their experiences with environmental print and shared book reading, children are much more likely to encounter the uppercase letter T and lowercase letter t than they are to encounter letters such as Z and q. Some studies have found that children are more likely to know the names of more frequent letters (Pence Turnbull et al., 2010), but others have found that children show no difference in their knowledge of individual letters based on frequency (Evans, Bell, Shaw, Moretti, & Page, 2006; Treiman & Kessler, 2003; Treiman et al., 2006).

**Letter-Name Structure**
Letters differ in whether or not their names provide cues to their corresponding letter sounds. For vowels, the letter name is redundant with the long vowel sound. For consonants, some letter names contain the most commonly associated sound at the beginning of the name; the letter name for B includes the /b/ sound at the beginning, for example. Some consonant letter names include the sound at the end of the name, such as the /m/ sound at the end of the letter name M. Other consonant letter names have no associations with corresponding sounds, such as H and W. Research consistently suggests that young children are most likely to know the sounds of letters like B, in which the beginning of the name cues the sound (Evans et al., 2006; McBride-Chang, 1999; Treiman, Tincoff, Rodriguez, Mouzaki, & Francis, 1998). These studies also indicate that some children are more likely to know letters with sound cues at the ends of their names over letters with no sound cues in their names, especially when children demonstrate greater levels of phonological awareness (Piasta & Wagner, 2010b).

**Visual Similarity**
Letters differ in the degree to which they share common visual forms or shapes. The shapes of the letters C and G, for instance, are very similar, whereas the shape of the letter X is fairly distinct from the shapes of other letters. Research suggests that children are more likely to know the names of lowercase letters that have more distinct shapes (Treiman & Kessler, 2003) because they often confuse those letters that share similar shapes (Treiman et al., 2006). Letters also differ in the degree to which their uppercase and lowercase forms are visually similar. The letter O, for example, looks the same regardless of case, whereas the letter G looks very different in its lowercase form, g. Children are more likely to know lowercase letter names for those letters with visually similar uppercase and lowercase forms (Pence Turnbull et al., 2010; Treiman & Kessler, 2004).

**Phonological Similarity and Pronunciation**
Letters also differ in the phonological similarity of their names and how easily their names and associated sounds are pronounced. With respect to similarity, the names of letters such as B and P, or such as L and M, differ in only the initial or final phoneme of the name. Children are less likely to be familiar with the names of letters that are highly phonologically similar (Treiman & Kessler, 2003). With respect to pronunciation, children are more likely to know letter names associated with phonemes that are easier to pronounce (Justice et al., 2006). On average, children learn to pronounce phonemes such as /m/, /b/, and /p/ earlier than phonemes such as /z/, /j/, and /v/.

**Multiple Sounds**
Lastly, letters differ in the number of sounds with which they are associated. Some letters, such as B, are associated with only a single common sound. Other letters are associated with multiple sounds (e.g., /k/ and /s/ for C short and long sounds for vowels), which might be confusing for children. Although one study indicated that children were less likely to know the sounds of letters with multiple sounds (Treiman & Broderick, 1998), this and other studies have shown that children are sometimes just as or more familiar with letter sounds for vowels, despite the multiple sound associations, than with sounds for consonants (Evans et al., 2006; Piasta & Wagner, 2010b; Treiman & Broderick, 1998).

Notably, letters may differ across a number of the attributes detailed above. For instance, the letter C occurs at the beginning of the alphabet and is fairly frequent in print, which should make it readily familiar to children. However, it is also associated with multiple sounds and is visually and phonologically

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Thus, learning the name for the first letter of their first name or for letter O are both fairly easy for young children. Learning the name of letter B is a little more difficult, and learning the names of U and V are very difficult. Letters that appear on the same line of the figure are approximately equal in terms of ease or difficulty. Thus, children typically have similar difficulty in learning the sounds of both U and Y. Of course, a particular child may not learn his or her letters in this exact sequence, but the typical order is important for two reasons. First, the order provides further confirmation of the differences among individual letters in how readily they are acquired. Second, the order highlights those letters that may require more intentional instruction (i.e., those that are typically more difficult for children to learn).

Framework for Assessment-Guided Differentiated Alphabet Instruction

Given the evidence that alphabet knowledge is related to both differences across children and differences across letters, early childhood educators are encouraged to use assessment-guided differentiated instruction to support children’s letter name and sound development rather than traditional one-size-fits-all whole-class approaches. Such traditional approaches typically do not address differences in children’s alphabet knowledge, instead providing the same instruction to all children regardless of whether particular children have already learned the letter to be taught (Neuman, 2006). Such approaches also generally do not recognize differences across letters, often providing the same amount and types of instructional activities for each of the 26 letters irrespective of the ease or difficulty of learning a particular letter (Jones & Reutzel, 2012).

Alternatively, early childhood educators can use assessment to plan alphabet instruction that meets the differing needs of children in their classrooms. The first step in moving beyond one-size-fits-all whole-class approaches is to conduct diagnostic alphabet assessment with children. Early childhood educators may wish to assess all the children in their classrooms or may first use established alphabet screening assessments (see Table 1) to identify children likely to experience difficulties in acquiring alphabet knowledge, then conduct further assessment only with these children. To conduct a diagnostic alphabet assessment, an educator presents a child with each of the 26 letters and asks the child to supply the name and/or sound for each letter. The educator marks whether the child supplied a correct name and/or sound. Although the assessment can be scored in terms of the total number of correct letter names or sounds (i.e., 0 to 26), most important for diagnostic purposes are which letter names and sounds the child knows.

Existing assessments that can be used in this way are listed in Table 1. Educators can also use letter tiles, magnet letters, or index cards to make their own alphabet assessment. Tips for conducting effective diagnostic alphabet assessment are provided in Table 2.

The second step is to examine the letter names and sounds that individual children do and do not know and

“My education is encouraged to use assessment-guided differentiated [alphabet] instruction…”
to decide which letters will be taught to whom. Early childhood educators can examine patterns of alphabet knowledge both for individual children and for the class as a whole. For each individual child, early childhood educators can note the specific letter names and sounds that the child knows, as depicted in Table 3. Educators may also note other information, such as whether the child is familiar with one or both cases for each letter, if the child knows the letters in his or her name, and whether the child is learning both names and sounds for letters or showing a greater familiarity with names; letter-name knowledge generally outpaces letter-sound knowledge for children in the U.S. and Canada (Ellefson, Treiman, & Kessler, 2009; Evans et al., 2006). Early childhood educators can also look for patterns across children in their classrooms. For example, by looking at the results in Table 3, an educator would know that he or she does not need to spend time teaching the letters A, B, T, or O to these children (although such letters should continue to be reviewed) and that all might benefit from instruction in letters G, V, W, and others. An educator might also note more specific patterns, such as Sam and Lucy, but not Emilio or Kendra, already knowing the name and sound for C, and Sam and Emilio, but not Lucy or Kendra, knowing the names and sounds for S and T. Notably, Table 3 is meant as an illustrative example; an educator would want to review patterns evident in assessment results for all children enrolled in the classroom.

These patterns are important because they help early childhood educators select letters to be taught and appropriate grouping practices for teaching them. Educators may wish to select easier unknown letters to teach first, to help children better grasp the concept of the alphabetic principle and lettersound correspondences. For children with little to no understanding of these concepts, starting with the first initial of their names may motivate interest in and understanding of the alphabet (McGee & Richgels, 1989). Educators may also select letters based on intended grouping practices. Letters unknown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Name</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Construct and Age</th>
<th>Reference</th>
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to multiple children can be targeted during small-group instruction. Small-group instruction involves the educator actively and intentionally engaging with

Table 2  **Tips for Assessment-Guided Differentiated Alphabet Instruction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Instruction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>■ Show the children each letter and ask, “What is the name of this letter? What sound does this letter make?”</td>
<td>■ Use assessment results to guide instruction. What letters are not familiar to one or more children? List the names of children who require intentional teaching for each letter and use this list to form small groups of two to five children.</td>
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<td>■ For letters with more than one sound, you may wish to ask children, “Do you know any other sounds that the letter makes?” For vowels in particular, you may want to know if the child has learned the short vowel sound.</td>
<td>■ Teach easier unfamiliar letters before more difficult letters. Look at your list of letters to be taught; start by teaching letters that Figure 1 notes are easier. Refrain from teaching letters in alphabetical order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Do not present the letters in alphabetical order (i.e., A, B, C). To create a random order, you can put letter tiles or magnetic letters in a bag or box, shake them, and pull them out one at a time to present to the child. You can also print letters on index cards and shuffle them, or use a published alphabet assessment that does not present the letters in alphabetical order (e.g., Clay’s Observation Survey, PALS).</td>
<td>■ Vary the amount of instruction by the difficulty of the letter and children’s learning progress. More difficult letters will require greater amounts of instruction. You can informally assess whether children have learned a targeted letter by asking each child to give the name and sound. Such informal assessment can occur at any point in the day.</td>
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<td>■ Start by assessing knowledge of uppercase letter names and sounds, especially for children with low levels of alphabet knowledge. Stop assessing uppercase when the child has mastered the names and sounds for all 26 uppercase letters.</td>
<td>■ Teach both the names and sounds of letters simultaneously, rather than teaching all 26 letter names before teaching any letter sounds. When introducing a letter, you can say “This is the letter B. It makes the sound /b/.” Provide a keyword or picture to help children remember the letter sound.</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ Add assessment of lowercase letter names and sounds as the child begins to demonstrate knowledge of lowercase letters (e.g., recognizes some lowercase letters during shared book reading or in environmental print). Assess knowledge of uppercase and lowercase separately so you can determine whether the child knows a given letter in both uppercase and lowercase.</td>
<td>■ Uppercase and lowercase forms of letters can be taught simultaneously or sequentially. When teaching sequentially, teach uppercase forms first. You do not need to wait for children to know all 26 uppercase letters before introducing lowercase letters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ When assessing, write down whether the child gave (a) a correct name and (b) a correct sound for each individual letter instead of just the total number correct.</td>
<td>■ Consider integrating alphabet instruction with phonological awareness instruction. In all cases, precisely articulate letter sounds. For example, the sound of L is /l/ (not /la/), and the sound of A is /a/ as in apple and not as in art or aunt. Be careful not to elongate or unduly exaggerate the vowel sound that is necessary to pronounce consonant sounds (e.g., clip the “uh” sound at the end of /b/). ReadingRockets.org provides a Watch &amp; Learn video that demonstrates the correct sound pronunciations for all letters.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3  **Diagnostic Assessment Results for Four Children: Uppercase Letter Names and Sounds Known**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sam</th>
<th>Lucy</th>
<th>Emilio</th>
<th>Kendra</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td>B</td>
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1 Knew letter name but not letter sound.

two to five children to teach particular content (Wasik, 2008) and has been demonstrated to be more effective than whole-class or even one-to-one instruction in supporting young children’s early literacy development (Connor et al., 2006; Ehri et al., 2001). Based on the results in Table 3, for instance, an educator might choose to group Sam, Lucy, and Kendra to spend time working on letter D with this small group. Letters unknown to only one child in the classroom might necessitate one-to-one instruction. By intentionally selecting the letters to be taught to particular children, educators can tailor alphabet instruction to the learning needs of children in their classrooms as aligned with the principles of developmentally appropriate practices and differentiated instruction (Watts-Taffe et al., 2012).

The third step is to plan and use effective teaching practices to deliver alphabet instruction on the selected letters. Alphabet instruction can take place in many fun, engaging, and authentic contexts (McGee & Richgels, 1989) but can also be intentional and explicit. For instance, educators can embed alphabet instruction into shared reading (Bradley & Jones, 2007; Justice, McGinty, Piasta, Kaderavek, & Fan, 2010). Continuing the example above, an educator working with Sam, Lucy, and Kendra might select the book Make Way for Ducklings to intentionally focus on letter D during shared reading. Before reading, the educator might show the children uppercase D and lowercase d, explicitly state and model the names and sounds for the letter, and use the words duck and ducklings as key words for the letter. While
reading, in addition to encouraging children’s listening comprehension and meaning making, the educator might also pause on pages containing words beginning with D (e.g., down, delighted) to provide additional instruction on the letter name and sound. After reading, he or she might invite each child to find and point to the Ds on a page. In subsequent small-group sessions, the educator might plan other opportunities for learning the letter D involving letter hunts, sound games, and songs. The educator might also encourage children to use letter D in their writing, given emerging evidence suggesting reciprocal relations between alphabet knowledge and writing development (Diamond, Gerde, & Powell, 2008). In addition, alphabet activities can be integrated into other aspects of classroom routines, such as transitions (“Anyone whose name starts with D may now clean up!”), gross motor time (“See all my letters on the wall? Let’s skip to the letter D.”), and lunch conversations (“Who wants to talk about the letter that we learned about today?”).

Notably, the educator is intentional in selecting the letter for the particular group of children and planning activities to focus on that letter and is explicit in providing the letter name and sound. These elements are critical, as converging research suggests that children, particularly those exhibiting low alphabet knowledge, often do not engage with print during play or shared reading but will do so when prompted by an adult (Evans et al., 2008; Neuman & Roskos, 1993). Educators may need to plan for greater amounts of intentional instruction when teaching the more difficult letters represented in Figure 1. In other words, easier letters such as B or C may require less instruction than more difficult letters such as U or Y. Outside of planned alphabet instruction, educators may also take advantage of additional “teachable moments” to review and reinforce children’s alphabet learning whenever these occur (e.g., viewing environmental print, hearing letter sounds in classmates’ names, writing a morning message or as part of dramatic play, reading other books).

Beyond embedding alphabet instruction into shared reading, recent research identifies other effective practices that can be incorporated into assessment-guided differentiated alphabet instruction (see Table 2). First, recent research (Shimidman & Ehri, 2010) confirms earlier work (Ehri, Deffner, & Wilce, 1984) showing the benefits of mnemonic aids (e.g., providing a keyword or picture to cue a letter sound, such as presenting S in the shape of a snake) to help children learn letter sounds. Second, recent meta-analyses (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Piasta & Wagner, 2010a; cf. Lonigan, Purpura et al., 2013) suggest benefits of combining alphabet and phonological awareness instruction. In preschool, educators might provide such instruction by presenting and labeling picture cards (e.g., deer, pig, dog) and assisting children in recognizing which have the same first sound. This phonological awareness activity can then be extended to identifying the letter that makes the first sound, encouraging children to name the letter, write the letter, or find the letter (e.g., within the printed word, from a pile of letter magnets or tiles). In kindergarten, more advanced phonological skills might be targeted. The educator might ask children to count how many sounds they hear in duck, say these three sounds out loud, and then match these sounds to letters to create an invented spelling of the word (see Yopp & Yopp, 2000, for other activity suggestions). Third, recent research suggests benefits of teaching letter names and sounds simultaneously to preschool and kindergarten children (Piasta, Purpura et al., 2010; see also Drouin et al., 2012; Jones & Reutzel, 2012). Explicitly providing both the letter name and sound may help children take advantage of letter-name structure to learn sounds (Piasta & Wagner, 2010b). Finally, although not yet rigorously evaluated, correlational evidence suggests that children may benefit from learning lowercase letter forms in conjunction with or subsequent to learning uppercase forms (e.g., teaching b after children have already learned B; Bowles, Piasta, & Musielak, 2013; Pence Turnbull et al., 2010). Indeed, although other recommended alphabet instructional practices are aligned with research (see IRA/NAEYC; 1998; Jones, Clark, & Reutzel, 2013, for review), few have been empirically evaluated, and more work is needed in this area (Phillips & Piasta, 2013; Piasta & Wagner, 2010a).

**Conclusion**

The framework presented above encourages early childhood educators to use assessment and intentional differentiated instruction to support the diverse alphabet learning needs of children in their classrooms. By determining which letters should be taught to whom, the framework promises greater efficiency in alphabet instruction and learning as compared to

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one-size-fits-all whole-class approaches. Children spend time learning letters with which they are not already familiar, instruction can be tailored to match the difficulties of specific letters as well as individual child needs, and whole-class time can be repurposed to target other educational goals. This article thus serves to equip early childhood educators with an evidence-based means of meeting the alphabet learning goals evident in the current educational context.

Acknowledgment
A portion of the research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305E100030. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

The author gratefully acknowledges the preschool teachers at the Schoenbaum Family Center for their input in crafting the manuscript. The content is much enhanced as a result of their expert and experienced contributions.

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