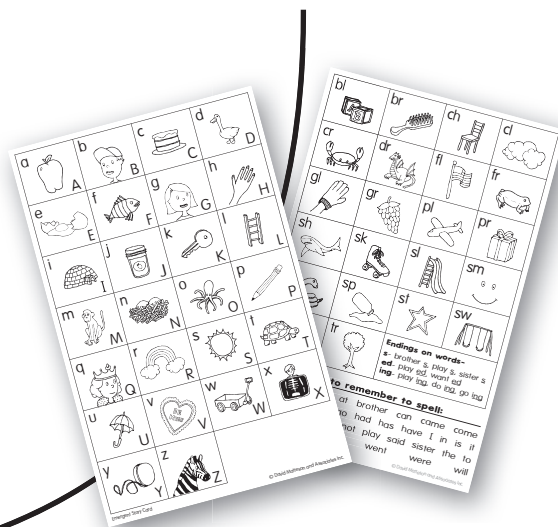


# MEANING-BASED PHONICS INSTRUCTION

## USING SOUND CARDS TO DEVELOP BEGINNING READERS AND WRITERS

BY DAVID M. MATTESON



Research has shown that *encoding* words may be more effective in helping young children understand the relationship between letters and sounds than *decoding* words (Clay, 1991). Students who are engaged in meaningful writing experiences that include opportunities to connect sounds with letters (encoding) may find it easier to make letter/sound connections than traditional decoding activities.

Many commercial reading programs or reading basals generally have a decoding focus. This letter-to-sound focus includes activities such as identifying rows of pictures and circling the pictures that begin with a particular letter, and/or identifying individual pictures and writing the letter that goes with the beginning sound. Some children experience difficulty with these isolated activities (i.e., incorrectly identifying the picture—puppy for dog) and may develop confusions that interfere with their learning. Because of such issues, children may not always be able to finish these activities independently, causing teachers to spend more time supporting students in completing these skill-based worksheets. Rather than losing valuable instructional time, teachers could be incorporating more authentic reading and writing activities into their literacy time with students, having a greater impact on their understanding of how words work. With this in mind, it may be more desirable for a school or district to implement a comprehensive emergent writing curriculum or an emergent literacy program that closely aligns its reading (decoding) and writing (encoding) activities.

A critical tool in developing such a curriculum or program is a sound card. Sound cards can be used in both reading and writing instruction and are effective in helping students understand the interrelationship between letters and sounds. Sound cards are a vehicle to help students sound out words by matching the sounds they hear to the picture on the sound card. At that point, students can make connections to the corresponding letter and begin to make an attempt at reading or writing words.

In *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control*, Marie Clay states, "...when children take the initiative they can invent spellings in systematic ways using knowledge that they have, such as alphabet names.... It forces children to carry out a splendid sound analysis of words they want to write—a first to last segmenting of the sounds of new words."

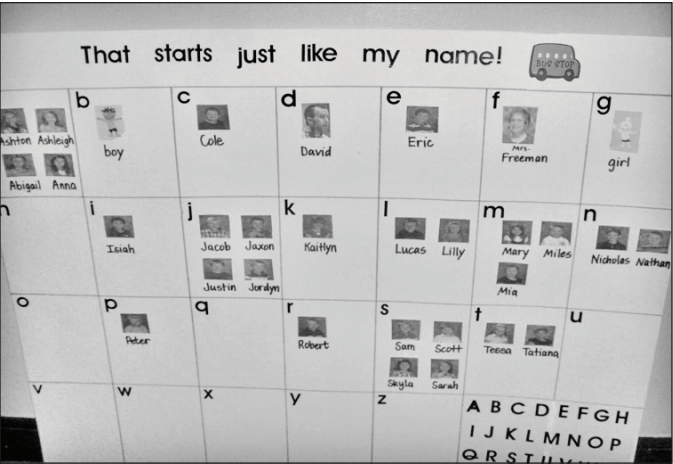
Sound cards can support this kind of teaching and learning. A *letter* sound card supports young children in isolating sounds for single letters. As young readers and writers develop they move from sounding out individual letters to using more efficient chunks of information. At that point a *blend* sound card can be introduced. (See page 3 for a developmental perspective on literacy development) Let's take a look instruction that makes use of sound cards.

### WHERE TO START

When young children first enter school, whether in prekindergarten or in kindergarten, using personalized sound cards is a good way to help them to begin to isolate beginning consonant sounds. These personalized sound

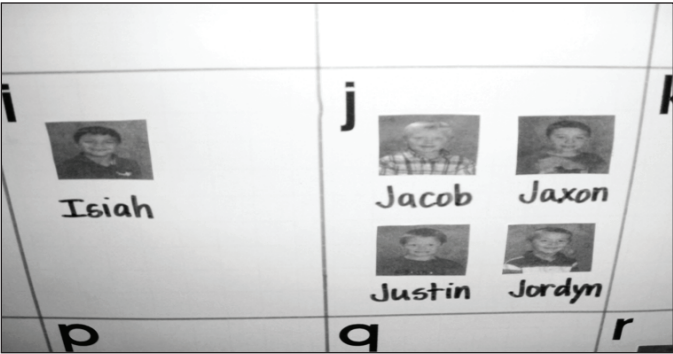
Meaning-Based Phonics Instruction

cards contain the alphabetized names and pictures of important people in the school life of students—classmates, teachers, principal, and other familiar school



One classroom’s personalized sound card

staff, as well as some often used vocabulary such as boy, girl, or even the school’s name. The more connections a child can make with new learning experiences, the more likely he or she is to take on learning (Cambourne, 2003). Using familiar faces and names is a meaningful teaching approach that supports young children in attending more closely to beginning sounds. As the early primary teacher works with students during any language activity, reference to the personalized sound card can be made often and easily. For teachers who use this teaching tool it’s not uncommon to hear statements like “Juggle—juggle starts just like Jacob’s name. /j/, juggle—/j/, Jacob.” Depending on the student’s stage of development, the teacher can also point to the name and/or the letter that goes with the picture and say, “These words both start with j.” By



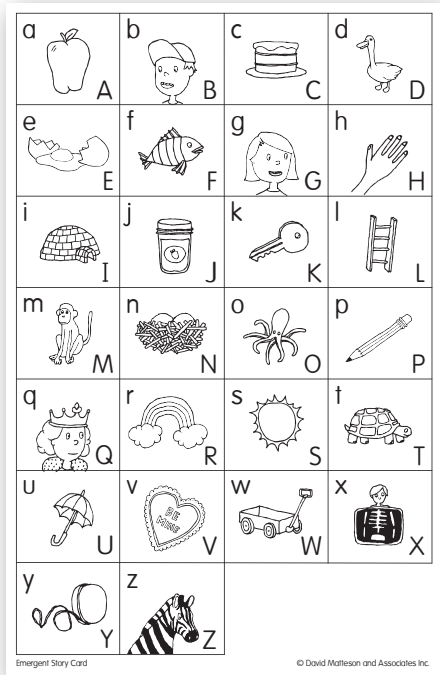
A personalized sound card in use

attaching a letter to the beginning consonant sound of the two words—juggle and Jacob—the teacher

has taken her students from a phonological awareness activity to a phonics activity.

DEVELOPING CONSISTENCY

The personalized sound card is meant to be a child’s first meaningful experience in understanding how words work. Because its content is specific to each classroom, the personalized sound card is unique to every class. However, consistency across a school or district is important in building both teacher and student understanding of phonics. With this in mind, teachers need to consider moving into a universal sound card once students have learned about sounds and letters from using the meaningful personalized sound card. Both the personalized sound card and the universal sound card are used in the same way, but the universal sound card has common pictures that can be identified by all students across all classrooms and all schools. Whereas the personalized sound card may not have a picture for every sound, the universal sound card



A Universal Sound Card

does. Each picture has been carefully chosen for its beginning sound and its ability to help students make connections from the sounds of the words they want to write to the pictures on the sound card. In order for the universal sound card to be effective, students need to be well acquainted with the pictures. This means

## A LOOK AT HOW PHONICS INSTRUCTION FITS INTO A GENERAL PICTURE OF LITERACY DEVELOPMENT.

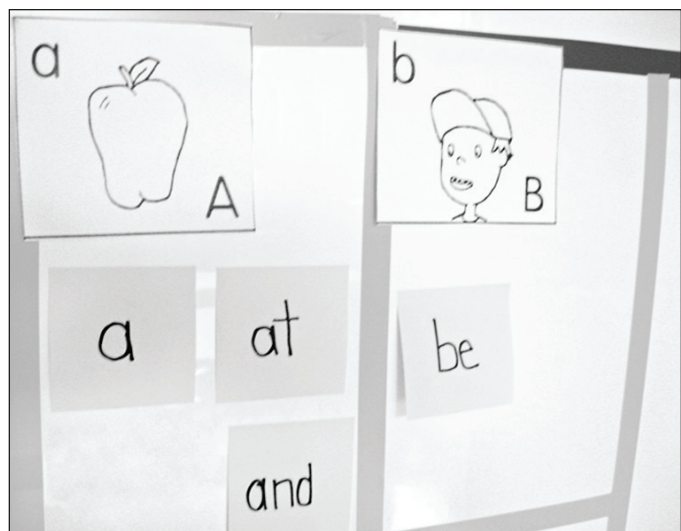
Grade Level	Primary Instructional Focus	Comprehension	Phonics (and Phonological Awareness)	Spelling
Birth-Three	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oral Language</li> <li>Gross Motor</li> </ul>	Relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Forming attachments, responding to and interacting with caregivers.</li> </ul>	Recognizing names orally (own, family, friends)  Experiments with putting sounds, words together with purpose, attaching meaning	Identifies some letters in their name—may connect first letter as their name  Makes connections to environmental print
Pre-kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oral Language</li> <li>Fine Motor Control</li> </ul>	The Picture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drawing and telling stories</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognizing names (own, family, friends)</li> <li>Playing with words (changing onset/rime)</li> <li>Identifying similarities between words (beg. letters and/or sounds)</li> </ul>	Recognizing and writing basic sight words in pictures and/or text below the picture (student name, sibling/friend names, mom. dad, me, I, the, my)  10-15 words
Kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Making connections between sounds and letters</li> <li>Understanding how words work</li> </ul>	The Text <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reading/Writing the words of the story</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Beginning hard consonant sounds</li> <li>Ending hard consonant sounds</li> <li>Medial hard consonant sounds</li> <li>Spacing</li> <li>Blends</li> <li>Endings (s, ed, ing)</li> </ul>	Weekly spelling list of sight words (which include generalizing words or simple word families)  35 – 50 words
First Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Narrative Elements</li> <li>Expository Elements</li> </ul>	The Writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elaboration of detail</li> </ul>		Weekly spelling list of sight words  Weekly spelling list of word families/ patterns (Long/short vowels)  75 – 100 words
Second Grade		The Writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Purpose</li> </ul>		Weekly spelling list of sight words  Weekly spelling list of word families/ patterns (Long/short vowels)  75 – 100 words
Third Grade and Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Genres</li> </ul>	The Reader/Writer <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Author's Craft</li> </ul>		Building Higher Level Vocabulary—Descriptive and Content

## Meaning-Based Phonics Instruction

that teachers will need to “teach” their students the pictures before they begin to use the sound card. Let’s take a look at what this “teaching” looks like.

### TRANSITIONING BETWEEN CARDS

While the early primary teacher is still using the personalized sound card as the main source of supporting students in making connections between words, the teacher also needs to be preparing the students for the upcoming transition to using the universal sound card. In prekindergarten, the focus of the universal sound card is about having fun in identifying the pictures and the letters. For the prekindergarten student this may take some time. The actual transition from the personalized sound card to the universal sound card will not occur for many prekindergarten students until the later part of the year, if at all. In kindergarten the transition will take



A word wall containing a classroom’s spelling words

place much earlier, preferably by the end of the first quarter. Many teachers accomplish this transition by using the universal sound card as an activity during centers (i.e., matching games, card games) and/or through fun whole group activities such as “Bingo.” The picture above offers another example of how one kindergarten teacher is thinking about this transition and beyond. She uses the universal sound card as a way to organize her word wall. All of these activities are meant to help familiarize students with the pictures and the letters. Once these sound cards are being utilized by students during reading and journal time the

students will have an easier time using the card to help them sound out words.

### USING A UNIVERSAL SOUND CARD

Once a universal sound card is implemented, the teacher needs to model its use. The following excerpt is a teaching scenario from a kindergarten classroom where the teacher is using a sound card. As is usual in this classroom, the teacher begins her writing instruction with writing a story of her own. Each day the teacher gathers her class at the rug, drawing a picture that contains the details of a story she has to tell. Whether she is putting writing in the picture or as text below the picture, the teacher keeps her sound card close by so she can easily model its use to students.

**Teacher:** I want to write a story about something that happened last night. Something funny happened at my house with my dog Sammy, and I want to tell you about it. Let me think—who was there? Everyone was home—me, David, and Colin. (The teacher draws her family.) This is me. The teacher says softly—me (and looks at the word wall). Oh, that’s one of our spelling words, pointing to the word me. (The teacher writes the word “me” over the picture of herself.) That’s David, my husband—/d/ /d/ David. (Pointing to the picture of the duck the teacher says,) /d/, /d/, duck. David starts just like duck. David starts with a d. (The teacher writes the name David over his picture.) I need to make sure I use an uppercase letter because David is an important word. It’s a name and needs an uppercase letter. And this is Colin. I always write about Colin. You’ve seen his name before. What is the first letter of his name?

**Students:** (They yell out) “C”

**Teacher:** That’s right. You remembered. Colin starts like the word “cake.” (The teacher points to the picture of the cake on the universal sound card and then writes Colin’s name over the picture she drew of him.) Colin is a name and needs an uppercase letter, too. (The teacher continues to tell her story and draw her picture.) We were all talking and I said to Colin “Come over here.” (She draws a speech bubble.) Come, /c/ come. That starts like cake, too. (The teacher writes “come” in the speech bubble and gets ready to write



the next word.) Come over, o—ver. What letter does o—ver start with?

**Students:** (They yell out) “O”

**Teacher:** That’s right. It’s an “o.” (The teacher doesn’t check with her sound card, as it contains only short vowels. The teacher isn’t concerned as she knows that vowels will be taught at a later point in time. The teacher returns to her story. She writes the last word, “here,” in the speech bubble without any fanfare—she knows that not every beginning sound needs to be talked about, especially those that don’t have hard consonant sounds. They aren’t as easy for students to hear. The teacher continues.) So there we were—Colin, David, and I talking, when I said to Colin “Come over here.” Remember, I said this story was about Sammy. Well, when I said “Come over here.” Sammy jumped up and rolled over. Isn’t that funny? Sammy thought I was talking to him and that I said “roll over.” (The teacher draws Sammy rolling over, then drops down under the picture and writes,) “Sammy’s funny! He does tricks even when he doesn’t have to.” (The teacher smiles and asks) Did you like my story? Isn’t that Sammy funny? What are you going to write about today? Make sure you have your sound card out when you write this morning so you can use it when you have a need.

The teacher in this kindergarten classroom waited several weeks into the start of the school year to help her students develop an understanding of sound/letter relationships because many of the students couldn’t draw recognizable pictures when they entered her classroom. The teacher spent much of the first quarter working on two important foundational components to literacy development. First, and most importantly, the teacher made sure the students had stories to tell and could draw basic shapes (circles, squares, triangles, and rectangles) to draw recognizable pictures about their stories. By drawing recognizable pictures the teacher knows that her students are developing the fine motor control needed to write letters and numbers with ease. Additionally, the teacher had her students begin to take on sound/letter relationships orally through using the personalized sound card to help them begin to make connections between student names and their beginning sounds. This teacher undertook that by developing these foundational pieces—fine motor

control and phonological awareness—prior to using the universal sound card, students would be more successful in using it and ultimately in reading and writing.

In this particular writing demonstration the teacher used the universal sound card to write words in the picture that identify (label) the people in the story as well as record what the characters said (speech bubbles). The teacher understands that writing text underneath the picture is an abstract concept for very beginning writers and that it is easier for students to understand how letter/sound relationships work when it is embedded in a well-drawn detailed picture. The words in the picture become a part of the picture and thus more easily remembered or recalled at a later date. For many young children learning is made harder when this developmental aspect of phonics instruction is left out. When the teacher notices that most of her students are experiencing success in attending to beginning consonant sounds during the labeling of their pictures, she will use the universal sound card to help them write text below the picture and continue to help students make sound/letter connections.

## GOING FURTHER WITH DECODING AND ENCODING WORDS

After developing students’ ability to isolate beginning consonant sounds, teachers use the universal sound card to help students identify ending consonant sounds, followed by medial consonant sounds. This broad sequence helps students write a frame of a word—the beginning, middle, and end of a word. Once students have a word frame, blends should be introduced. At this point students will need a new tool—a blend card. This occurs at different times for different children. Some students will be ready for the blend card in kindergarten, while others may not be ready until first grade. (Students do *not* need to master every letter on the universal sound card to move onto the blend card. It is very likely that many students will not have mastered the short vowel sounds as well as the sounds for the letters “q”, “x”, and “z” as they aren’t frequently used.)

Blend cards work similarly to the other sound cards. They help students identify common blends, which

## Meaning-Based Phonics Instruction



Blend Card

supports a deeper understanding of how words work. Word work at this point is about students knowing that many words are made up of letter clusters. Recognizing these letter clusters and knowing how they work within words will make the sounding out and writing of words much easier for students. The blend card shown here expands the idea of letter clusters by incorporating a section on basic word endings –s, –ed, and –ing. With both blends and endings on the card, students will come to understand how letter clusters work. Like the other sound cards, the more the teacher models using the blend card and provides students with hands-on practice the more quickly learning will occur for them.

### USING A BLEND CARD

Using any of the sound cards during reading instruction will also help students move more quickly. In the following teaching scenario, a first-grade teacher is introducing a new story to a small group of his students. The story is entitled, *My Little Brother Ben*. Notice how the teacher uses the blend card to support his students in uncovering a challenging word in the title.

**Teacher:** I have a new story for us to read today. (He passes the books out to the group.) I think you're going to like it. What's happening in the picture on the cover?

**Jana:** Two boys are playing with blocks.

**Teacher:** Yes, it looks like they are having fun, doesn't it? Do you think they are friends?

**Paul:** Yes.

**Teacher:** Let's read the title to find out some more.

**Students:** (Looking at the title, everyone is quiet.)

**Teacher:** Well, I know everyone knows the first word, right?

**Paul:** It's "my."

**Teacher:** That's right. "My" is one of our sight words. Let's look at the last word. I bet we can figure that one out too. It's like a word we all know—ten. (The teacher writes the word "ten" on a small white board and then "Ben" underneath.)

**Carly:** Ben. It's Ben.

**Teacher:** Yes, the word is Ben. How did you figure that out?

**Carly:** I put a "b" in front of ten and got Ben.

**Teacher:** Oh, you took off the "t" from ten and replaced it with a "b"? Good job. So we have the first word "My" and the last "Ben." What about this word? (The teacher points to one of the words in the middle of the title.) Look at how this word begins.

**Students:** (Moving their lips) /b/, /b/

**Teacher:** Wait a minute. Look here. (The teacher writes "br" on the white board.) This is how the word begins. (The teacher passes out a blend card to each student.) Find the "br" picture. What word starts with "br?"

**Jacquelyn:** Brush.

**Teacher:** Yes. Br—ush starts with "br", not just a "b". Let's go back and read the title once more. This time get your mouth ready by saying /br/ and let's see what happens.

**Jana:** Brother—My Little Brother Ben.

**Teacher:** Does it look like it could be "brother?"

**Students:** (All nod their heads yes.)

**Teacher:** Does brother make sense?

**Students:** (All nod their heads again.)

**Teacher:** Jana, you said, “My *Little* Brother Ben—how did you know that word was ‘little?’”

**Jana:** I looked at the picture and I saw he was little.

**Teacher:** Oh, after you figured out they were brothers you saw that one was smaller than the other? Good for you—we always need to be thinking about both the pictures *and* the words when we read, don’t we? Let’s all read the title to see if it all fits.

**Students:** (In unison) My Little Brother Ben.

**Teacher:** Well, we have the title, what’s the story going to be about?

**Jacquelyn:** It’s about a big brother and a little brother playing together.

**Teacher:** I think you may be right, but let’s turn to the title page and see what else we can find out before we read the story.

This teacher understands that as his student’s progress in their reading and writing levels, they will need different phonic skills to be successful. He knows that sounding words out letter by letter is not very effective or efficient at “higher” levels. Letter clusters can make up many of the challenges that students face, and having a tool like the blend card can support their learning as well as his teaching. He also understands that it takes more than phonics to read. Students need to be looking at pictures for support as well as making sure their words make sense and look right. This more complete problem solving helps students know they are on the right track as they read and write.

A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH TO PHONICS INSTRUCTION

Making connections between letters and sounds orally	(phonological awareness activities)
↓	
Hearing and writing the beginning sounds in words	(hard consonant sounds including long vowels sounds)
↓	
Hearing and writing the ending sounds in words	(hard consonant sounds including long vowels sounds)
↓	
Hearing and writing medial sounds in words	(hard consonant sounds including long vowels sounds)
↓	
Incorporating spaces between words	
↓	
Hearing and writing blends and word endings	(s, ed, ing)

### CONCLUSION

By the first half of first grade, students should be writing stories that have a combination of correctly spelled words (known words) and close approximations of words. At this point in their learning, students' close approximations should contain the beginning, middle, and ending letters of the words (a word frame) they want to write in their stories. Blends and endings should also be visible in their work, as should long vowel sounds. Students may not have the correct letter combination for the long vowel sounds, but they should be writing the letter of the vowel sound they hear. They may also have a vowel letter in place of a short vowel, but it may be the wrong vowel letter. The work now is to help these students develop their understanding of how long and short vowels work. Some teachers use vowel sound cards to help students understand how vowels work but with the number of vowel combinations for both long and short vowels, it may be an overwhelming task for both teachers and students.

Since it will be developing students' understanding of vowels that complete the "word frames" students have been working with until now, it may be more appropriate to consider a developmental spelling program. With so many different long- and short-vowel combinations, giving students more support with smaller chunks of vowel work over time (primarily first and second grades) will help them get pictures of words with specific vowel combinations tucked in their heads. This visual process of learning what words look like will have more benefits over time and longer-lasting effects. In the next article, "Spelling Development," teachers will read about a meaning-based "spelling program" that continues to develop students who understand how words work. This spelling article focuses on shifting students' word work from a phonics-based approach in prekindergarten and kindergarten to a visual approach in first and second grade that takes into consideration the words (especially vowel patterns) that phonics can't support.

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