

S O U N S F O R L I T E R A C Y
Language and Literacy Develop Hand in Hand



PAN-AFRICAN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE
“AFRICA’S CHILDREN, AFRICA’S FUTURE”

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White Paper

Every child wants to read. Every child wants to write. The handprint on the cave wall was only the beginning of the human story. That primordial urge has not dwindled, yet millions remain illiterate. What can we do to ensure that all can leave their message and that their message can be read?

South Africa is rightly dubbed the Rainbow Nation. Its array of languages and cultures offers tremendous opportunities. With those opportunities come the complexity of serving well such a variety of needs and expectations. Literacy is the thread that runs through the dreams of such a diverse population. However, ensuring literacy is particularly challenging in a country with eleven official languages, especially with an education department that is nobly committed to each child attending school and learning in his or her home language. Examining the commonalities in the eleven languages and combining that information with research on how children learn can help.



S o u n s f o r L i t e r a c y

L a n g u a g e a n d L i t e r a c y D e v e l o p H a n d i n H a n d

If you do not know letter sounds, you cannot sound out words. If you cannot sound out words, you cannot read. If you cannot read, you will become another statistic in the list of drop outs or broken dreams.

Brain research confirms that infants and toddlers have a natural window during which the tools of printed language are most easily learned. It is also known that the hand and brain work together to learn. Therefore, learning letter-sound associations early and through informal, hands-on activities is the natural and timely way to make a measurable difference in reading readiness for preschool children.

Further research indicates the best predictor of end-of-kindergarten literacy skill is beginning-of-kindergarten literacy skill (Walpole, Chow, & Justice, 2004). Clearly, it is critical to provide literacy tools for infants and toddlers in this window of learning to discover, interact with, and explore through play. The right information (letter-sound knowledge) at the right time (birth to three years), and in the right way (kinaesthetically and incidentally) makes a powerful difference in building literacy skills.

The wealth of information on how the brain learns offers the promise of simple, effective, and measurable new strategies for the work of building literacy. One such strategy is demonstrated through Souns, a literacy programme designed primarily for infants and toddlers. Souns is an evidence-based programme demonstrating that early language skills and early literacy skills are complementary and should be experienced hand in hand.

All of South Africa's eleven languages use the same print symbols which, for the majority of the letters, represent the same sounds. The Souns programme builds letter-sound associations, the first step to literacy and the bridge between languages. Souns has been implemented in participating educare centers in South Africa since 2008. Currently there are Souns sites in multi-lingual environments in Cape Town, Knysna, and Pretoria.



Souns places specifically designed and sequenced letters of the Latin alphabet into the hands of young children at their most language and shape sensitive period, between 5 months and 36 months. The hand reaches out to hold, play with, and explore the letters, providing an alternate way of learning: a concrete, touchable concept of printed language rather than an abstract one. Whether children are typically developing or have special needs, the collaboration between the hand and the brain is fundamental to learning. As the work of Maria Montessori and Jean Piaget confirms, what the hand experiences, the mind remembers.

Souns is particularly relevant as children work at sorting out the individual sounds of their language. An isolated sound introduced with the respective symbol dramatizes the uniqueness of each sound, helping a child to distinguish the differences between the letters. This better arms the child for later success in reading and writing.

Letter-sound associations are effortlessly learned by a child if the timing is right, the experience is fun, and the child's hands are involved. Object labeling is central to natural development for the infant and toddler. The child is driven to adapt to his or her environment and needs to know the labels of things to communicate successfully. Young children have an object



“ball” to connect to the word “ball.” The Souns programme provides objects - letters - for the individual sounds of his or her language. “Ball” is in the eye, the ear, and the hand of the child; the sounds of his or her language are in the eye and ear, and, with Souns, can be in the hand as well. The tools of print in association with their most common sounds placed in the hand become fixed in the mind.

Providing one label for one object allows the child to construct well defined categories. Letter-sounds are the most direct link to reading and writing and are, therefore, the most useful to the child. We speak in sounds. Writing is the recording of sounds, and reading is the decoding of letters into sounds. One label for one object - in this case the most common letter-sound association for each letter - is the best way to ensure success for early reading and writing. As the child demonstrates confidence in individual letter-sounds, new information can be added incrementally, one small piece at a time. Allow each letter-sound association to be fully explored and assimilated before proceeding to new information. Keeping it simple makes a difference.



Beginning early and continuing incrementally is the best way to build a foundation of learning for children. Children cannot learn the multiplication tables at the same time they are being introduced to algebra. Their cognitive resources are too busy negotiating the numbers to consider the algebraic concepts. Being strategic with cognitive resources makes a difference in learning to read and write as well, which are the most difficult skills a child will ever learn. Building literacy needs to begin early, progressing slowly and with certainty.

A child who is certain about letter-sound associations will eagerly explore language as he or she moves into the early stages of literacy. For instance, you may hear children stretching out words as they speak. They listen intently to the sequence of sounds as they say the words. Armed with the tools of their language, many young children demonstrate a voracity for writing. By three to four years of age, paper, cardboard, whatever they can find, becomes a promising surface for personal expression. Parallel to this explosion in writing is the beginning stage of reading, the slow sounding out of simple words. This is a natural step of exploration for a child who is confident with letter-sound associations.



Writing often comes before reading with Souns - first by manipulating the Souns letters and then with his or her hand. Inventive spelling is what you will see. If you observe the process, you will see that the child is literally recording on paper the sounds she is speaking as she writes. The focus is on expression, not spelling. The more a child listens, writes, is read to, and progresses as an independent reader, the more he will learn about spelling. No error in letter formation or not writing all the sounds in a word is as important as the child's self-confidence.



“b a c e d l d r”
 (back end loader)
 “ b l ” (ball)
 “ t u c ” (truck)
 by a 3 year old



“e l e f u n t” (elephant) by a 3 year old

The Souns early childhood literacy programme is based on research:

- ☞ Exploring prototypes of print links letters with their corresponding phonetic sounds. (6)
- ☞ “Language and reading requires getting the sounds sorted out correctly.” (7)
- ☞ The greatest results come from interventions with children younger than 3 years. (2)
- ☞ Consistent labels for objects, not variable ones, promotes categorization. (4)
- ☞ Children encounter the world incrementally; the ordering of experiences matters. (5)
- ☞ Neural networks can fail when too much information is introduced at one time. (5)
- ☞ Letter-sound knowledge leads to greater success with reading and writing. (2,3)
- ☞ Early inventive spelling leads to greater success with spelling in school. (2)

Preliminary data from parent observation surveys in 2009 (n=33)

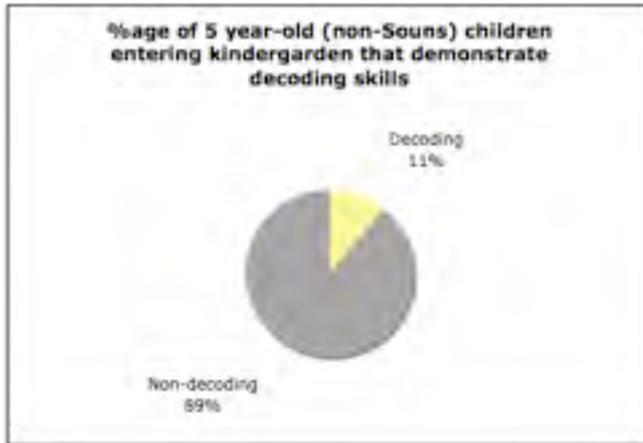
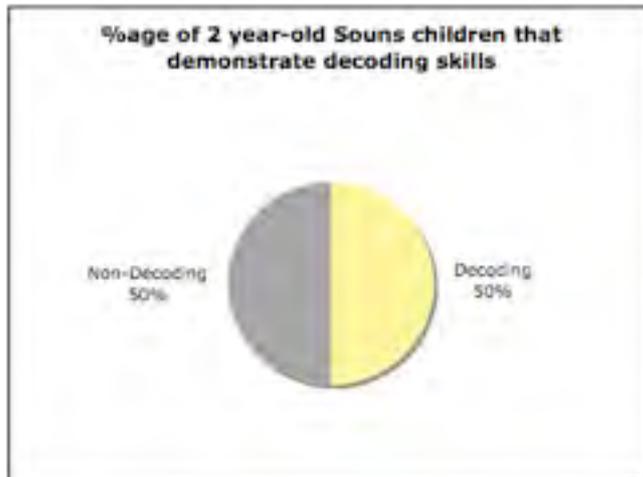
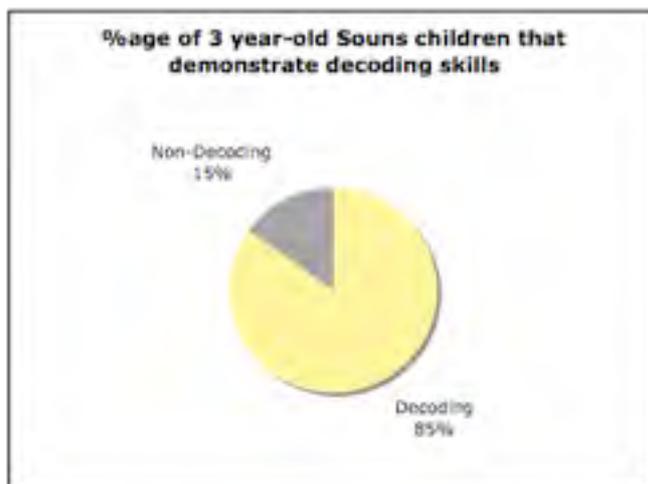


Chart 1. Data from US DOE National Center for Educational Statistics Report in 2000 (1).



Charts 2 and 3. Percentage of children age 2 (24-36 months) and age 3 (36-48 months) using Souns for at least 1 month that can decode written words.



Souns users experience success in decoding.



Souns was introduced to South Africa through the efforts of Rotary Districts 6900, 9350, and 9400. The Souns programme is currently in participating educare centers and Grade R classrooms overseen by CECD in Cape Town and KET in Knysna. The newest interest is in Pretoria through Meetse-A-Bophelo. Each of the three NPO's has embraced Souns and is committed to facilitating the programme in educare centers.

All proceeds from Souns go to Counterpane Montessori, a non-profit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to the Montessori philosophy and literacy efforts globally and locally.

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