RESEARCH REPORT

AlphaKids *GO!*

Introduction

AlphaKids *GO!* is a leveled-text literacy program designed to develop essential skills for Grades K–2 students with a focus on comprehension, phonics, and vocabulary. With 258 high-interest fiction and nonfiction books, teachers are able to differentiate instruction and meet the diverse needs of primary readers. Carefully crafted lessons provide guidance for implementing research-based instruction in small-group settings through three readings of each book with a specific focus during each reading. Each lesson provides a social/emotional learning activity that connects the book's content to one of the five key social/emotional learning areas of development. In addition, the lessons include specific guidance for English language learners so that all students have the support they need to become proficient readers.

The purpose of this document is to describe the scientific underpinnings for **AlphaKids *GO!*** and provide educators with the confidence that they are selecting a program steeped in strong research foundations. This document incorporates historical studies as well as current findings from literacy leaders and recognized researchers. It details how the best practices in phonics and word study, comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary are incorporated into the **AlphaKids *GO!*** program.

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Foundational Research Basis for
AlphaKids *Go!*

Developing Foundational Literacy Skills in Young Readers

Print Concepts

Young children come to school with varying levels of understanding of print concepts. These concepts often have been introduced at home by parents and caregivers reading aloud to them. Regrettably many children do not have these early literacy experiences and are at risk of falling behind when they enter school. Knowledge of print concepts influences language development, phonemic awareness, phonics, word reading, and reading/writing development, and is an important predictor of beginning reading success (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2013; National Reading Panel, 2000; Morris, 1993; Roberts, 1992).

For this reason, print concepts must be explicitly modeled and taught. In the classroom, these understandings emerge as teachers read aloud to students daily and discuss specific concepts. Young learners must develop clear understandings of print concepts as first steps to reading (Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris, 2014; Adams, 1990). Some of these concepts are fundamental behaviors including how to hold a book correctly, where to begin reading on a page, and knowing that in English we read print from left to right and from top to bottom. Other print concepts are more challenging to develop. Early on, readers must understand that what is spoken is written, and what is written is read.

R In **AlphaKids *GO!***, students have frequent opportunities to explore the world of print. In addition to the print concepts cited earlier, the books and lessons also introduce young learners to the following:

- differentiating between print and pictures
- sweeping to the next line
- tracking sentences across pages
- understanding the names and functions of the parts of a book; and
- identifying the title, author, and illustrator of a book.

The Role of Phonics

Phonics is the understanding that systematic and predictable relationships exist between the letters of written language and the sounds of spoken language. Instruction in phonics leads to an understanding of the relationship between letters and sounds (Blevins, 2017; Put Reading First, 2001). Knowing these relationships will help students read familiar words and decode unfamiliar words accurately and automatically (McCardle, Chhabra, & Kapinus, 2008; National Reading Panel, 2000). Learning to decode written words using the fundamentals of phonics "empowers students with an exponential effect": once a student knows the sounds that ten letters stand for, the student can decode "350 three-sound words, 4,320 four-sound words, and 21,650 five-sound words" (Ordetx, 2021).

Phonics is essential to any comprehensive approach to the teaching of reading. Phonics instruction is most effective when introduced early and intentionally taught (Put Reading First, 2001). The first step in reading is learning to decode phonetically. As students learn to decode, they develop word recognition. Then, with increased word recognition, students improve their reading fluency. This reading fluency is a key component for reading comprehension—a main goal of early reading instruction (Blevins, 2017). To decode, students use their knowledge of letter-sound correspondence to sound out words in a text. This grapheme-phoneme approach is an efficient way to learn to read (Dehaene, 2013).

Phonics instruction needs to be explicit and teach students to "sound out" words (Armes, 2020). Direct instruction leads to better decoding and word recognition skills. The more students practice decoding and the more exposure to new words they have, the more words they are able to recognize and the easier reading becomes. Blevins concludes, "Overall instruction must be engaging, thought-provoking, purposeful, and applied" (2017, p. 20).

In **AlphaKids** *GO!*, beginning readers have daily opportunities to practice and hone phonics skills. The components of the program provide:

- Text-specific lesson plans with explicit directions for the teacher to teach, practice, and apply a target phonics skill. This skill relates to the words used in the book that students are reading. Students complete multiple activities as a whole group, with partners, and individually to practice the skill using an assortment of words.

- A phonics blackline master accompanies the lesson plan for additional practice and assessment of the same target skill. The blackline master uses pictures and activities for students to demonstrate their knowledge and actively apply the phonics skill.

- Concrete phonics instruction specific to English language learners in each lesson plan relates the target phonics skill to the challenges these learners may face.

Focus on Developing Reading Strategies and Building Understanding

Comprehension: Purpose and Definitions

It is universally accepted that the ultimate purpose of reading is to comprehend. Also widely acknowledged is the notion that comprehension is a complex process. It is neither simple to acquire, nor simple to teach (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018; Cooper & Kiger, 2009; McCardle, Chhabra, & Kapinus, 2008; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Although subtle nuances exist, reading comprehension can be defined as understanding what is read, remembering what is read, and communicating with others about what is read (Put Reading First, 2001). For Fountas and Pinnell (1996), reading is the construction of meaning; comprehension is the process of reading, not the end product. Dolores Durkin defines reading as "intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader" (as noted in *The National Reading Panel Report*, 2000). McCardle and her colleagues provide a more in-depth definition, stating comprehension is the ability to understand language at several levels—words, sentences, and how those groupings interact with larger text structures such as paragraphs, chapters, and books. As in Durkin's findings, reading comprehension occurs as readers interact with text (McCardle, Chhabra, & Kapinus, 2008). For Castles and her colleagues, the multiple parts of reading involve identifying the individual words and activating their meanings, making connections within and across sentences, as well as applying background knowledge and making inferences (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018).

How Do Students Develop Comprehension?

Allington (2012) concurs that reading comprehension involves "active thinking," and provides significant evidence that active thinking can be improved when teachers explicitly model comprehension strategies. His findings reinforce data presented previously in *The National Reading Panel Report* (2000). Most students typically do not acquire helpful strategies on their own. However, they do benefit when strategies are specifically taught and modeled. This result is particularly true for lower-achieving students (Allington, 2012; National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). As Castles, Rastle, and Nation (2018) summarize, "explicit strategy instruction is effective" (p. 36).

Duke and Pearson recommend a model for comprehension instruction that connects and integrates different learning opportunities into five components:

1. explicit description of the strategy and when to use it

2. teacher and/or student modeling of the strategy in action

3. collaborative use of the strategy

4. guided practice with gradual releases of responsibility; and

5. independent application of the strategy (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

In this model, teachers are explicitly demonstrating strategies, allowing opportunities for practice and application, and encouraging students to reflect thoughtfully on their behaviors. Likewise, students are active participants (not passive observers) in the process, and they are learning to become independent readers and thinkers.

R Explicit Strategy Instruction in AlphaKids *GO!*

In the **AlphaKids *GO!*** program, teachers have numerous opportunities to differentiate instruction in small groups as they teach comprehension strategies. Each lesson plan focuses on one reading strategy and provides guidance to the teacher on how to teach the strategy and then support students in practicing and applying it to better understand the text.

For fidelity of implementation, each text-specific lesson plan provides a predictable format for teaching a leveled text. Specific strategies and brief suggested dialogue are supplied for consistent delivery. Teachers explicitly model and teach a comprehension strategy in "During Reading" as part of the third read of the text. They then assess and review comprehension in "After Reading." The "GO Further" part of each lesson provides opportunities for students to explore an additional reading strategy, word work, vocabulary, or writing.

At every level of the **AlphaKids *GO!*** program, students have opportunities to think and respond thoughtfully to the text. In addition to the explicit instruction in the lesson plans, each student book concludes with a "Think About It" page containing questions promoting literal and inferential comprehension. Not only can readers check understanding of what is read, they make connections to the text and think critically about what they have read.

How Does Knowledge Affect Reading Comprehension?

In addition to reading strategies, studies have found that the background knowledge a reader has about a topic can significantly impact the reader's comprehension of a text. Teaching content provides students with vocabulary and general knowledge that improves their ability to make inferences and comprehend a text more effectively (Hirsch, 2003). As Castles, Rastle, and Nation (2018) state, "no amount of strategy instruction can bring about

successful comprehension if the text cannot be understood because of limitations in knowledge or difficulties with activating knowledge in the service of comprehension" (p. 36). In an interview, education journalist Natalie Wexler stated, "Students with more [background] knowledge have a better chance of understanding whatever text they encounter" (Korbey, 2020). Tyner and Kabourek (2020) assert that increased focus on academic content knowledge leads to an increase in reading proficiency. In summary, knowledge about the world enables students to be able to learn more from increasingly difficult fictional and nonfictional texts (Willingham, 2006).

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In **AlphaKids *GO!*** , students are exposed to a wide variety of rich topics and culturally diverse fictional stories. Each lesson plan begins with a "Build Background" section that enables teachers to support students in activating the relevant prior knowledge they have about the book's topic or theme. Students then build their content knowledge with nonfiction titles through three readings of the book and in-depth guided discussions about the content in which students are able to ask questions, make inferences, and use vocabulary. Similarly, many fiction books address themes relevant to other content areas. Each leveled book is correlated to a science, social studies, or math strand that students explore during their three readings of the story.

As students progress through the levels of **AlphaKids *GO!*** , they are exposed to rich subject matter, from symbols of the United States, the inventions of Benjamin Franklin, and human body systems to the impact of specific women scientists on history, the celestial bodies in our solar system, and the challenges some famous immigrants faced when coming to America. This content knowledge is combined with reading strategy instruction that leads to a deeper understanding of the text, domain-specific vocabulary, and the topic in general.

The Bridge Between Fluency and Reading Comprehension

Fluency is the ability to read accurately, quickly, and with expression. Becoming a fluent reader is important because it builds a bridge between word recognition and comprehension (McCardle, Chhabra, & Kapinus, 2008; Put Reading First, 2001). When readers are fluent, they are able to focus more on comprehending text and less on decoding words.

After examining numerous studies, the authors of *The National Research Council Report* determined that adequate progress in learning to read depends strongly on sufficient practice in reading to achieve fluency with different texts written for different purposes (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Allington (2012) notes that a key reason for some children not developing adequate fluency or rate of reading is simple: they have had limited reading practice in appropriately leveled materials.

Teachers must provide more fluency instruction—and practice—as a part of their daily reading program. Attention to research-based fluency instruction can have beneficial effects in the classroom. Researchers note that systematic skills instruction and teacher-guided reading and rereading opportunities are effective (Pressley & Fingeret, 2007). Reading the same text several times in a variety of ways has been shown to positively impact reading comprehension and pronunciation among students (Minero, 2019; Turner, 2010).

In discussing the day-to-day implementation in the classroom, Hicks provides guidance to educators on how to support effective fluency practices (Hicks, 2009). She encourages teachers to:

- use think-alouds to model what fluency sounds like
- provide a variety of rereading opportunities: partner, echo, choral, shared, and individual

- have available a variety and large number of leveled texts for rereading; and
- provide quality instruction in decoding and comprehension skills.

The most effective activities for improving fluency include choral and partner reading (Minero, 2019). Both approaches enable less proficient readers to practice their skills without being in the spotlight, which improves their confidence and allows for learning through listening to their peers.

With the 258 books in the **AlphaKids *GO!*** program, each text-specific lesson is designed with multiple readings for enhancing and practicing fluency.

Each lesson includes **three** readings of the text:

- for enjoyment
- for guided reading using higher-order thinking questions; and
- for more focused thinking related to the phonics and comprehension skills.

During the first reading, students may choral or echo read the book with the teacher. More proficient readers may take turns reading with a partner to practice phrasing and fluency for informational clarity. During the second reading, students may reread phrases or sentences from the text to demonstrate their understanding. During the third reading, following a mini-lesson on point of view for example, students are asked to think about how dialogue reveals a character's feelings and then read aloud to demonstrate how the voice is used to express that emotion. In addition, Running Records for every title enable teachers to monitor students' fluency skills during a one-on-one read-aloud of the text. These Running Records can be used frequently or periodically throughout the year in an ongoing manner to track a student's fluency progress and determine if the books they are reading are the appropriate level.

How Vocabulary Supports Reading Comprehension

Vocabulary knowledge and its effect on reading comprehension have been studied for decades by researchers. Based on an extensive review of the literature, *The National Reading Panel Report* states clearly that vocabulary learning leads to improved comprehension. The report lists several implications for vocabulary instruction. Four points that bear directly on the focus of this research report are:

- vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly
- learning in rich contexts is valuable for vocabulary learning
- multiple opportunities and repeated exposures to words are important; and
- vocabulary learning should entail active engagement in learning tasks.

Since the publication of *The National Reading Panel Report*, researchers continue to investigate the role of vocabulary and how it is connected to reading comprehension. More recent analyses reinforce that vocabulary is critically linked to the development of reading skills and is integral to instructional designs (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018; Lane & Allen, 2010; McCardle, Chhabra, & Kapinus, 2008). Rich vocabulary instruction leads to a better grasp of the content, especially for English language learners (Minero, 2019).

In separate literature reviews, Allington and Kamil report that direct, explicit instruction and focusing on words in context are important (Allington, 2012; Kamil, 2004). Pressley and Fingeret report that students can learn new words with repeated encounters through rich vocabulary instruction. They emphasize the importance of learning about words in rich contexts and participating in multiple activities in which students analyze the nuances of word meanings (Pressley & Fingeret, 2007).

Students who use the **AlphaKids *GO!*** program acquire vocabulary through active engagement, including: intentional and incidental learning; direct instruction of vocabulary; rich contexts of fiction and nonfiction literature; and repetition and multiple exposures. The "Introduce Vocabulary" section in each lesson puts best vocabulary practices into action. Teachers first introduce key academic vocabulary from the leveled text and provide context-specific definitions that have been carefully crafted to be level appropriate. Students are then guided through an instructional routine where they discuss the words in context with thought-provoking questions. In addition to this whole or small group routine, each lesson plan includes a vocabulary section that addresses the special needs of Spanish-speaking English language learners.

Supporting the Whole Student

Social/Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (CASEL, 2021, para. 1).

Incorporating SEL into students' education has been shown to cause advancements for students, teachers, and the community. These benefits include increased academic success, improved behavior, and stronger relationships (CASEL, 2021). With improved classroom behavior, teachers and students are able to spend more time focusing on the academic curriculum. As a result, academic improvements have been seen in many studies (Vega, 2017).

The five main areas of SEL development researchers agree upon are:

- self-awareness
- self-management
- social awareness
- relationship skills; and
- responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2021; Vega, 2017).

The most effective SEL instruction develops these five areas with an active approach that involves students in the learning (Vega, 2017). When students actively participate in learning social and emotional skills and these skills are consistently nurtured and supported, the students are better able to reach their academic goals. In summary, focused, organized instruction from a young age that builds students' awareness and understanding of their own emotional health as well as their empathy skills has numerous positive effects.

Each individual title's lesson plan in **AlphaKids *GO!*** includes an SEL section that connects the book's content to one of the five main SEL areas of development. After making the connection, the activity then details a specific routine and provides discussion prompts. This activity aids students in further understanding and practicing the particular area of learning, and it allows teachers to seamlessly incorporate SEL instruction into their everyday classroom activities.

English Language Learners

Students who are English language learners (ELLs) need additional support to develop the foundational literacy skills that all young readers need. Like all students, ELLs must learn to decode the words on a page. Research shows that phonemic awareness and phonics instruction helps these learners build this foundation (Blevins, 2017; Shanahan & Beck, 2006). One way to help ELLs with phonemic awareness is to model the production of a sound they may not recognize from or produce in their first language. For phonics instruction, effective strategies include hands-on activities as well as assisting students in connecting their first language to English (Robertson, 2009). When a sound in English does not exist in the student's first language, direct instruction of that sound is useful (Shanahan, 2017).

Similarly, English language learners benefit from in-depth vocabulary support because they often lack a strong English vocabulary. Effectual vocabulary strategies include pre-teaching vocabulary before reading, providing time to practice using new words, and focusing on cognates to help students connect their first language to English (Robertson, 2009). With support, ELLs can use their knowledge of their first language and other tools their teachers provide to become successful young readers.

R In each individual **AlphaKids** *GO!* lesson plan, English language learner support accompanies the phonics and vocabulary instruction. The phonics activities for ELLs relate the target phonics skill to a challenge ELL students may face, such as consonant blends or vowel sounds that are not produced in their first language. This ELL instruction guides teachers in understanding why a phonics sound may be difficult for certain ELLs and gives straightforward activities to use for additional practice.

The ELL vocabulary support aids teachers in familiarizing Spanish-speaking ELLs with cognates for terms they will encounter in the book. This support, in addition to previewing and engaging with the vocabulary with their peers before reading, sets up ELLs for improved reading comprehension.

Summary of Foundational Research Basis

✔ Knowledge of print concepts is an important predictor of beginning reading success, and print concepts must be explicitly modeled and taught.

✔ Phonics instruction is essential to any comprehensive approach to the teaching of reading, and it is most effective when introduced early, intentionally taught, and practiced often.

✔ Students develop reading comprehension when teachers provide explicit instruction of strategies, allow opportunities for practice and application, encourage active participation in the learning process, and teach content knowledge to build essential background for future comprehension success.

✔ Fluency builds a bridge between word recognition and comprehension. It is important for students to have ample access to appropriately leveled materials to allow for fluency practice, in addition to systematic, research-based skills instruction.

✔ Vocabulary is critically linked to the development of reading skills and is integral to instructional designs. Students can learn new words with repeated encounters through rich vocabulary instruction.

✔ Social/emotional learning instruction focused around the five areas of development have been shown to improve academic success.

✔ English language learners benefit from direct phonics and vocabulary instruction that builds on their knowledge of their first language.

R **AlphaKids** *GO!* is a research-based, classroom-tested program that gives teachers the tools they need to help students learn and grow as readers. Teachers can differentiate instruction using a wide selection of carefully leveled books from a variety of genres. The lesson plans focus on building phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency skills; provide multiple opportunities for practice and assessment; and offer support for social/emotional learning and the specific learning needs of English language learners.

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