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One Color at a Time: A Better Way to Learn

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One Color at a Time: A Better Way to Learn

Elise Hitchings, Augsburg College

Abstract

Children learn colors better by learning one color, then branching out to another, and so on. Children are not taught color terms this way; instead, they are asked, "what color is this?" and have many color terms introduced to them at once. This paper illustrates the gap between knowledge and practice that exists, and explores the feasibility of changing current methods to the one color method.
One Color at a Time: A Better Way to Learn

Preschool children often struggle to learn color terms. Today, teachers and parents use a method to teach color terms by throwing the terms at the child until something sticks. The lack of separate color lesson plans is shown through the materials that preschool teachers use. Preschoolers and toddlers are constantly asked “what color is this?” by teachers and parents. But this is confusing to children, as they are exposed to many color terms in a short period of time, and they do not even understand one. Though eventually children can learn color terms using this method, it takes longer than the one color method. Using the one color method is as easy as changing the question “what color is this?” to “Is this green?” or “can you point to something green?” Although the current method does work, and has worked for many children, this paper will demonstrate the advantages of using the one color method.

Teaching colors with the one color method means one color is selected to start. For this example, the starting color is green. The child is taught green until they comprehend it; comprehension means the child can name and pick out an example of the color without any prompting. Once a child has learned one, the child can compare the next one to it on their perceptual map. A perceptual map is the map a child has of the world using their senses. Children are able to compare, for example, blue to green and understand blue is different than green, and in comparing the colors the child learns to differentiate them. Knowing there is a difference between the two colors means the child can more readily understand the second color. Then, knowing the second color they are ready to learn another. As their perceptual map expands they are able to easily learn more, using their map as a platform to learn from, stemming from the first color. Both teachers and parents would benefit from using this method.

Scholars in the field of color term acquisition agree, since at least 1971, that colors are best learned one at a time. Soja (1994) found children have difficulty learning their first color word, and “[t]he acquisition of a color word requires mapping a name onto a color” (2, 15). Mapping a name onto a color means the child will comprehend the color. The difficulty in learning the first word is where the one color method can help.

Heider (1971) found children are drawn to the focal colors of red, green-yellow, blue, brown, and pink-orange-purple, in this order (8). Using red as a beginning color for the one color method would most likely provide the easiest first color. Pitchford and Mullen (2003) found “the process by which… [color] sensations are mapped to [color] concepts is initially broad… but becomes increasingly refined over the course of development” (23). As children gain more color terms, they are able to be more specific. Roberson, Davidoff, Davies, and Shapiro (2004) asked
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children from two different cultures to name colors. This study found color terms are gradually sorted into organized categories, and these categories vary across cultures.

Using different experiments and testing for other areas of color term acquisition, all four studies agreed children learn best with a starting point. The starting point would best work as one color. These studies do not directly relate to the one color method, but they all directly state that it works. They seem to be confirming an earlier finding. This research was done before Heider's, and was not available for this project. But all of these studies, done at different times with different resources, confirmed the same finding. All of these studies assume the past research was solid, and their findings suggest it is general knowledge among researchers.

A recent study by Melody Dye (2010) offers another possibility for learning color terms more efficiently. It found children have a hard time learning colors because in English adjectives (like “blue”) precede nouns (like “car”) and this confuses the child because what they need to know first is the object is a car, not that it is blue. The brain has to be trained color is important, as that information is secondary to much more vital information. At the same time, when a child is asked to find a color there are many other colors around, which is confusing for the child if they do not already have a solid grasp of the color they are looking for. The order of words is a factor in color term acquisition and putting nouns first can be combined with the one color method but this paper will primarily address the one color method.

According to Roberson, et al. the age when “children acquire color terms fall[s] between 2 and 6 years” (2004, 2). This age group falls mostly into preschool, making it important for preschools especially to use the one color method. But this method does not appear to be used. Education professors and the collection management librarian at Augsburg College were consulted to find a standard book for teaching colors to preschoolers. They did not know of any, leading one conclude there is none. But preschool teachers often post lesson plans online: there are websites, Pinterest boards, and other blogs devoted to preschool lesson plans. The lesson plans for colors are often for multiple colors, and there are not enough of the single color lesson plans in each place for colors to be taught one at a time.

Curriculums used widely in the United States are found through a simple internet search. The first page of results when searching the terms “preschool lesson plan color,” displays several sites that each have more than 100 ideas, and they usually include lesson plans for topics other than color. 123child.com is the only site that breaks lessons down by individual
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color. Education.com, teachpreschool.org, perfectlypreschool.com, and prekinders.com are all sites that offer lesson plans and tips for teachers. These sites share ideas for projects, tips, worksheets, and other information preschool teachers are encouraged to use in their own classrooms. JumpStart is a company that produces technology-based learning, and they also have their own curriculum. On their website they offer tips, and the advice they offer for color lessons is:

Good color lesson plans explore the many aspects of different colors. Depending on the age group of the students, teachers can consider introducing students to the relationship between colors and moods, colors and perception or simply colors and aesthetics. A class for younger students may stop at the relationship colors share with each other. Learning happens best when multiple senses are involved, and a lesson about colors should utilize this fact to its advantage. Teachers should look for lesson plans that are age-appropriate and allow the entire class to have fun learning about art.

This tells teachers and parents to include multiple aspects of color, but it implies the use of more than one color for the lesson with the words "the relationship colors share with each other." In context this is evidence that the current method used to teach color is teaching the basic colors simultaneously until children learn to sort them out. In the reference book A to zoo: Subject access to children's picture books there is a section on colors, and of the 286 titles in the section, 50 have only one color in the title, or imply it. Some of the book titles with one color are: Robert Bright's I like red, Amy Hest's The purple coat, and Margret Rogers's Green is beautiful. These books might talk about more than one color, but based on the titles they seem to talk about one. This means only 17.5% of these books imply they talk about one color, which also indicates the one color method is not used. Bright's book has pictures that are black and white, except for a red item on every page. It does not always address the item specifically though, and it has a story that is not completely about the color red. Hest's book is about getting a new coat, but the pictures are full color and the story does not focus on the color purple specifically but rather trying new things. Neither of these talk only about the color they imply in the title.

There are a few standard preschool curriculums; most are subscriptions with very limited access to sample lessons, none of which were about color terms. One curriculum supplier is Greystone House; they use the Montessori method, so they teach colors at age 2. This method does not take colors individually, but all of the basic colors are
taught at once. The Montessori method uses a child’s curiosity to inspire learning, so it is more self-directed than other pedagogies. There are also curriculum books, such as The Weekly Curriculum Book: 52 Complete Preschool Themes by Barbara Backer. This is a weekly curriculum book, and there are no single color lessons in the table of contents. The Horizons Preschool Curriculum Kit book’s color worksheets involve multiple colors; Exhibit 1 is a sample color worksheet from the book. It has a child coloring turtles: one red, one brown, and the child picks the last one. These are the first two results on Google Shop, with a few different versions of them following. These books show, through their lack of single color lesson, the single color method is not being widely used.

On Amazon there are a few different top results. They include The Giant Encyclopedia of Lesson Plans for Children 3 to 6 edited by Kathy Charmer, Maureen Murphy, and Charlie Clark. In this book there is a whole section on color, but the subsections are: colors on my clothing, crayons add colors, crazy about colors discovering blue, feeling blue, fun with red, green, mix it up, primary and secondary colors, rainbow of colors, and warm and cool colors (see Exhibit 3). This book actually separates out blue, red and green. But it only does these three colors, and all of the other section titles imply they deal with multiple colors. The Weekly Curriculum by Barbra Backer organizes weeks by themes, for example one week is dictated to the sense of touch. This curriculum does not break lessons down by color, but incorporates them with other lessons. The theme for the third week in November is Children’s books. In one lesson the children work on creating their own book, and as they are coloring they are asked about the colors they are using.

While researching this paper the book The Complete Daily Curriculum by Pam Schiller and Pat Phipps is the only curriculum book that broke down colors into individual lesson plans. This book only has one day each for red, blue, yellow, green, purple, orange, black, white, pink, and brown (they are in this order). The order of the plans do not completely follow Heider’s (1971) recommended order—red, green-yellow, blue, brown, and pink-orange-purple (8). This is important because it is the sixth hit on amazon, and so while relatively popular, it is probably not a first choice.

The gap between what research has shown repeatedly and current pedagogy is conspicuously unnecessary. The one color method is a well-researched, established technique that works for children. Children can learn colors faster after the first one, and if they can learn colors faster it leaves more room in the school year to learn other skills, or for children to advance their color skills more than traditionally possible. When children struggle to learn a concept they may get frustrated, and often
lose confidence in their abilities. This is not to say that the current method does not work, but that the one color method is better suited to children's needs. It will increase their self-confidence/esteem and ability to learn. “Children acquire self-confidence and self-esteem as a result of successful experiences” and teaching color terms in a way that will allow children to learn faster will be a positive experience (Bunker, 1991, p. 467).

The most likely reason colors are not taught with the one color method is because preschool teachers and parents do not have access to the types of databases that store such research and do not know of the effectiveness of this technique. Many preschool teachers do not have college degrees, but instead rely on their own experience and the experience of other teachers, as well as curriculum supplements.

It is perfectly feasible to teach colors one at a time, or at least focus on one color for a period of time. The current method of teaching color can easily be changed to focus on one color. For example, many lessons involve coloring. Instead of coloring with all colors, the worksheet or free drawing could use one color, as in Exhibit 2. Instead of using a coloring sheet like Exhibit 1 it would be simple to switch to using a coloring sheet like Exhibit 2. Or for lessons that involve painting, one paint color could be used.

For example, if a preschool was going to teach one color for two weeks, enough varieties of activities exist that the child would not get bored. Two weeks is used as an example, because in Soja’s work she found an average of 800 times is needed to comprehend a color, using the traditional teaching methods, so it should not take 800 trials, but two weeks is enough time to be exposed to the color almost 800 times per child, assuming the parents work with the child at home. Also, working on colors is often one part of the day, with other activities that work on additional skills planned. The two week lesson plan schedule could look something like this for an everyday preschool:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coffee filter butterflies</td>
<td>Coloring worksheet</td>
<td>Collage</td>
<td>Glue painting</td>
<td>Green snack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wear green</td>
<td>Tissue paper painting</td>
<td>Playing with green Dinosaurs</td>
<td>Sponge painting</td>
<td>Nature walk (if seasonally appropriate)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most difficult part of changing the methods teachers and parents use is to get them aware of the benefits of changing. Once parents and teachers understand they can simply adjust the materials they already have and change the order of use around to use the one color method. This method is one that can easily be integrated into current practices; they can
be simply adjusted to focus on one color, instead of several.

As stated previously, preschools teach color by introducing multiple color terms to a child until they comprehend them. This is confusing for the child, because they need a base to work from. Giving the child a base makes it easier for them to learn other colors. Awareness of the teachers and parents is key to changing the way color is taught. It is a small change but the benefits make it worth changing. That is not to say that the current method is wrong or does not work, but rather that using the one color method is more beneficial. This method makes it easier for children to learn color terms. Children often get frustrated when learning color terms, and they lose confidence in themselves. By using an easier method children will gain more confidence in themselves and their learning capabilities.
Color one turtle red. Color one turtle brown. Color one turtle your favorite color.
Exhibit 2
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Exhibit 3

Dear Special .................................. 22
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