

SCIENCE OF READING IMPLEMENTATION

BRIEF #2

SCIENCE of READING and the PARAPROFESSIONALS in the CLASSROOM

Co-Authored by the Science of Reading Fellowship Team: Patricia Albornoz, Kelley Bendheim, Dennis Davis, Alesa Falcone, Kiara Felts, Rebecca Griffith, Rhonda Grode, Micere Keels, Julia Lashley, Kindel Nash, and Paola Pilonieta





INTRODUCTION

As discussed in brief number 1, North Carolina's [Excellent Public Schools Act](#) requires that all pre-K to fifth-grade teachers in traditional public schools complete [Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling \(LETRS\) training](#) and outlines plans for how the state can build the capacity of classroom teachers to align their instruction with the science of reading (SoR). Much less attention has been given to whether and how to build the capacity of paraprofessionals in the classrooms, such as the teacher's aide. This is important because during many parts of the school day, teachers rely on paraprofessionals so that individual or small groups of students can receive targeted instructional support.

Building the reading instruction capacities of all staff working in elementary classrooms is vital to achieving the 'all hands on deck' approach that is necessary to ensure that students have the best opportunity to become proficient readers. Although the paraprofessional's role is not planning curricula or primary instruction, they need a strong understanding of the SoR and aligned instructional practices to effectively implement designated teaching and other support tasks that increase opportunities to learn for individuals or groups of students who need more support.

During the 2023-24 academic year, after all pre-K through fifth-grade teachers at one school had completed LETRS training, one of the school's pre-K teachers recognized

that because instructional assistants did not receive any SoR training, there was increasing inconsistency between the reading instruction strategies used by the teachers and their paraprofessionals. Teachers were unable to maximize the use of instructional assistants to support struggling readers because there wasn't planning time for the lead teacher to train instructional assistants and without a curriculum that provided a scope and sequence of resources and materials for aligning instruction with the SoR, teachers were unable to maximize the use of instructional assistants in supporting struggling readers.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

How can we create on-the-job learning opportunities and quick information bites to enable instructional assistants to provide struggling readers with individual and small group reading instruction aligned with the SoR?

This problem of practice was selected because the best outcomes occur when struggling readers receive immediate intervention during the earliest grades. Additionally, building the capacity of instructional assistants in the pre-K department was within the Fellow's locus of control.

During the 2023-24 academic year, this pre-Kindergarten teacher engaged in twice-monthly meetings as part of the Science of Reading Implementation Fellowship. The Fellowship was guided by the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, four North Carolina university professors who are literacy experts, and NC-DPI's Assistant Director of Early Literacy. The Fellowship enabled her to tackle this problem of practice by providing examples of engaging instructional practices aligned with the science of reading that she could have paraprofessionals learn through observation one week and then repeat with students the following week. Because the paraprofessionals did not receive any SoR training, these instructional practices need to be ones that could be learned and implemented effectively without having a comprehensive understanding of why particular literacy concepts were being taught using specific strategies. She also learned from other Fellows about building capacity among school staff by including SoR info bites in the weekly staff newsletter.

Through consistent engagement with this problem of practice, the primary change is that in the middle of the academic year, intentional steps were taken to build the capacity of paraprofessionals to use SoR-aligned practices when they were engaged in student instruction. This school's pre-K department produces a weekly newsletter with resources and reminders about due dates, support, and updated information. The Fellow added a section titled "LETRS/Heggerty", which provided teachers and paraprofessionals with opportunities to watch videos, read articles, and attend webinars related to the SoR.

This addition to the newsletter was vital to strengthening reading instruction during a year when the pre-K Department didn't have a director or a

reading instructional coach. Through the newsletter, paraprofessionals gained access to the same information as teachers to increase consistency in the instructional practices that students experienced. The Fellow noticed that the paraprofessionals in her classroom became more interested in trying the recommended lessons and learning games with students. Additionally, during nap time, while the Fellow worked on compiling student assessment data, paraprofessionals could now include their observations of student growth and development based on their use of SoR-aligned lessons and individual interventions.

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This problem of practice was taken up in a pre-K to fifth-grade school that has a student body of about 400 students. The school was 40% Black, 30% Hispanic, 20% White, and has a growing population of multiracial students, with 71% of students economically disadvantaged. The percentage of Multilingual Learners (multilingual) has increased in recent years, and currently, 28% of the student population has a multilingual status. Most of the teaching staff (82%) have worked at the school for over ten years, coupled with a group of beginning teachers (18%) with less than four years of experience. Administrative and teacher turnover has increased in recent years, with teachers moving within and leaving the district entirely.

The Fellow teaches an inclusive pre-K classroom with typically developing students and students with Individual Education Plans (IEP). Most pre-K classrooms have one lead teacher and one instructional assistant with up to 15 students ages four to five; inclusive classrooms have one lead teacher and two instructional assistants with up to 12 students ages three to five, with varying degrees of developmental support needed. There are only four other inclusive pre-K classrooms in the district. Inclusive classrooms give typically developing students the opportunity to learn about and with different types of learners, and students with IEPs have the opportunity to learn with same-aged peers who can model expected school behaviors.

Each inclusive classroom in the district is unique. However, all follow the [Tools of the Mind curriculum, a Vygotskian-inspired, play-based approach with strong evidence for developing children's self-regulation.](#)



[academic and social skills, and a lifelong love of learning](#). The literacy components of the curriculum include letter identification activities and a scaffolded writing process called play planning. This curriculum is aligned with the SoR. For example, it uses a letter chart that focuses on the initial sounds in words, which builds students' foundational reading skills. However, it doesn't provide teachers with enough background information on the science of teaching letter sounds to enable them to diagnose early reading challenges and adapt the curriculum to help struggling readers.

RESEARCH-INFORMED UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Research informs us that [paraprofessionals may be particularly important in supporting reading instruction in inclusive classrooms](#) where special and general education students learn together. Paraprofessionals are part of the instructional team working under the guidance of the lead teacher; they modify or adapt learning materials, content, and instructional practices to meet students' needs. [Paraprofessionals can best support reading instruction when they are provided with explicit instructions](#) regarding which research-based practices to use with which child or group of children. This guidance is needed because they may not have enough teaching experience to make pedagogical decisions. The classroom teacher, department chair, or another administrator must have enough planning time to supplement the instructional plan with notes for the paraprofessionals.

Research conducted in North Carolina schools found that [paraprofessionals are a cost-effective way of improving student achievement, especially their reading test scores](#). Additionally, the positive benefits of instructional assistants on reading learning were largest in higher poverty districts. Even more promising is evidence that [reading interventions delivered by paraprofessionals can help two out of three struggling readers to improve their reading skills significantly](#). The lead teacher largely determines the effectiveness of paraprofessionals because they [determine whether teaching assistants supplement instruction and deliver individual interventions](#), or simply copy materials, grade assignments, and decorate bulletin boards. This means that lead teachers need guidance on how to effectively utilize and build the capacity of their paraprofessionals.

CONVERSATIONS THAT CREATED CHANGE

This school was invested in having staff use SoR practices for literacy instruction, starting with pre-K, even though the Excellent Public Schools Act only requires it of kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers. The previous pre-K Director wanted to include all staff in transitioning to using SoR-aligned practices, introduced [Heggerty's evidence-based reading curriculum](#), and encouraged everyone to share thoughts on implementing SoR.

During the first year of LETRS training at this school site, several teachers expressed concerns about paraprofessionals not being part of the required training. The following school year, several paraprofessionals were asked to step in as substitute teachers for most of the year since several classrooms lacked a full-time certified teacher. This highlighted the importance of paraprofessionals completing LETRS training to enable them to take on the lead teacher position when needed.

In response to instructional inconsistencies that the Fellow observed between the teachers and paraprofessionals, she began to facilitate discussions and share knowledge that would increase the capacity of all staff members to use SoR-aligned practices. Discussions with her two paraprofessionals included creating opportunities for them to share their perspectives on the curriculum, behavior management, and daily structure of the classroom. This helped to develop the high level of trust and collaboration needed among the staff in an inclusive classroom to meet students' diverse needs.



The Fellow broadened the learning opportunities she provided to her paraprofessionals to the whole pre-K department during monthly professional learning community meetings. This included brief reviews of practices learned from LETRS training to remind teachers and instructional assistants of the importance of continuing to advance the implementation of SoR-aligned practices.



FOSTERING CHANGE IN THE COMING ACADEMIC YEARS

Many conversations are needed in this district and across the state to identify missed opportunities to ensure that children receive developmentally appropriate, play-based, early literacy instruction during their pre-K year. This would serve the aim of increasing the number of children entering kindergarten ready to learn to read. One missed opportunity is not including pre-K staff among those receiving support from the literacy instructional coaches assigned to each school. Coaching would foster intentional vertical literacy planning and alignment, and assist pre-K staff in completing required transition meetings, reports, and lessons to scaffold students' transition to kindergarten.

North Carolina expects pre-K paraprofessionals to complete a specific number of annual training hours; requiring a set number of these hours to focus on SoR would increase the overlap in knowledge and consistency in instructional practices used by teachers and paraprofessionals. One recommended area for

joint professional development is the course “Early Literacy: Print Awareness, Phonological Awareness, and Alphabet Knowledge.” This course would give teachers and paraprofessionals the same information at the same time to help keep everyone informed and teach students with SoR concepts in mind.

Another opportunity for ongoing collective learning on the SoR is during the school’s monthly pre-K department professional development meeting. In the past, these have functioned as staff meetings that provide information about programmatic updates and requirements. The previous director was able to carve out time to incorporate SoR information into each meeting. Once a new pre-K director is hired, it might be possible for the new director to attend North Carolina Department of Public Instruction’s SoR Community of Practice webinars and bring ideas and resources to the pre-K staff so that SoR can be highlighted throughout the school year.

[Fewer young adults are getting an education degree](#), and more [teachers are leaving the field](#). Given this, it might be in the best interest of school districts to review their budgets to identify opportunities for paraprofessionals to attend professional development aligned with the SoR. It has become increasingly clear that teachers need paraprofessionals to do more small-group and individual instruction so that struggling readers don’t fall behind. Paraprofessionals are also relied on to assume responsibility for the classroom when lead teachers are absent and substitute teachers are unavailable.

RESOURCES FOR BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF PARAPROFESSIONALS

- [5 Ways to Support Paraprofessionals in the Literacy Classroom](#)
- [Paraprofessionals: The “Sous Chefs” of Literacy Instruction](#)
- [Training Paraprofessionals to Effectively Work With All Students](#)
- [How Teaching Assistants Can Support and Champion Dyslexic Students](#)
- [Reading remedies: This Alabama school battled COVID reading woes through teacher support, training](#)

SERIES OF BRIEFS

BRIEF #1

Lessons Along the Pathway to
Implementing the Science of Reading
In North Carolina Classrooms

BRIEF #2

Science of Reading and the
Paraprofessionals in the Classroom

BRIEF #3

Lower and Upper Elementary
Attending to Both Sides of the
Reading Rope

BRIEF #4

Aligning SoR Practices Across
Content, EC, ML, AIG Educators

BRIEF #5

Creating A Master Schedule that
Maximizes the Literacy Block

BRIEF #6

Creating Whole School Change
When Legislative Mandates are
Lacking (focus on charter schools)

BRIEF #7

Role of Parents In Advocating
for Science of Reading Aligned
Instruction in Schools

BRIEF 8

Using the “Science of
Implementation” to Implement
the “Science of Reading”

CO-AUTHORS

PATRICIA ALBORNOZ is a Core Literacy
Teacher in Orange County, North Carolina

KELLEY BENDHEIM is the Assistant Director
of Early Literacy in the Office of Early Learning at
the NC Department of Public Instruction

DENNIS DAVIS is the Associate Professor of Literacy
Education at North Carolina State University

ALESA FALCONE is the Lead ELA Teacher
in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina

KIARA FELTS is a Pre-Kindergarten teacher
in Alamance County, North Carolina

REBECCA GRIFFITH is a Structured Literacy and
Dyslexia Specialist in Forsyth County, North Carolina

RHONDA GRODE is a Reading Specialist
in Wake County, North Carolina

MICERE KEELS is the Policy and Practice Lead at
the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation

JULIA LASHLEY is an Academic Coach in
Robeson County, North Carolina

KINDEL NASH is a Spangler Distinguished Professor of
Early Childhood Literacy at Appalachian State University

PAOLA PILONIETA is an Associate Professor
of Reading and Elementary Education at the
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

[ACCESS ALL OF THE BRIEFS HERE.](#)