

SCIENCE OF READING IMPLEMENTATION

BRIEF #3

LOWER and UPPER ELEMENTARY — ATTENDING to BOTH SIDES of the **READING ROPE**

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INTRODUCTION

There are many things that beginning readers need to learn on the pathway to becoming proficient readers. These things are often described as a [two-stranded reading rope](#) of skills that twist together to create a skilled reader. [Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling \(LETRS\)](#) training is aligned with the two sides of this [reading rope](#), one strand providing the components of word recognition and the other strand providing the components of language comprehension.

LETRS Units 1-4 highlight the strategies that build word recognition (phonological awareness, decoding, sight recognition), and LETRS Units 5-8 highlight the strategies that build language comprehension (background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, literacy knowledge). During students' kindergarten through second-grade years, teachers focus on word recognition. Then, during third- through fifth-grade, the focus often transitions to language comprehension. However, the science of reading informs us that students need instructional exposure to both sides of the reading rope from pre-K to fifth-grade.

North Carolina's [Excellent Public Schools Act](#) legislation requires that all pre-K to fifth-grade teachers complete LETRS training, but it is at the discretion of individual districts and schools as to whether and how classroom teachers are supported in implementing what they've learned into their classroom practices.

However, coaching support is an essential part of what all teachers need to improve their classroom practices. [“The difference in effectiveness between teachers with instructional coaches and those without can be equivalent to the difference between novice teachers and teachers with five to ten years of experience.”](#) In the school profiled in this problem of practice, the school's literacy instructional coach was responsible for supporting kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers in implementing their learning from LETRS training.

During 2023-24 academic year, after kindergarten through fifth grade teachers completed LETRS training, the literacy instructional coach began to see that although upper elementary (third to fifth grade) teachers recognized the importance of phonemic awareness and phonics (concepts usually taught in lower elementary classrooms), but they found it challenging to make time for it in their daily instruction. Similarly, lower elementary (kindergarten to second grade) teachers were beginning to recognize that language comprehension contributes to children's learning of basic phonemic and phonics skills, but weren't adapting their instructional practices to include comprehension skills.

Throughout LETRS training, participants are reminded that becoming a proficient reader is the product of word recognition and language comprehension.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

How to increase lower elementary teachers' understanding of the benefits of providing instruction on language comprehension to complement their focus on word recognition, and upper elementary teachers' understanding of the benefits of providing instruction on word recognition to complement their focus on language comprehension?

This problem of practice was further narrowed to focusing on encouraging third-grade teachers to continue attending to word recognition while preparing students for end-of-grade exams. This was selected because traditional test preparation focuses on reading comprehension strategies, leaving little time to continue strengthening foundational phonological skills. Research suggests that it doesn't have to be either-or; teachers can develop reading comprehension by working with morphemes and strengthening sentence comprehension skills. As the teachers in this school shifted to test preparation, the literacy coach demonstrated how instruction could be done differently by working with a select few students on building vocabulary and sentence comprehension using LETRS resource materials that had yet to be utilized by the teachers.

During the 2023-24 academic year, the literacy coach engaged in twice-monthly meetings as part of the Science of Reading Implementation Fellowship. This 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 a deeper understanding of how teaching word recognition in third-grade can be much deeper than just teaching the six syllable types. She also developed a deeper understanding of the vocabulary assessment measure within mCLASS, which enabled her to have productive data-focused conversations with teachers to pinpoint where students were struggling and the

instructional strategies that would be most helpful in building their lagging skills. Learning about the benefits of having vertical conversations among teachers and the importance of having teachers understand the literacy standards in the grades before and after their own helped structure conversations that the Fellow facilitated among the teachers.

The primary change that resulted from consistent engagement with this problem of practice is that in the next school year, third-grade teachers will begin utilizing a district resource that provides lessons focused on six syllable types during core instruction to continue third graders word recognition development across the district. Once these lessons have been completed, teachers can use formative checkpoint data to determine small group intervention instruction for students who continue to struggle with basic skills. Additionally, third-grade teachers in this school have begun discussing how to be more intentional with their vocabulary instruction, such as developing vocabulary journals and interactive vocabulary walls.

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This problem of practice was taken up in a pre-K to fifth-grade school of about 650 students with a student body that is 61% White, 20% Hispanic, 12% Black, 13% Multilingual Learners, and 33% economically disadvantaged. The overwhelming majority of the staff (92%) are experienced teachers. The school is located in a suburban area and includes students bused in from a nearby city. Students attending this school follow a year-round calendar where the school is in session for nine weeks, followed by a three-week break. Teachers meet in weekly professional learning communities during which student support teachers, such as Intervention, Multilingual Learners, Special Education, Academically and Intellectually Gifted, Instructional Facilitator, and the Literacy Instructional Coach attend as needed.



Research informs us that it is important for lower elementary teachers to [begin building students' comprehension skills](#) and for upper elementary teachers to [continue developing basic word recognition skills](#). Throughout LETRS training, participants are reminded that becoming a proficient reader is the product of word recognition and language comprehension. This indicates that both domains must be strong for proficient reading to develop.

The case for spending instructional time on language comprehension in the lower elementary grades is detailed in Unit 6 of LETRS Volume 2. In this section, the authors share research indicating that the most common cause of reading comprehension difficulty is due to difficulty reading the individual words, which is based on foundational skills built in the earliest grades. Specifically, they state that “development of academic language comprehension in the primary grades, through oral language interactions, direct teaching, and text reading, lays the foundation for success in higher grades (LETRS Volume 2, p 73).”

The Fellow was present at professional learning community meetings for all grade levels, which allowed her to engage in many coaching conversations related to SoR implementation. During professional learning community meetings that focused on ELA instruction, she was able to discuss learning from the Science of Reading Fellowship meetings with school teams and share effective ways of using student data. One example is that the vocabulary measure found in the [mCLASS Benchmark assessments](#) is a good predictor of whether third-grade students will demonstrate reading proficiency on the end-of-grade exams. Grade-level and school-wide data discussions were also critical components of getting buy-in.

The conversations were broadened as data discussions led the district's academic team to wonder if the upper-grade teachers needed instructional support to include word recognition along with language comprehension into their ELA instruction. This notion was also partnered with the knowledge of an inconsistency in how many syllable types each second-grade team across the district taught. The academics team wanted to create a resource that gave students a core overview of each of the syllable types and also incorporate connected text. In addition, third-grade teachers across the district indicated a need for materials that addressed word recognition. The Fellow also demonstrated the benefits of attending to word recognition

among third-grade students by volunteering to work with small groups of struggling readers as determined by multiple data points such as NC Reading Check In Scores, report card grades, and the mCLASS Vocabulary score.

FOSTERING CHANGE IN THE COMING ACADEMIC YEARS

Demonstration of the benefits of having a literacy and reading expert present across a broad range of kindergarten to fifth grade classrooms will be increased in the coming academic years because the SoR Fellow's position will change from Literacy Instructional Coach to a Reading Specialist teaching reading focused classes on the rotation schedule shared by art, music, media, and PE teachers. This will enable the Fellow to further change by collaborating with kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers and sharing instructional practices that address reading skills found on the Reading Rope's word recognition strand and the language comprehension strand. She will work with each class, weekly, focusing on words to support student discourse with science content and building background knowledge while using cooperative learning strategies; lessons will also incorporate word study and text comprehension. This instructional collaboration will enable her to share successes and reflections on the lessons, encourage teachers to identify where SoR-aligned instructional practices can support ELA, math, social studies and science curriculum, and reflect on overall implementation.

RESOURCES FOR ATTENDING TO BOTH SIDES OF THE READING ROPE

- [The Reading Rope: Breaking it all Down](#)
- [Teaching Reading is Rocket Science](#)
- [The Reading League Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines 2023](#)
- [The Reading Rope The Reading Rope | Help Pinpoint Reading Struggles](#)
- [The Interconnectedness of Reading and Writing Ropes](#)

SERIES OF BRIEFS

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

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Science of Reading and the
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Lower and Upper Elementary
Attending to Both Sides of the
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Aligning SoR Practices Across
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Creating A Master Schedule that
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BRIEF #6

Creating Whole School Change
When Legislative Mandates are
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BRIEF #7

Role of Parents In Advocating
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BRIEF 8

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

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