



Our Science of Reading Journey

Part I - written by Dr. Amy Mattingly

I began my time at Campbell University as an Assistant Professor and Coordinator of Elementary Education after working in the public school system for ten years as a teacher, reading specialist, and Multi-Tiered System of Supports Coach. The transition from teaching elementary students to college students caused me to reflect on my own journey to become a teacher. I had an overall positive experience in college, however, looking back I recognized some gaps in my undergraduate teacher preparation program. I took a reading course and a children's literature course, and the memories of what I recall could best be summed up by learning to use a shower curtain to display the alphabet and using household items to create a fishing game where students could "catch" letters. It didn't take years of reflection to know that learning to read would require more knowledge than how to plan fun alphabet activities. Because I did not feel confident in my ability to teach reading to all children, I pursued a master's degree in literacy before entering the classroom as a teacher.

My goal as a professor was to prepare teachers during their undergraduate studies to teach reading instead of needing an advanced degree - to understand explicit instruction instead of just activities and to be able to use data to determine the needs of students. I was privileged to begin my teaching career in a school system that provided many hours of professional development in reading so that I could continue to grow in my expertise, but I also knew that not all school systems can provide that level of support.

The faculty at Campbell had already taken steps to collaboratively evaluate coursework and readjust some of the reading classes the year prior to me joining the university. One important change they had made was adding a 10-hour field experience to the foundational reading course. The field experience was an opportunity for teacher candidates to be partnered with elementary classroom teachers to observe and work with children during the reading block. While this time was now a part of the coursework, I needed to think about how to design the experience. This task was difficult because I had not worked in the school districts where my students were assigned so I needed to develop a strategy to help them connect what they observed during the field experience to what they were learning in my class. To support this endeavor, the field experience assignments included writing reflections of reading lessons they observed, connecting these observations to reading research, and if they saw practices that did not seem aligned with what they were learning, they needed to explain the discrepancies. A major take-away from this exercise was that it was difficult for students to think at this critical level during their junior year and what was most needed in the field experience were strong examples of instruction that aligned with the reading research.

Another pivotal change I felt was necessary was a new textbook. Students needed a book that explained the research in a way that made sense to someone without teaching experience, while providing guidance on how to explicitly teach reading skills and strategies. The [textbook I chose](#) had example lessons for the various components of reading that student could implement in the field experience. This allowed for the connection of research to practice while also supporting lesson planning that met various student needs.

Another realization for me as I sought to embed the science of reading in both the course content and the field experience was that it was too complex to fit into two reading courses. Therefore, I looked for opportunities to integrate reading content into other courses where there was a natural connection.



I made the difficult decision to leave Campbell University when an opportunity became available where I could work more closely with education policy. During the recruitment and hiring process, the professional education faculty prioritized the new faculty member having a solid understanding of the science of reading and the willingness to continue to evaluate the effectiveness of the courses within the department. They chose Dr. Kathleen Castillo-Clark, and she will continue to tell the next phase of Campbell's story.

Dr. Amy Mattingly currently serves as the Vice President of K-12 Programs at Helps Education Fund. She holds a Ph.D. in Educational Research and Policy Analysis from NC State University. She can be reached at amy.mattingly@helpseducationfund.org



Our Science of Reading Journey:

Part II - written by Dr. Kathleen Castillo-Clark

I joined the faculty at Campbell University just as the “Excellent Public Schools Act of 2021” was implemented in N.C. This legislation requires Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) to include coursework grounded in the Science of Reading (SoR). I remember thinking initially, *aren’t we already doing this? What have we been teaching if it wasn’t grounded in evidenced-based research?* Our initial goal was to evaluate our reading courses (there were only two) to ensure they were indeed *aligned* to the SoR. Unfortunately, there was no official guidance for what this work involved, what *alignment* truly meant, or how we would measure outcomes. *We would have to build the plane while flying!*

Using a SoR implementation guide from another university system as a framework, I first mapped out our existing curriculum. I completed an informal self-study, compiled student feedback, and met regularly with the literacy committee. Ultimately, we modified our course sequence and goals using the five pillars of effective reading instruction. The obvious first decision was to change the course sequence. Initially the students took both reading courses in the same semester, but it was simply too much content at once for our students to process and learn. The next change was to better focus the content within each course. The first course, EDUC 400 now focuses primarily on phonics, phonemic awareness, and fluency and is taught first in the sequence. EDUC 406 mainly focuses on comprehension and vocabulary and is offered in the spring semester. We also added one contact hour, making this a 3-hour required course.

I remember the teacher candidates’ faces when I first asked them if they had ever heard of a phoneme.... blank stares, maybe a little panic... “aren’t we just teaching kids to read?” “I didn’t learn phonics” another would say. Our candidates were on their *own* journey, and it was a challenging one. We had to combat preconceived notions about what systematic reading instruction *looks* like. Many of our students had never seen this type of reading instruction modeled, and Covid-19 restrictions were preventing our candidates from going out into the field. So, I began the arduous process of searching for (and vetting) high quality SoR teaching videos. I created a set of [mock field placement activities](#) for the candidates to practice teaching in lieu of the opportunity to work directly with students. [Dr. Anita Archer’s videos](#) on explicit instruction were incorporated as exemplars in both reading courses. The Reading League’s [Science of Reading: Defining Guide](#) enabled our faculty to share a common language surrounding the SoR, and its easy-to-read nature was especially helpful for our teacher candidates. I purchased copies for the literacy committee and incorporated the e-book version into our course syllabi.

The challenge at this point was that we didn’t have any guidance from an external reviewer or syllabi/course sequences that could serve as exemplar models of SoR alignment. *We weren’t teaching the 3-cueing system or balanced literacy, but we knew we had room to grow and improve.* So, I continued to research and regularly meet with the literacy committee, determined to make modifications to our program.

Two *new* courses were added, EDUC 407 - Children’s Literature and EDUC 372 - Literacy Power Lab. The children’s literature content had initially been embedded into the foundational reading course, but in doing so we were compromising our ability to effectively teach both reading instruction and literature. EDUC 372 was the brainchild of our adjunct instructor, Stacie Wood, who was a National LETRS Professional Learning Facilitator. She had been offering volunteer sessions to help our candidates review for the NC Foundations of Reading Test, a licensure requirement, and the response from



students was overwhelmingly positive. *We needed to do something to move the needle on our test scores.* So, EDUC 372 Literacy Power Lab was added as an elective, giving our candidates a 3 (required) +1 (elective) course sequence. We had now, within one academic year, both expanded and refined our program to better align with SoR. *The ease and expedience of that feat was made possible by being a smaller EPP, operating with the full support of our dean.*

Having laid a strong foundation already, the **2022-2023** academic year added significant clarity to the path ahead. We were awarded a [NCICU Science of Reading Grant](#) to support our efforts, and I was appointed as a member of the NCICU Science of Reading Task Force. This was a pivotal point; we now had a *formalized* community of practice, a wide network of support, and access to resources that were shared across EPPs. Through the grant we were able to fund professional development (including *LETRS* training for two faculty members), attend the [Plain Talk about Literacy](#) conference, build a comprehensive in-house library of SoR curriculum materials for our teacher candidates, and engage external evaluators to review our program changes. As part of the grant, I completed the [NCICU Science of Reading Self-Study](#), which includes an evaluation of 98 SoR competencies across 9 major areas of study. Our results identified additional needs within both our course redesign and Foundations of Reading Test preparation.

To assist our next steps, we engaged TPI-US to conduct an external evaluation of our reading courses, which provided a neutral third-party that could provide specific feedback on areas of targeted improvement. Their review revealed a specific gap in our courses: the syllabi didn't have links to learning for diverse learners, including gifted and talented, linguistically diverse, and culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse learners. *We were teaching explicit instruction; we just weren't being explicit in our syllabi...the irony.* To address this, I added in several articles to the course reading list in EDUC 406 and revised two class sessions to specifically focus on diverse students' needs. In EDUC 400, we modified the course schedule to include specific references and examples of methods and materials for meeting diverse students' needs. The evaluators also recommended that we include more opportunities for our candidates to work directly with students and include assignments in the field that would enable instructors to assess candidate knowledge and instruction. So, we added a 10-hour short field in the second reading course, EDUC 406, which will be piloted in Spring 2024. In EDUC 400, we modified our short field assignments to include more direct teaching experiences instead of relying primarily on observations.

Our two-year redesign has already shown great results. Our success is best summed up by our rising seniors, the first class to take the courses in the new sequence. Instead of frustrated and overwhelmed, we now regularly hear students exclaim, "ah, I finally get it! It just clicked!" Most significantly though are the results of the NC Foundations of Reading Test. For the cohort of students who have completed our new course sequence and the elective class, our current pass rate is 100%. As more students progress through our program, we will continue to evaluate the effectiveness of our program redesign. Ultimately, we must be willing to pull back the curtain and acknowledge what we can do better.

Dr. Castillo-Clark is an appointed member of the NCICU Science of Reading Task Force. She serves as an assistant professor and elementary education coordinator at Campbell University. She holds an Ed. D in Curriculum & Instruction from Loyola University, a master's degree in Education: Language & Literacy from Harvard Graduate School of Education and a B.A. in Elementary Education: Literacy concentration from UNC-Chapel Hill. She is a National Board-Certified Teacher in Reading-Language Arts, Early and Middle Childhood. kcastillo@campbell.edu