Rhode Island College's Journey
By: Dr. Cara McDermott-Fasy

Rhode Island College has made progress aligning to the science of reading over the last 5-7 years. The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) approved our literacy scope and sequence as a proficiency pathway to meet the requirements of the Rhode Island Right to Read Act (2019, 2002), and we received high marks on the recent NCTQ Teacher Prep Review: Foundational Reading Skills (2023). There are other goals on our horizon, but I wanted to take a moment to shine a light on a tool that has been instrumental in our journey - Innovation Configurations.

My colleagues at Rhode Island College and I were initially introduced to the concept of an Innovation Configuration through work with Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform. (CEEDAR), a technical assistance center. Our journey started roughly back in the spring of 2017. Our state had been working with the National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) for a few years related to the MTSS Framework. Then, in the spring of 2017, we were presented with the opportunity to engage in a syllabi review process with the CEEDAR Center. We could choose any of their Innovation Configurations, or ICs, and we choose Basic Reading: K-5 based on some initial conversations occurring related to literacy and dyslexia in our state. That resulted in bringing together faculty from the Elementary Education Department and the Special Education Department who taught courses focused on literacy as the majority of teacher candidates in the undergraduate teacher preparation program pursue dual certification, and thus take courses across both departments.

The concept of an Innovation Configuration (ICs) as a tool for educational reform is not new. For example, Hall and Hord (1984) discussed ICs as "the third diagnostic dimension" in the Concerns-Based Adoption Model, and CEEDAR (2014) noted that, "ICs are designed to improve teacher education, which, in turn, can lead to improved student achievement." Through the use of ICs, teams work to answer the following questions (CEEDAR, n.d):

1. What types of instruction and experiences do teachers receive throughout their preparation and/or professional development that promote the use of evidence-based practices?
2. To what extent are teachers and teacher candidates provided with an opportunity to apply these strategies with explicit feedback and sustained implementation and support to ensure fidelity?

.

Due to our prior work with NCII on the MTSS framework, we had already begun to

discuss our current "literacy scope and sequence" and our reimagined "literacy scope and sequence" in light of that framework This was critical because an effective MTSS Framework is founded on the idea of a shared responsibility between general education and special education as well as an "all hands on deck" mentality. We were able to effectively use this framework to illustrate the need for desilofication, and we quickly moved onto mapping our current literacy courses onto the MTSS Framework. This, coupled with the use of the IC, helped us really think more deeply about gaps, redundancies, and possible places for enhancements across our literacy scope and sequence.

Our partnership with CEEDAR, and our work with Innovation Configurations, gave us the time and space to sit down and really start to have conversations and dialogue about "our courses" within the program. In those initial conversations, we talked about the state of reading today, the role of teacher preparation, and the students and families who were not being effectively served in our public schools (e.g., students on the dyslexia continuum), yet really had nowhere else to go as the specialized language schools in our area often had no seats available. We shared the stories of families that we were working with, and the all too common narrative that they were experiencing. We felt a responsibility to work towards change.

Initially, *we* had two goals. One was to backward map from a program completer who would be ready to support students with intensive literacy needs, including dyslexia, and their families upon graduation and certification, or Day One. We were really driven by the notion that these students and families can't wait. We had to keep our focus on them. Our second goal was to respond to what we recognized through the process of backward mapping as a major missing link- which was instruction on Tier 2 supplemental interventions. We had three literacy courses addressing Tier 1 (e.g., a reading instruction course, a language arts course, and a children's literature course), and an intensive intervention in literacy course. However, we didn't have a course that focused Tier 2, and we were hearing from our district partners that they too were seeing a need for stronger competencies in this area. As a result, we reworked the course sequence to better prepare our students to deliver supplemental interventions. We were fortunate to be able to put into place a four course footprint in this dual certification program.

We graduate the majority of teachers in our state, and they stay and teach our students. The conversations which occurred as we engaged in the syllabi/program review process, initially using CEEDAR Innovation Configurations and later creating and utilizing our own (RIDE, 2022) in light of state legislation related to recognizing every student's right to read, led us to a place where we knew we need to shift our thinking, *and our conversation*, from "my course" to "our literacy scope and sequence." This became what we refer to as a de-siloed approach, and it was critical to our redesign efforts.

When digging a little deeper into the history of Innovations Configuration in education, I came across various resources in the form of articles, webinars, and briefs. Some words, phrases, and quotes (see Reference List for sources) that stood out me during my increasing familiarity with Innovation Configurations follow:

"Used for more than 30 years in the development and implementation of educational innovations and methodologies."

"a heuristic"

"personnel preparation organizer"

"a systematic procedure for developing course syllabi"

"conceptual maps"

"designed to be rubrics to guide teacher and administrator educators in their IHEs in construction of new or adapted course syllabi"

"Application for ICs for IHE: faculty self-assessment, self-reflection, course improvement."

"try to identify central content in teacher preparation development and professional development and then define degrees of implementation of this essential content"

"interested in the kind of instruction that has the greatest impact on children"

"Remember, you do the IC across all the syllabi. That is the beginning of a conversation: What are we covering, what are we not covering? Do we have too much redundancy in certain areas? Are there really key areas that we are missing entirely? I would urge you to use them in that way… It ought to be the beginning of a discussion about how we improve our program."

There has been some recent conversation around the use of course syllabi in the program "evaluation" process. I found some clarification on this point in a few webinars (CEEDAR, n.d.) on Innovation Configurations. These are some quotes that helped me think through this issue (see Reference List for sources):

"We use course syllabi, and we realize that has some degree of controversy. We do note the course syllabi are used frequently in a variety of settings to evaluate programs. The course syllabus should be a kind of contract between the institution, the instructor in the course, and the students in the course, and the syllabus should specify course expectations, course content, and various activities that are related to accomplishing those expectations. Now, the way we use them is to examine all the syllabi that are required in a teacher education program. We look at the IC components and the degree of implementation, not through just a single course, but through all the courses in the teacher preparation program. We recognize the limitations in syllabi. We know that some content that appears on the syllabus actually is not taught and some content that is taught doesn't appear on the syllabus. The syllabus, given recognition of some of the limitations, is a useful way to look at course content in college preparation coursework as well as professional development programs."

"These (ICs) aren't designed to be evaluative tools in the sense of really highlighting areas or problems. It is really to facilitate a discussion among faculty to take a look at a period of courses that are required or utilized to prepare teachers and leaders and figuring out where are we covering this and to what level are we covering evidence-based practices within our program. It really helps highlight where there might be gaps and redundancies and strengths within

programs, and sometimes just by sitting down and going through this exercise as a team, it really helps come to some level of coherence and scaffolding within courses. It is a starter. It is a diagnostic tool. It is not meant to be the end all. Certainly isn't going to give you all of the information...to improve upon a practice or to integrate information into these courses...what are these essential components that we know through all of the research and all of the evidence and highlight what are those essential components..that is the key...what are these essentials components that we know...if all teachers were able to implement with a level of fidelity...we are going to move the needle for kids. And that type of discussion and taking a look at those courses is really helpful but it is not the end all of the process."

It was also noted in these webinars that an outside support person is often helpful in this process. We found that to be true when we started utilizing ICs. We had technical assistance through CEEDAR, and our team benefited from the ability to ask clarifying questions to an objective, outside facilitator.

In sum, Innovation Configurations (ICs) offer teacher preparation programs a process to engage in collaborative syllabi review, examining gaps and redundancies in and among courses as well as places for possible enhancements (CEEDAR, 2014). The process of using an ICs is self-driven and designed to look across a program, not at a particular course. It is a collaborative process by which programs review, reflect, revise and refine their content to benefit preservice teachers within the program. As mentioned, our continuous improvement efforts related to literacy began in the spring of 2017. The Rhode Island Right to Read Act was passed in 2019. These two paths dovetailed and set the context for our more recent efforts related to continuous improvement in literacy utilizing tools we developed in state and then shared with the wider community (McDermott-Fasy et al., 2023).

In Rhode Island, our recently developed tools are modeled after an Innovation Configuration and offer EPPs another resource in their efforts to align course content to the science of reading and Structured Literacy. The primary tool is the [Rhode Island Science of Reading and Structured Literacy Refinement Tool](#) (RIDE, 2022). It was designed as a crosswalk to help Rhode Island EPPs refine their syllabi to meet the requirements of the RI Right to Read Act (2019, 2022). The [Rhode Island Science of Reading and Structured Literacy: Resource Bank for Syllabi Refinement](#) (RIDE, 2022) supplements the syllabi refinement tool with materials for supporting coursework and practice-based learning opportunities in scientific literacy instruction. See Figure 1 for suggestions for getting started or revisiting continuous improvement efforts related to literacy. Our journey has reaffirmed that the use of ICs in the continuous improvement process promotes collaboration and dialogue between faculty through systemic, data-driven review of coursework and clinical experiences.

Figure 1.

Professional Tips for Continuous Improvement Related to Literacy.

Identify departments/programs preservice teachers cross during their Program of Study.
Identify the faculty who teach the literacy courses in those departments/programs.

Bring those faculty together and start to move from a "my course" perspective to a "literacy scope and sequence" perspective.
Ask: What is our vision for program completers related to literacy? What do we want them to know and be able to do?
Backward map from that vision.
Utilize the MTSS/RTI framework as the foundation for backward mapping.
Consider utilizing an Innovation Configuration such as the RI Syllabi Refinement Tool and aligned Resources Bank during program improvement efforts.

Reprinted with permission from The Reading League.

References

CEEDAR Center (n.d.). *Innovation Configurations in action.* Retrieved in September 20, 2023 from Innovation Configurations in Action | CEEDAR (ufl.edu)

CEEDAR Center (n.d.). *Innovation Configurations: Tools for improving opportunities to learn for teachers and leaders.* Retrieved in September 20, 2023 from Improving Opportunities to Learn | CEEDAR (ufl.edu)

CEEDAR Center (2014) *The CEEDAR Center: Innovation configuration guidelines.* https://ceedar.education.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/IC-Guidelines.pdf

Hall, G. & Hord, S. (1984). *Change in schools: Facilitating the process.* New York: State University of New York Press,

McDermott-Fasy, C., Kurto, K., Foley, A., Obel-Omia, C., Feinberg, N., Zoll, S., Pinheiro, B., LaCroix, K., & Dennis, D. (2023). The science of reading in higher education: A collaborative effort to refine and enhance programs in the Ocean State. *The Reading League Journal*, 4(1), 52-57.

Rhode Island Department of Education (2022). *Rhode Island science of reading and Structured Literacy syllabi refinement tool*

Rhode Island Department of Education (2022). *Rhode Island science of reading and Structured Literacy: Resource bank for syllabi refinement*

Sailor, W., Skrtic, T., Cohn, M., & Olmstead, C. (2021). Preparing teacher educators for statewide scale-up of multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 44(1), 24-41.