

Literary Learning

The Newsletter for Vermont's English Language Arts Educators and Supporters

Fall 2023

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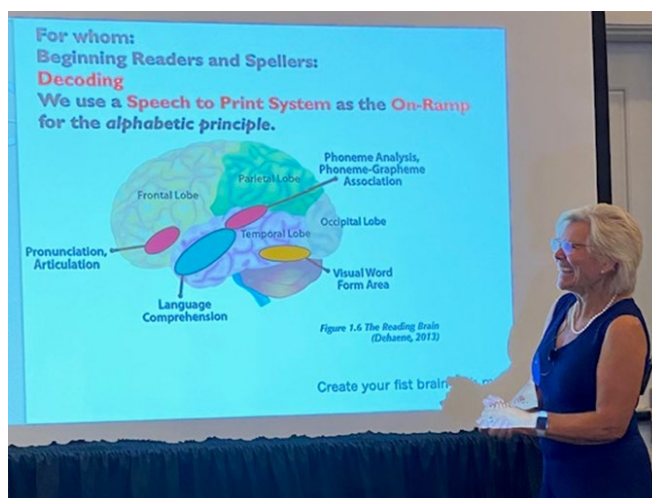
Welcome Back!

I hope you had a restful and rejuvenating summer and are slipping seamlessly into the new school year. I'm excited to share with you some information, resources, and upcoming opportunities that will support your continued work with Vermont youth. Thank you for your dedication to what I truly believe is the most noble profession. Best wishes for an amazing school year!

The Case for Both Code- and Meaning-Based Literacy Instruction

Over the summer, I had the opportunity to attend the Northern New England Science of Reading School Leadership Summit with presentations from literacy experts [Dr. Carol Tolman](#) and [Natalie Wexler](#). Dr. Tolman is best known for coauthoring [LETRS](#) (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling), while Natalie Wexler is coauthor of [The Writing Revolution](#) and has recently published [The Knowledge Gap](#). While the presentations focused on different aspects of literacy, the message delivered by both experts was clear: students need instruction in both code-based and meaning-based literacy skills in order to become proficient readers.

The program began with a presentation by Dr. Tolman, which focused on explicit code-based instruction. She did, however, make a point of saying that different students need different amounts of explicit instruction in foundational literacy skills at different points in their literacy trajectories. This is something that is often overlooked by people who stress the importance of the lower strands of [Scarborough's Rope](#). Dr. Tolman said the important questions to ask when doing word work are: *For whom (which students)? Under what circumstances? For how long?*



Dr. Tolman talked about brain science and how literacy instruction helps students bridge the unnatural task of letter recognition in the occipital lobe with the natural task of sound recognition in the frontal lobe. She also mentioned the importance of spelling, and how encoding helps to solidify decoding, but not the other way around. Finally, she stressed the importance of different types of texts for different purposes. Classrooms should have decodable texts for beginning readers and spellers to read on their own, but educators also need to read aloud books with more complex patterns and vocabulary to help students develop language skills and comprehension.

Natalie Wexler's presentation focused on the importance of a knowledge building curriculum that connects listening, speaking, reading, and writing about the same topic. She recommends a content-focused elementary curriculum that goes deeply into social studies, science, and the arts with complex texts (accessible to all students through read-alouds and discussion). This corresponds to what Dr. Tolman said about different types of texts for different purposes as well as Dr. Lupo's work with [quad text sets](#).

Wexler agrees that better phonics instruction helps in the early grades, but students' reading scores will drop after 5th grade if they are not also taught meaning-based literacy skills. This is because comprehension becomes more important as kids get older and become exposed to increasingly complex texts. She stressed the importance of background knowledge in understanding what we read (as evidenced by studies like the "[baseball study](#)"), pointing out the strong correlation between general academic knowledge and general reading comprehension. Like other literacy experts, she talked about the "Matthew Effect," which refers to the fact that good readers tend to read more and therefore become better readers while readers who struggle continue to struggle. She suggested five key actions educators can take to narrow the knowledge gap:

1. Organize read-alouds by topic, not skill.
2. Ask questions that put content in the foreground.
3. Organize classroom libraries by topic.
4. Spend lots of time on meaty social studies and science topics.
5. Have students write about what they're learning.

Wexler also talked about the brain, particularly memory. She explained how the capacity of working memory is limited, so we need to transfer information into long-term memory to retain it. She illustrated this with a metaphor of Velcro - prior relevant knowledge helps new knowledge "stick." Talking about a topic helps transfer it from working memory to long-term memory and practice helps with retrieval of information from long-term memory, so it's helpful to have students explain what they have learned to someone else. Also, writing can help compensate for lack of "Velcro," but since it's the hardest thing we ask students to do, it should be done across the curriculum.



Since reading and writing are more cognitively taxing than speaking and listening, read-alouds are efficient ways to expose students to complex texts, syntax, and vocabulary without causing too much cognitive strain. Speaking about what they hear in these read-alouds helps students transfer it into long-term memory. All of this makes it easier to do the more cognitively challenging tasks of reading and writing.

My biggest takeaway from the event was seeing how each expert tipped her hat to the other's area of focus, further illustrating the need for students to be taught to "crack the code" of reading as well as how to derive meaning (and hopefully pleasure!) from what they are decoding.

Proficiency Scales Opportunity

The AOE is looking for English language arts and literacy educators to provide feedback on sample high school proficiency scales that have been drafted to accompany the newly revised Proficiency-Based Graduation Requirement Hierarchy, which includes a single PBGR for ELA, four Critical Proficiencies within that PBGR, and three Priority Performance Indicators within each Critical Proficiency.

A proficiency scale is a criterion-based assessment tool that is task neutral and includes explicit expectations for learning at each level. It should be designed to show a continuum of distinct levels of knowledge and skills relative to a specific performance indicator. These distinct levels are qualitative (not quantitative) and describe what the student can do (rather than not do) at each proficiency level. The proficiency scale is used to assess where a student is along the learning progression and determine if a student has mastered the overarching Critical Proficiency. These results will be used in concert with those from other Priority Performance Indicators to report student attainment of the corresponding Critical Proficiency.

If you would like more information about this opportunity or are interested in participating, please fill out [the form](#).

Resources

If you have resources you use in your own classroom that you would like to share, please [send them to me](#).

Evidence-Based Literacy Practices – The AOE's [English Language Arts and Literacy webpage](#) is now the home to a collection of documents that provide information about evidence-based practices to support literacy in grades PreK-3, as recommended in the [What Works Clearinghouse/IES Practice Guides](#). These practice guides present recommendations that were developed by a panel of literacy experts based on reviews of research, practitioner experiences, and expert opinions. Click on each evidence-based practice to learn more about the ESSA level of evidence, how to carry out the recommendation, and connections to [Literacy Essential Practices](#). [Contact Emily Leute](#) for more information.

LCAS Appendix B: ELA – This document offers information, observations, and recommendations regarding the purpose and implementation of specific literacy and English Language Arts assessments utilized at the local level. It is a companion document to [Strengthening and Streamlining Local Comprehensive Assessment Systems: Guidelines and Support for Leadership Teams](#), which provides guidelines and resources to help systems develop a streamlined balanced local comprehensive assessment system (LCAS) for all students. This document is intended to provide a high-level overview of a sampling of assessments, including assessments known to

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be in use by SU/SDs in Vermont, to support local systems and schools in making informed decisions and investment requests. This appendix is not an exhaustive list, does not represent the full breadth and depth of information about the included assessments, and is not an endorsement of the assessments reviewed. LEAs are encouraged to evaluate assessments before purchasing or utilizing an assessment. For guidance on how to evaluate assessments, please refer to the Agency's [LCAS Defining Essential Components](#).

Student Achievement Partners Resources: Foundational Skills and Text-Dependent Questions – [Effective Enhancements for Foundational Skills Instruction document](#) includes student-friendly, fun, and engaging games, songs, and activities that can be used to enhance foundational skills lessons. [On this page](#), teachers can find tools to help write and evaluate text-dependent questions. Be sure to download the [Short Guide to Creating Text-Dependent Questions](#).

Professional Offerings and Opportunities

Building a Strong Foundation for Lifelong Literacy Success – The AOE's new course is live and available to all Vermont educators! [Register](#) and begin taking the first module of the course *Understanding the Neuroscience of Reading* today at your own pace. The first module introduces a scientific approach to reading instruction, reading research, evidence-based practices, and reading assessment and should take no longer than 60 minutes to complete. Modules 2 through 6 will concentrate on the needs of educators who teach or support students K–3 students and adolescent students. A certificate of completion will be available after completing each 45-60 minute module.

Springboard Collaborative Family Literacy Engagement – The AOE has space available for SU/SDs interested in family literacy engagement and small group instruction programming with [Springboard Collaborative](#) this winter and spring. To learn more [contact Emily Lesh](#) or [complete an interest form](#) by Oct 31, 2023.

Flynn Student Matinees – The Flynn is offering shows to complement your English and Social Studies curricula. These shows take creative and engaging spins on Shakespearean and other literary classics, as well as performances that open our eyes to world cultures, new perspectives, and defining moments in history.

- [The Odyssey](#): Lisa Peterson's adaptation of *The Odyssey* brings new life to this ancient epic. Four young women trapped in the limbo of a refugee camp retell Odysseus' adventures as they struggle with their own search for a home. October 17, grades 6-12
- [Keep Marching](#): Stories from the historic 1963 March on Washington are brought to life in this one-act play by Mad River Theatre Works. March 11, grades 4-12
- [Turn](#): Through Shakespeare's *Othello*, M'Balia Singley examines, with equal parts humor and honesty, what it means to be a Black woman. December 1, grades 5-12

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