

## TALE OF THREE TEAMS: REVAMPING CURRICULUM AND CAMPUS STRUCTURES TO IMPROVE LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT FOR STUDENTS IN POVERTY

**C. Kelly Cordray**

Texas A&M University-Texarkana

**Abbie R. Strunc**

Sam Houston State University

### Abstract

Researchers have studied the effects of poverty on student achievement for decades which resulted in different government mandates to correct the issue in the United States. The aim of the polices is to break the cycle of inequitable access to literacy, among other social concerns of inequity. Moats (2020) argues educators CAN get 95% of students to on grade level reading performance by the end of first grade if intervention begins early and provides instruction aligned to the science of reading. This study uses the knowledge of the Science of Teaching Reading to implement structured literacy professional development with all faculty serving grades K-2 at a rural primary campus that had been without a phonics-based curriculum for several years. Additionally, time for appropriate literacy instruction was added, including a tightly held Response to Intervention period, and time for collaborative planning and data analysis which all worked together to achieve stellar student achievement results.

Keywords: *Science of Teaching Reading, STR, equity, Structured Literacy, literacy, Response to Intervention, RtI*

---

### Introduction

Researchers have studied the effects of poverty on student achievement for decades which resulted in different government mandates to correct the issue in the United States. The aim of the polices is to break the cycle of inequitable access to literacy, among other social concerns of inequity. In 1995, Hart and Risley documented a 30-million-word gap in vocabulary between children from families with parents or guardians with incomes above the poverty threshold as compared to those at or below the poverty threshold in the United States. Despite environmental factors, which do impact children's learning outcomes, Moats (2020) argues educators CAN get 95% of students to on grade level reading performance by the end of first grade *if* intervention begins early and provides instruction aligned to the science of reading. Kilpatrick (2018) notes the lack of instruction in foundational reading skills is a leading cause of children's reading struggles; and Seidenberg (2017) expands that the degree to which a child finds success or failure with reading is directly related to how quickly the child was identified as in need of intervention, coupled with the skill of the educator to provide appropriate instruction. Therefore, the only certain way to obviate low literacy is prevention: successfully teaching children to read in the first place (Seidenberg, 2017, p. 9). Why has this been a stumbling block in American classrooms for decades?

Seidenberg (2017) argues there are three main challenges to successful literacy instruction: 1) lack of educator literacy to seek out scientific claims rather than what is claimed by uninformed and unskilled decision makers, 2) a strong belief in the validity of personal experiences, creates a vulnerability to believe claims that lack any scientific truth, and 3) the conflict between identifying research-based instructional support versus publishers marketed materials. Furthermore, websites are not always the most reliable source for research-based information; so, if educators do not have access to peer reviewed research for guidance in reading instruction, the volume of marketing materials and information can be overwhelming, particularly for novice teachers.

However, it takes more than knowing how to break the unproductive systems that are not producing what is desired in education. Educators at all levels must take action to put the right systems in place. Therefore, instead of turning to a new program to solve reading woes each time external pressure is applied from political forces outside the classroom, district and campus administrators must become knowledgeable about effective reading instruction to make appropriate curricular choices. In the meantime, children are receiving inadequate reading instruction and fail to develop as readers (Danielson, 2002).

### **Context and Purpose**

This research project emerged when Cordray was asked to assume the role of principal of a small primary school in northeast Texas. Prior to taking on the role of principal at the campus, she worked in the school district's central office as Director of State and Federal programs for the school system. The superintendent asked Cordray to review the primary school's literacy instruction in the 2017- 2018 academic year. The data indicated that 67% of students in pre-kindergarten through second grade were underperforming. The school's student population were listed as 99% of students who were "at risk" of not graduating high school due to economic and/or social hardships. In the course of data review, it was discovered that there was no research-based phonics curriculum present. Additionally, further investigation into the campus structure revealed wasted instructional time with long and chaotic transition periods, no systematic phonemic awareness instruction, no phonics instruction, and the absence of direct, systematic, explicit literacy instruction on the campus.

North Primary School (NPS) serves grades PK through 2nd grades and is situated in a small northeast Texas town with a population of approximately 4,500. The total students enrolled in the school system was approximately 1,200, with 379 enrolled at the primary school. In the 2017-18 school year the following demographic data were reported: white - 54.2%, African American - 23%, Hispanic - 11.9%, and other - 10.9%; 205 males (54.09%); 174 females (45.91%); Special education students represented at 13.23% of the student population, while 83.6% of students were reported to live at or below the poverty threshold. Additionally, there are 14 English Learners and 6 gifted and talented students. The professional staff was 89.7% white and 96.6% female. The years of teaching experience were reported as 48.3% having 0-5 years of experience and 10.3% having 6-10 years of experience. On average, the teacher/student ratio was 1:16 (Texas Academic Performance Report, retrieved from <https://tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/index.html>, June, 2019). Also notable for the context of this study, in 2018, the national government required a new report be filed by school districts called the Equity Report. This report showed this primary schools was staffed by teachers with the least experience and served the greatest number of students in poverty in the school system.

## Interventions

Cordray officially began in the role of campus principal at NPS July 2018 with the first task of drafting a more efficient master schedule to support structured literacy instruction. The adjustments included a daily planning period so teachers could collaboratively plan instruction that meets the rigor of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). Also, in summer 2018 through discussions with the Instructional Specialist for Elementary, it was discovered an extremely fragmented Response to Intervention (RtI) process had been used by the campus in the 2017-18 school year. Response to Intervention allowed teachers to provide any intervention of their choosing during the appointed RtI time in the schedule. A different educator (the dyslexia specialist on campus) progress monitored students on skills that were not tied to classroom instruction, and the assistant principal input the data. In the 2017-18 school year there was not a system for enrichment for students who were already performing on grade level. In order to allow for student growth and support for students already achieving at or above grade level, the Instructional Specialist for Elementary and principal worked to incorporate a more effective RtI process into the improvement plan for students' reading success which included allowing those already at grade level to receive enrichment.

### *Professional Development in Structured Literacy*

The principal's prior role as Director of State and Federal Programs in 2017-18, charged with overseeing the decisions for how the district spent federal funding, offered a unique perspective on the availability and potential source of funds for literacy curriculum. Cordray recommended the district look for resources to support research-based phonological awareness and phonics instruction. It was important to provide teachers with the training to implement these instructional tools accurately, since the data pointed to a lack in reading achievement. In April 2018 district administrators elected to provide Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training to all prekindergarten through 2nd grade teachers and all other teachers who taught reading directly in grades 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup>. LETRS is "professional development for educators responsible for improving K-12 instruction in reading, writing and spelling" (Moats and Tolman, 2009, p. 1). Teachers were directed to complete Modules 1 and 2 of LETRS over the summer to qualify for the two exchange days that were scheduled in early August. The online training completed over the summer would be followed by an in-person training day to solidify content knowledge.

The district committee also chose to fund training in Neuhaus Education Center's Language Enrichment curriculum for teachers who would be teaching summer school in 2018 and training in Neuhaus' Reading Readiness and Automatic and Accurate Reading for all other Kindergarten through second grade teachers in August 2018.

## Outcomes

The second-grade teachers and reading interventionist received the training and curriculum readily which is evident in the results they had with students. During observations, it was noted that the Neuhaus curriculum was implemented with fidelity, all second-grade teachers were open to feedback, and the teachers provided unwavering support for students' improvement when they were assessed. As noted in Table 1, Scores for 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Students Based on STAAR Reading, there were substantial gains in the

percentage of students who achieved a 2.0 and above on the STAR reading assessment, moving from 18% in August of 2018 to 67% in April of 2019, an increase of 49% in one academic year.

**Table 1.**  
*Scores for 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Students Based on STAR Reading*

Date of Assessment	# Assessed	# at PP	% at PP	# at P	% at P	# at 1.0-1.9	% at 1.0-1.9	# at 2.0 and above	% at 2.0 and above
August 2018	73	33	45	6	8	23	32	13	18
April 2019	79	16	20	4	5	6	8	53	67

After assessing student progress, teachers readily shared data with students and celebrated successes. These teachers also willingly accepted direction for grouping students for RtI, setting Accelerated Reader (AR) goals, and following campus AR expectations. They also encouraged students and families to participate in all campus extracurricular literacy activities with great enthusiasm. Although all of these are positive comments and the results seen with 2nd grade students were phenomenal; it is suspected that the fidelity of implementation came from a place of blame, directed at what 1st grade teachers had not done the previous year. The second-grade team was stressed by the need and pressure they felt to get students reading on grade level, and rather than blame being placed where it should have been, the lack of a research based curriculum taking its toll on student achievement, the second grade team blamed their first grade counterparts. Teachers felt unnecessarily burdened for the students' poor reading levels at the start of 2nd grade and so they did not veer from the path set before them with structured literacy instruction, trusting that it would provide what the students were missing. As Table 2, Scores for 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Students Based on Texas Primary Reading Inventory notes, student performance improved by more than ten percentage points in all categories, except for Story 1 Comprehension. Student performance in this category increased by 7.3%, while all other categories improved by 10.1% or more. Consistent with the hypotheses that a lack of spiraling structured literacy practices left students with significant gaps in their reading skills, Graphophonemic Knowledge reflected student gains from 13% in August 2018 to 66% in April 2019 – an increase in student skills of 53%. Similarly, Word Reading 2 or more showed student results at 45% in August 2018 but students scored 75% in April 2019, a 30% increase in student achievement. The students, teachers, and leadership were the same in August of 2018 and in April of 2019, the changes provided during the school year was in the use of a spiraled structured literacy curriculum which impacted student learning and performance in a positive manner when implemented accurately.

**Table 2.**  
*Scores for 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Students Based on Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI)*

Date of Assessment	# Students Assessed	GK 3 or more* % D	WR 2 or more* % D	Story 1 Reading % D	Story 1 Comp. % D	Story 2 Reading % D	Story 2 Comp. % D
September 2018	71	13	45	63.4	53.5	56.3	39.4
April 2019	79	66	75	73.5	60.8	77.2	58.2

\*Texas Literacy Plan Standards

GK = Graphophonemic Knowledge; WR=Word Reading; D= Developed; SD=Still Developing

At the other end of the spectrum, much of the kindergarten team (three of five) and the first-grade team (four out of five) displayed negative attitudes toward the new structured literacy instruction model, at best. The two positive educators in kindergarten were new, in their first or second year, on the campus. The most positive and open teacher in 1st grade was a new to the profession and working through an alternative certification to obtain their credentials. Cordray was unaware at the beginning of the 2018-19 school year about the negative interactions (most were unspoken, but obvious) between the second and first grade teams. The second grade teachers made comments to first grade teachers such as, “What did you teach these students?” When these comments and attitudes were brought to the attention of the principal in late October, she had a conversation with the main spokesperson from the second grade team. Unfortunately, the conversation was not sufficient to turn the effects of the ‘blame game’ around.

However, the blame game had a detrimental and lingering effect on the first-grade team’s ability to embrace structured literacy and implement it with fidelity. Their competency was attacked, and all interactions afterward to improve literacy instruction were marred by the negative interactions with colleagues. After doing an observation with one teacher, Cordray scheduled a feedback session. Even after beginning the feedback session with positive words prior to making suggestions for instructional improvement, the teacher shut down. She responded to the feedback provided with a teary, “I thought I was doing it all right.” Table 3, Scores for 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Students Based on STAAR Early Literacy, demonstrates the impact of the negative interactions as related to student achievement. There were improvements in student performance from August 2018 to April 2019, which is good, and clearly desired, but the improvements would likely have been even more substantial without the negative interactions between teams, which lead to the defensive feelings from the feedback session.

**Table 3.**

*Scores for 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Students Based on STAAR Early Literacy*

Date of Assessment	# Students Assessed	% at Early Emergent	% at Late Emergent	% at Transitional	% at Probable
August 2018	78	15	58	15	10
April 2019	84	0	10	46	44

As a result, the corrective feedback had little impact on her practice. This situation remained the consistent throughout the year which became a barrier to effective implementation of the curriculum and as a result, student achievement. Cordray worked with the entire first grade team on several occasions to split the elements of the Language Enrichment curriculum into both whole group and small group components based on which needed closer supervision and accountability with the teacher (decoding words). Two of the five were open to feedback and made changes after they were observed. The others continued instructional practices via whole group instruction that should have been carried out in small group teaching time.

**Table 4.***Scores for 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Students Based on Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI)*

Date of Assessment	# Students Assessed	# at Still Developing	% at Still Developing	# at Developed	% at Developed
September 2018	77	39	50	38	49
April 2019	84	53	63	31	37

Table 4, Scores for 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Students Based on Texas Primary Reading Inventory, reflects the connection between implementation of the structured literacy curriculum, teacher understanding of the process, and apprehension surrounding the change. To illustrate, in February 2019 the principal of NPS met with the first-grade team and in the meeting the teachers expressed concerns about covering all their grade level TEKS. The team stated that they liked the way Neuhaus curriculum presented concepts. They requested the ability to pull concepts earlier to align with the TEKS Resource System scope and sequence. The concern was that at the current pace, it may not have been possible to attend to some concepts in the Neuhaus curriculum. Cordray agreed to this with the caveat that this was done in addition to teaching the program in a sequential manner, *not* instead of using the program as intended. Unfortunately, it was discovered in May through a review of teachers' student data forms, the team misunderstood the compromise and teachers only picked around in the curriculum. Concepts were not presented sequentially which stalled students' progress in becoming solid and fluid decoders. This resulted in much less growth in 1st graders than for 2nd graders as is evidenced in the data and reflected in Tables 3 and 4, Scores for 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Students Based on STAAR Early Literacy and Scores for 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Students Based on Texas Primary Reading Inventory, respectively. This also points back to teachers' lack of secure knowledge of the definition of structured literacy being an explicit, systematic and direct teaching approach. If the teachers truly understood the spiraling nature of structured literacy, they would have continued presenting lessons in sequence. Haphazard implementation did not produce the same results that second grade teachers experienced by implementing the curriculum with fidelity.

### Conclusions

Due to the transition between principals the data trends for student performance in literacy were not well communicated to the teachers. Teachers were not fully aware of the student learning gap which existed. Therefore, the changes Cordray made coming in as a new principal were seen as a surprise and unnecessary by some teachers which affected the potential impact and sustainable results. As a first-year principal on a campus, changing all teachers to structured literacy is an ambitious goal if the principal is their sole support. However, when reviewing student data, it was apparent that without substantial changes, teachers would have continued doing a disservice to students. Despite the challenges, ethically Cordray would have approached the task in the same manner. Teachers who were resisted learned about what is necessary to teach reading in a research-based manner even if they did not fully implement the curriculum as intended. At the same time, for those educators who implemented the curriculum with fidelity, student performance increased significantly. Overall, more than 100 students were taught with structured literacy and the results demonstrate the improvement in performance.

Instructional and cultural change is a process. Not every stakeholder will embrace curricular and instructional changes which are implemented, even if the changes are made for the best interest of

students. However, at the end of the day, leaders and resisters must all realize that as educators, we are collectively responsible for what happens to and with our students while they are in our classroom or on our campus. During the 2018 – 2019 school year, North Primary School experienced several significant changes in leadership, curriculum, and instructional practices. While those challenges were, at times, difficult, several outcomes of those changes improved student performance. Teachers expanded their knowledge of structured literacy and effective research-based reading practices. They also learned how to administer assessments with fidelity to ensure reliable data, suitable to drive instruction and intervention. Finally, teachers' enhanced skills allowed them to regularly share data with students and parents. These innovations together allowed instructional decisions to be more data driven and student grouping which are, in turn, directly tied to greater student proficiency in reading.

### References

- Danielson, C. (2002). *Enhancing student achievement: A framework for school improvement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Hart, B., & Risley, T.R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.
- Kilpatrick, D.A. (2018). Genetics, the environment, and poor instruction as contributors to word-level reading difficulties: Does it matter for early identification and instruction? *Perspectives on Language and Literacy*, 44(3), 25-28.
- Moats, L. C. (2020). *Teaching reading is rocket science: What expert teachers of reading should know and be able to do*. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers.
- Moats, L. & Tolman, C. (2009). *LETRS: The challenge of learning to read, module 1*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Longmont, CO: Sopris West Educational Services.
- Seidenberg, M. (2017). *Language at the speed of sight: How we read, why so many can't, and what can be done about it*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Texas Academic Performance Report. Retrieved June, 2019 from <https://tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/index.html>.

