

Thank you to the members of the House Education Committee for inviting my testimony on K-3 literacy education in response to Bill H.668 titled, “An act relating to evidence-based structured literacy instruction for students in kindergarten—grade 3 and students with dyslexia and to teacher preparation programs.” I am the Department Chair of Castleton University’s Education Department. In our department of four fulltime professors (down from eight six years ago), I serve as our professor of literacy education. I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and I was educated in Pennsylvania public schools, except for grades K-3 when I attended Detroit, MI Public Schools in the late 1960s.

I earned my Bachelor of Science in Communications with a Certification in Secondary English from Kutztown University, a state university in Berks County, Pennsylvania, in 1989 as an adult learner. After teaching middle and high school English for almost ten years, both in an independent girls’ boarding school for three years and in public middle and high schools in the Philadelphia area, I returned to school to earn my Masters’ Degree and Reading Specialist Certification at the Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) in 2001. I then earned my PhD in Curriculum and Instruction from Penn State in 2004, with a concentration in Literacy. I am a qualitative educational researcher in a quantified era, and I have a story to share about what that means to the preparation of future public school teachers.

My first positions in higher education were at two of Penn State’s 23 two-year branch campuses: Penn State Altoona and Penn State Berks, respectively. I served as the literacy education faculty member who, along with a science educator, a mathematics educator, and a special educator built up a four-year Elementary Education major with certification for elementary teachers on each campus. I taught a nine-credit literacy block as my full teaching load at both campuses, and I researched New Literacies for how preservice teachers utilized multimodal literacy practices in their literacy instruction. At that time, our elementary teacher preparation programs were interconnected with a music education and art education to prepare teachers versed in arts integration.

It was in my second position at Penn State Berks and when we were building relationships with the Reading School District, an urban school system, that the sweeping NCLB Act of 2004 legislated the need for “highly qualified teachers” and “evidence-based” or “scientifically-based reading instruction” wording which is still coded today, and in the original intent of this bill. The evidence for this term came down from the findings of the very impactful and highly critiqued National Reading Panel Report that was completed in 2000. In “Reading Between the Lines,” a Nation article, Stephen Metcalf wrote in January 2002:

Several critics have emerged with key questions about the NRP report. To begin with, the 100,000 figure is wildly misleading. The central findings—those most likely to guide school practices, and thus their purchase of textbooks—involved only thirty-eight studies. Coles argues that those studies are often themselves of questionable relevance. On the decisive question of whether phonics instruction has an impact on reading comprehension, for example, the panel cited just three studies supporting a significant boost: one conducted in Spain, one in Finland and one comparing phonics to placing words and pictures into categories—as Coles puts it, in effect comparing phonics to “no instruction at all” (p.38).

In what seemed, in retrospect, like an overnight change, the K-3 city schools in which I worked shifted from teacher-generated curricula and instructional decision-making to packaged reading programs. Reading City schools bought McGraw-Hill's Open Court Reading Program for all city elementary schools, and I witnessed Reading City elementary school libraries emptied of rich children's literature to make space for the predictable texts of Open Court. McGraw-Hill's Open Court Reading Program, has since come under scrutiny. Multiyear scale-up effectiveness trials of 4,500 students indicate that Open Court Reading has had little impact or negative impact on reading improvement (2018), which is a trend found in other meta analyses of systematic phonics instruction (2020). A profound shift occurred with the passage of NCLB. Schools--faced with the progressively serious penalties of "Annual Yearly Progress" scores--invested in what were called "evidence-based" programs rather than teacher expertise.

In 2007, I took a risk and left my tenure track position at Penn State Berks for a visiting position as a literacy educator at what was then Castleton State College. Looking northward from Pennsylvania, Vermont is viewed as a small state with an effective national voice. Like many of us who come from away, Vermont draws us through its natural beauty, hard-working villages (I live in Poultney, Vermont), and, its participatory democracy, which brings me to the reason I am testifying before this committee today. This committee has signaled that it values the voices of those of us who are experts in our fields. For this opportunity, I am grateful.

In preparation for my testimony, I have read the initial drafts of the Literacy bill, the current draft, the AOE's November 2017 Expanding and Strengthening Best Practice Supports for Students Who Struggle, and the AOE's Blueprint for Early Literacy Comprehensive System of Services, PreK through Third Grade (July 2019). Today I draw, in part, from research and policy statements compiled by both the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Literacy Association in regard to balanced approaches to Reading Education and struggling readers. I also take from the Handbook of Learning Disabilities to support Castleton University's address of Dyslexia and reading instruction in our education programs. I note that these professional organizations are not evidenced in any of the reporting on best practices in reading instruction and students who struggle represented here.

While what I share today about how we prepare teachers is focused on K-3 reading preparation we have designed for our Castleton students, it is important note that we have created a parallel structure at the secondary level for those planning to teach discipline-specific courses. At Castleton, our students major in the liberal arts and license at either the elementary or secondary level. And at either level, our students may endorse in Special Education. Our licensure programs are 42 credits, twelve of which are designated for student teaching.

From the remaining 30 credits, we have carved out six dedicated reading, writing, and special education credits, which, at the elementary level, are facilitated through a Reading-Writing Classroom course and an Elementary Special Education course that we stack together on a Tuesday, Thursday schedule from 9:30 to 12:15. The Reading-Writing course is built on the principles of constructivist theories of learning and socially mediated knowledge. We work through the ranges of instructional practices associated with the traditional components of Reading: Phonemic Awareness; Phonics; Vocabulary; Fluency; and Comprehension. Both courses are built on the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which provides a framework through which to think through and break down barriers to learning through carefully designed learning opportunities that support multiple pathways toward successful learning.

While Dr. Linda Pepler, our newly retired Special Educator and Speech Pathologist, and I designed these courses to be co-taught, which we began to do when our department was twice its size in 2016, I am now fortunate to work with our colleague Dr. Leigh-Ann Brown, who is also a Special Educator. Dr. Brown specializes in Childhood Studies and is currently specializing in Applied Behavior Analysis. Dr. Brown's courses are guided by the principles of behavior and do indeed adhere to the systematic and explicit instruction. Direct instruction--which is both explicit and systematic--plays a large role in our Elementary Special Education course. We think the beauty of these back to back courses is that their design exposes students to ways in which reading can be taught so meet the individual needs of students. Although we have yet to hire a replacement for Linda Pepler and Dr. Brown is taking up most of our special education courses, Leigh-Ann still manages to find occasional times to co-teach with me as we build connections and scaffolds across our reading, writing, and special education coursework in order to teach our future teachers to support all of our learners.

Essential to our courses is that we co-supervise our students in their reading-writing and special education fieldwork at Mettawee Community School in West Pawlet, VT, where we partner with K-6 classroom teachers who have been deemed highly effective reading teachers by their excellent Principal Brooke Debonis. Principal Debonis is visionary in the professional development she provides for her teaching staff in that she utilizes PD for sustained study over time rather than one-off sessions. As such, when we began our reading writing and special education field work with Mettawee back in 2016, we initially worked with two 1st and 2nd grade Mettawee teachers because they are the teacher-leaders in the workshop model of teaching reading and writing at Mettawee.

Today we work at Mettawee Community School with up to five excellent teachers of reading and writing who facilitate learning through the workshop model. This model is designed to cycle through instruction and assessment of reading behaviors in both small groups and with individuals in order to keep a close eye on progress monitoring, instructional goals, and possible interventions needed for each student. Additionally, our students have the benefit of working with the special educator who is assigned to these classrooms. Dr. Brown, the special educators, the classroom teachers, and I help our students identify areas of struggles their reading and writing group members may encounter and help to brainstorm strategies they can utilize to support the learner's access to print text.

Each semester, our students are paired with a mentor teacher and assigned to a heterogeneously grouped foursome of elementary students, chosen for their varied strengths and challenges as readers and writers. Over the course of ten trips, our students, their Mettawee mentor teachers, and we collaborate to support the facilitation of reading, writing, and assessment activities we learn about both in our coursework and with the support of our classroom teachers. Our students learn to design learning experiences through UDL in order to provide for all of the learners in our small groups.

Our goal is to prepare analytic teachers who closely observe young readers and writers for what they can teach us about what they know about how print works and to be adept at scaffolding support where young readers struggle and as well as to prepare enrichment opportunities to feed their curiosities. Our students learn to take fieldnotes of these observations they make during the sessions they facilitate through either a planned literacy activity or assessment with their small group. Our students' utilize these notes, course readings, and mentor input to produce a Child Case Study as their final outcome where they demonstrate their preparation, analysis, and

reflection of student reading and writing behaviors across all students, which a deeper concentration on one student who is typically identified as a struggling reader.

We want our teachers to be complex thinkers when they consider their students' reading capacities. From the syllabus:

The purpose of this Reading-Writing Classroom course is to offer practical advice on how to manage and monitor learning through the design of appropriate curricula, considering the Common Core Standards, the organization of the classroom, and the development of methods of assessment and evaluation; each posits different roles for teachers in the networks of groups interested in literacy education; and each provides hierarchies of knowledge and practices which preservice teachers and children should develop in order to participate in their world around them. Rather than simple alternatives to educational practice, these visions and their respective ways of teaching literacy represent different futures for children and society (Reading-Writing Classroom Syllabus, 2020).

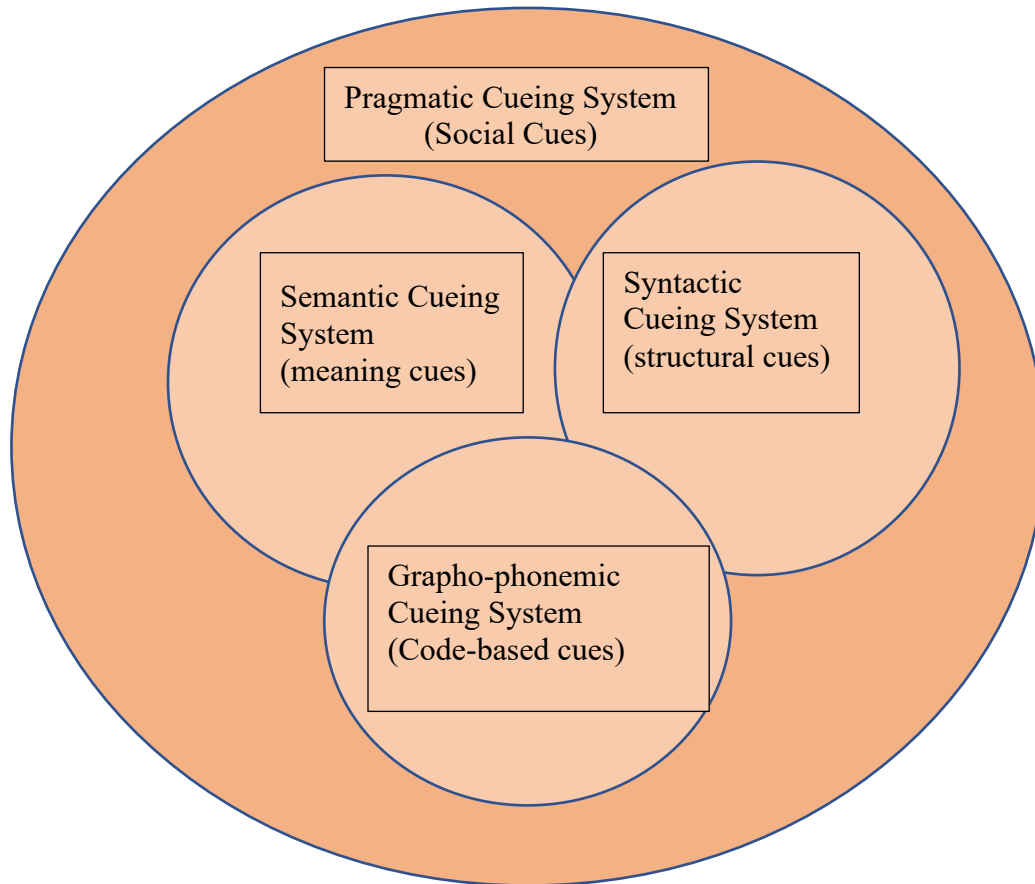
We do not teach programs or one specific way to teach reading. We do teach our students to be consumers of knowledge as well as producers. With all of the rhetoric of the "Science of Reading" as the only way to teach reading, there actually isn't a consensus about the best way to teach reading, even with students who live with dyslexia. From the Handbook of Learning Disabilities:

The environment, language, and reading disorders reflect the complexities of individual differences, the impact of early atypicalities upon subsequent brain development, and the role of both critical periods and cultural factors as they impact the growing organism. Much as a log jam alters the flow of the river and causes collateral pathways and pools, each brain's unique development forces us to respect that there will never be a singular cause or treatment for dyslexia (2014, p. 28; Nicholls, 2010, P. 78).

We want our future teachers to have open hearts and flexible minds in their approaches to analyzing an individual student's reading behaviors based on multiple access points. In my experience working with local elementary teachers and their principals, our students are apprenticing with just these kinds of mentor teachers.

If we adhere to the research on Explicit and Systematic Phonics instruction, our coursework must address the belief that we have control of sound-letter relationships before making sense of print. The AOE's 2019 Blueprint for Early Literacy Comprehensive System of Services, Pre-K through Third Grade does recognize an interrelationship between what they call "code-based skills" and "meaning-based skills." The report states, "To become readers, children must develop two broad sets of skills: 'code-based' skills and 'meaning-based' skills. Code-based skills include the ability to map letters to their respective sounds and in combination to read words. Meaning-based skills include understanding the meaning of text, or comprehension and include oral language use and vocabulary. To be a competent reader, code-based skills are necessary but not independently sufficient" (p. 14). Rather than juxtaposing these two codes, we teach these concepts as interdependent Cueing Systems: Grapho-phonemic, Semantic, Syntactic, and Pragmatic.

Four Interdependent Cueing Systems



My career as a literacy educator is now spanning 30 years. In graduate school I had the benefit of learning from some of the premier critical theorists of our time. They taught me to read the competing interests of different stakeholder perspectives and how they play out on student learning. While much else that concerned me about the upcoming bill has been revised out or will be revised out like the title, which will be amended at passage, my caution to us as a state is to be mindful about the implications of the terms we utilize because they signal our political relationship to reading education. The District Management Group commissioned by Vermont's Agency of Education found that excellent reading teachers are who we need to educate our children. Institutions of Higher Education can and should be instrumental toward this end and if adjacent schools become "sister schools" to each other in sharing staff support for reading classrooms, we in higher education have what it takes to become their "mother school," in supporting the educational needs of excellent reading teachers and special educators.

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