

Areas of Research and Scholarship Excellence

Area Title: Developing and Supporting Evidence-Based K-8 Literacy Instruction

Participating Departments and Disciplines:

- Special Education and Child Development (SPCD)
- Reading and Elementary Education (REEL)
- Disciplines Represented: elementary reading, secondary reading, elementary writing, secondary writing, disciplinary literacy, assessment and data-based decision making, teacher professional development in literacy at pre-service and in-service levels, academic year literacy, and summer literacy.

Names of Organizers: Kristen Beach (SPCD), Erin FitzPatrick (SPCD), Erin Washburn (REEL)

Target Category: Future Opportunity and Investment

Keywords: literacy, reading, writing, professional development, education

Executive Summary

Literacy, a core goal of education, is “the ability to read, write, spell, listen, and speak in ways that enable communication, promote understanding of ideas, and enrich lives” (Moats, 2000). To achieve literacy, young readers require support in foundational reading skills, such as learning to: hear and manipulate sounds; read words, sentences, and longer texts; and understand what is read. Young writers require support in handwriting, spelling, genre knowledge, ideation, planning, translation of ideas to paper, drafting, editing, and revision. As learners engage with content-heavy texts in upper-elementary and middle school, they must read and understand complex and technical words, apply strategies for general and discipline-specific text comprehension, and engage in writing to express and generate knowledge.

Developing and supporting literate children in K-8 public schooling requires the existence of, knowledge about, professional development for, and use of evidence-based practices (EBP) in literacy. EBP are practices with strong evidence of positive student outcomes. Evidence is accumulated through a series of experimental research studies with positive findings. EBP in literacy play a critical role in developing and supporting literate children.

Though much is known about how to support literacy development, not all students receive high-quality literacy instruction (i.e., EBP) nor do all students develop strong literacy skills. The United States and the State of North Carolina have illiteracy rates of 21% and 14% respectively (NCES, 2020). The challenge of illiteracy costs the nation in excess of \$230 billion tax dollars annually and caused the National Institutes of Health to declare illiteracy a national health crisis. Moreover, students living in poverty who fail to read at grade level early are four times less likely to finish high school (AERA, 2011); the same child in poverty is thirteen times less likely to graduate on time than a proficient peer.

The work of this Research Cluster (RC) centers on the development, adoption, and sustained use of EBP in K-8 literacy to address the disparities in employment opportunities and widening income inequality, particularly for minoritized learners, related to unequal access to educational opportunity. Through existing independent and collaborative research, as well as emerging areas of research and collaboration, faculty address four broad areas:

(1) **Pre-service teacher training and support:** RC faculty prepare educators in the delivery of EBP in literacy. Areas of scholarship include a published evaluation of COED Teacher Preparation Redesign efforts, the development/evaluation of a literacy assessment course (\$6,946.20 internal funding), and the development/scaling up of a pre-service-teacher supported tutoring program serving learners in under-resourced schools.

(2) **In-service teacher professional development and support:** RC faculty support and study the adoption and delivery of EBP by in-service (i.e., employed) teachers. Scholarship includes five book chapters, two technical reports, and fourteen peer-reviewed manuscripts.

(3) **Summer-literacy experiences:** RC faculty design and evaluate summer literacy programs to support needs of underserved students. Faculty secured \$110,000 to support a Summer Reading Camp (SRC) and have published four peer-reviewed articles. In 2021, faculty will host and study a new science and literacy summer camp for Black middle school girls.

(4) **Development of EBP to support upper-elementary and middle-school literacy:** EBP for upper-elementary and adolescent learners are less well-established than those for elementary-aged learners. RC faculty have designed and supported implementation of EBP in general reading and the integration of literacy in disciplinary learning. These efforts have resulted in over \$1.2 million of federal funding, 24 peer-reviewed publications, and four book chapters.

Evidence of Strength and Excellence

Our RC deserves recognition and support in the category of Future Opportunity and Investment. We are five early- to mid-career researchers across two departments within the Cato COED. It is noteworthy that we have been employed as faculty in higher education for only two to ten years (median = four years), yet demonstrate exceptional productivity and future promise. Over the past five years, collectively this team has published 77 journal articles, book chapters, and books; delivered 130 presentations at regional, national, and international conferences; produced 15 technical reports, professional development reports, or other research reports; developed 3 papers commissioned to synthesize research initiatives, identify future directions for research, and inform nationally convened committees; submitted 23 proposals for external grants; received \$3,119,921 in internal and external grant funding; and received 18 awards for research, mentoring, teaching, and service. Collectively, the group has advised 12 doctoral-level students and 46 master's level students, co-published 20 times with doctoral students, and secured over \$1.2 million in leadership grant funding for doctoral student support.

Our collective expertise, as well as established and forthcoming collaborative efforts and productivity, is aligned with a trajectory toward national prominence. Through continued and supported efforts, we have the potential to win additional substantial external funding, obtain international attention, and to attract additional promising faculty and doctoral students to UNC Charlotte. The work of this RC has evolved in a short period of time in our four key areas:

(1) Pre-service teacher training and support. Participating RC faculty members enhance pre-service teacher training through designing, implementing, and revising undergraduate and graduate-level courses focused on using EBP in literacy assessment and instruction. This team has placed a specific emphasis on the creation, evaluation, and refinement of coursework that includes relevant and rigorous fieldwork for pre-service teachers. For example, Dr. Beach evaluated the COED Teacher Preparation Redesign efforts, resulting in two presentations and one article publication. Drs. Washburn, Gesel, and Fitzgerald developed an elementary literacy assessment course and were awarded internal funding to study course design and implementation (\$6,946.20). Building on this work, Drs. Gesel and FitzPatrick developed and are currently scaling up a pre-service teacher supported tutoring program serving a local school with high needs. Additional scholarship in this area is emerging.

(2) In-service teacher professional development (PD) and supports. All faculty involved in this RC have extensive experience at the district, state, and national levels designing, implementing, and researching PD opportunities for adoption and delivery of literacy EBP for Grades K-8. At the local level, Dr. Beach has trained 360 local educators in an evidence-based literacy intervention since 2016 and provides ongoing PD support to educators throughout the state of NC. At the state and national levels, Drs. Fitzgerald and Washburn have led the creation, implementation, and research of large-scale PD focused on literacy for K-5 literacy educators and leaders in Michigan, New York State, and large urban districts across the United States. At a national level, Dr. Gesel works with the federally funded National Center for Intensive Intervention (NCII) to develop PD materials related to expanding teachers' capacity to deliver effective intensive literacy interventions across academic and behavioral domains. Dr. FitzPatrick serves as an expert in writing research on the International Literacy Association's Writing Task Force that synthesizes writing research and provides guidance to in-service teachers. She and a talented team provided PD to nearly 1,200 teachers in 2020, integrated the work with UNC Charlotte student experiences, and are resubmitting an external grant to support

the work (planned 2021). Scholarship across RC faculty and related to this area includes 14 peer-reviewed manuscripts, five book chapters, and 11 technical or other research reports.

(3) Summer-literacy experiences. Summer learning loss is a well-documented phenomenon, affecting mostly historically underserved populations, that refers to students' regression of academic skills during summer. To address this issue, RC faculty are involved in development and evaluation of two summer literacy camps designed to support the needs of underserved students. Dr. Beach developed the SRC in 2016 in partnership with the local school district and six community organizations to provide elementary children with EBP in literacy. In its fifth year and during the COVID-19 pandemic, Drs. Washburn and Gesel joined Dr. Beach to design a new virtual format. Since most other reading camp experiences were cancelled, this speaks to the RC's nimbleness and dedication to mitigating and studying summer learning loss. Dr. Fitzgerald joins the team in 2021. SRC has resulted in \$110,000 in funding from local foundations, four collaborative peer-reviewed manuscripts, and local media attention. In 2021, Dr. FitzPatrick and UNC Charlotte colleagues will host and study the implementation of a new science and literacy summer camp for Black middle school girls.

(4) Development of EBP to support upper-elementary and middle-school literacy. The final area of emphasis for this RC focuses on investigating and supporting use of research-supported practices and EBP for intermediate-grade learners in upper-elementary and middle school. RC faculty have designed and supported implementation of EBP in general reading and the integration of literacy in disciplinary learning, including disciplinary literacy. These efforts have resulted in over \$1.4 million in federal funding, 24 peer-reviewed publications, and four book chapters. As examples, Dr. Fitzgerald recently served on a team, convened and funded by the National Academy of Education, to synthesize the scholarship produced by the centers funded through IES's Reading for Understanding Initiative. Dr. Beach served as co-PI on a federally funded grant (2016-2019) where she developed and tested academic vocabulary instruction for middle school students with learning disabilities. RC faculty plan future collaborative efforts in this area.

Existing and Emerging Collaborations

As evidenced above, RC faculty are engaged in collaborative efforts, especially in the areas of pre-service teacher preparation (Area 1) and summer literacy experiences (Area 3). Efforts toward in-service professional development (Area 2) and development of EBP to support older students (Area 4) have been made individually and are areas of emerging collaborations.

Use of Resources

It is the goal of this RC to establish a center for evidence-based instruction in K-8 literacy at UNC Charlotte. Several reading centers housed in large universities exist throughout the nation (e.g., the Florida Center for Reading Research), however, the nation has yet to realize a literacy center that gives comparable attention to reading *and* writing, or attention across elementary *and* middle school. In this way, our proposed literacy center sets itself apart on the national scale, and our individual expertise and scholarship combine synergistically to support this multifaceted focus. The center would provide professional development, engage in collaborative research, and secure external grants to support research and operations. This goal is supported by both SPCD and REEL department chairs, as well as the Dean of the Cato COED. R1 Commission resources would support scale-up efforts of in-progress collaborative work, and strengthen RC faculty collaboration. Support would expedite the development of the center. This could be done through support for development and securing of external grants, resources to support post-doctoral scholars, and graduate assistantships and programs at the doctoral level.

Alignment with Regional and National Priorities

Our focus on establishing a center for evidence-based instruction in K-8 literacy aligns with regional, national, and international priorities. The priorities of local school districts and nonprofit organizations speak to the need for such a center, particularly given North Carolina's 14% illiteracy rate. *READ Charlotte's* work, for example, centers on building reading skills so that 80% of children read proficiently by the end of third grade. Similarly, the *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools* call literacy their "North Star" and have a demonstrated commitment to supporting literacy district-wide. Our research priorities align with and complement these regional priorities in ways that have allowed us to develop collaborative partnerships already (e.g., Summer Reading Camp, Virtual Reading Tutoring Clinical Experience; writing-focused PD) and provides strong promise for future development. Our collective expertise and areas of scholarship support important areas of expansion to these existing priorities.

At the state-level, our research area is closely aligned with policies from the *North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI)*, and *NC State Board of Education (NCSBE)*, both of which have priorities around building teachers' capacities for literacy instruction. Additionally, our work aligns with the *NCDPI Read to Achieve initiative*, which seeks to improve students' literacy outcomes through EBP in literacy. It also aligns with *NC State Improvement Project*, which centers on improving instruction for students with disabilities and includes teacher professional development series related to topics such as Reading Foundations and online resources related to a range of topics (e.g., literacy coaching and adolescent reading). Finally, our work aligns with the priorities of an *April 2020 Board of Governors' Resolution on Teacher Preparation*, which called for the UNC System to develop a UNC System Literacy Framework to guide teacher preparation programs across the state in preparing teaching candidates to implement effective EBP in literacy.

These statewide initiatives and our work can be situated within recent national conversations pushing for increased emphasis on the "*Science of Reading*," including integration of sciences of reading and writing, in teacher preparation and professional development. For example, our research area closely aligns with federal Department of Education policies such as the *Early Literacy Initiative*, which centers on foundational (K-3) EBP in reading. Similarly, our area aligns with the work of national commissions focused on more advanced reading skills (e.g., National Academy of Education's *Reaping the Rewards of the Reading for Understanding Initiative*, a literature review produced to synthesize the Institute of Education Sciences' \$125 million effort to advance the research base on reading comprehension). Our areas of excellence and future development may be couched within these broader national priorities, which further demonstrates the potential for our work to significantly advance the research reputation of the university.

Importantly, our research area also supports the *priorities of the university*. UNC Charlotte's mission statement emphasizes community engagement and specifically notes a commitment to the greater Charlotte region's needs in areas such as education. Looking to the future, UNC Charlotte's vision statement outlines the ways that the university wishes to increase the accessibility of learning on campus and in the greater community as a means for meaningful collaboration aligned with regional needs and priorities. Our existing impact in the local region and the alignment of our continuing and emerging research areas and priorities with those of local schools and organizations provides an avenue through which we will continue to support the university's vision.

Supporting Documents

Research Cluster Participating Faculty Names, Titles, and Brief Areas of Expertise

Name	Title	Area of Expertise
Kristen Beach	Associate Professor of Special Education	Early and adolescent reading development and intervention; summer literacy experiences
Miranda Fitzgerald	Assistant Professor of Reading and Elementary Education	Intermediate-grade literacy development and instruction; integration of language literacy and disciplinary instruction
Erin FitzPatrick	Assistant Professor of Special Education	Evidence-based practices for writing instruction, Grades 3-8; practice-based professional development
Samantha Gesel	Assistant Professor of Special Education	Evidence-based practices for reading intervention and assessment; data-based decision-making
Erin Washburn	Associate Professor of Reading and Elementary Education	Early and adolescent literacy assessment and intervention; literacy teacher preparation and professional learning

Research Cluster Faculty Contributions/Expertise

Kristen Beach

Dr. Kristen Beach brings 18 years of experience working with PreK-12 learners in schools in both teaching and research capacities. Dr. Beach is an expert in elementary and adolescent literacy. She co-developed the summer reading camp (SRC) in 2016, directed the SRC in 2019, 2020, and 2021. She has co-published 17 peer-reviewed articles/chapters in literacy, 11 other research reports supporting school-based literacy implementation, and has secured more than \$1.9 million dollars in grants to support her research in adolescent literacy, and \$1.2 million to support doctoral scholarship via a Leadership Grant. Dr. Beach serves on the executive board of the Division for Learning Disabilities, an internationally recognized organization. Her current interests are in the areas of supporting schools to sustain use of EBP in literacy and in developing and supporting EBP in literacy for middle school students.

Miranda Fitzgerald

Dr. Miranda Fitzgerald has 13 years of experience working with intermediate-grade learners through teaching and research. Her work involves three central concerns: the potential benefits of learning environments that integrate language literacy and disciplinary instruction, features of instruction that support the development of vocabulary and reading comprehension, and

strategies that support pre- and in-service teachers to learn and use research-supported instructional practices in literacy. She has co-published 11 peer-reviewed articles/chapters and 2 commissioned papers focused on literacy instruction, as well as 2 technical reports to support professional development in literacy. She has worked with pre- and in-service teachers and educational leaders in various capacities, including designing and teaching literacy methods courses, designing and delivering professional development for educators and instructional leaders, and serving as a consultant to education and policy organizations.

Erin FitzPatrick

Dr. Erin FitzPatrick served as a journalist with the Department of Defense and later as a teacher in public schools for eleven years before moving into academia. She brings these writing and teaching expertise to research writing strategies and interventions effective with learners in both general and special education settings as well as professional development models which support implementation with high fidelity. She has co-published 17 peer-reviewed articles/chapters addressing literacy instruction and/or professional development to support literacy instruction and a research advisory of the International Literacy Association. She serves on the International Literacy Association's Writing Task Force as well as the editorial board for *Learning Disabilities: Research and Practice*.

Sam Gesel

Dr. Sam Gesel has worked with children with or at-risk for disabilities in clinical and school-based settings for the past 13 years, through both teaching and reading experiences. Dr. Gesel is an expert in intensive reading interventions and data-based decision-making frameworks to support teachers in intensifying and individualizing reading instruction when student data indicate inadequate response to interventions. She has co-published 14 peer-reviewed articles/book chapters in literacy or data-based decision-making. She also serves in advisory roles for the National Center on Leadership in Intensive Intervention, a consortium for doctoral students in special education, and the National Center on Intensive Intervention, a technical assistance center related to expanding teachers' capacity to deliver effective intensive interventions across academic and behavioral domains.

Erin Washburn

Dr. Erin Washburn has worked with PreK-12 learners, teachers, and educational leaders in teaching, research, and leadership capacities for the past two decades. Dr. Washburn's research is focused on literacy teacher preparation, inservice teacher professional learning, and the efficacy of school-based literacy interventions. She has co-published 32 peer-reviewed articles/chapters in literacy, many with graduate students and inservice teachers. Dr. Washburn has developed, directed, or co-directed after school and summer reading programs in partnership with K-12 schools. She has also served as a literacy consultant at the district, state, and national levels including her role as a working board member of the Center for Effective Reading Instruction (CERI) for the International Dyslexia Association. Dr. Washburn is also the Associate Editor of the international journal for Learning Disabilities Worldwide, *Learning Disabilities: A Contemporary Journal*.