PPAL Conference May 15, 2026
Participant Handout: Building Literacy Through Evidence-Based Practice
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Workshop Description: This workshop builds foundational understanding of how children learn to read, how reading difficulties may present differently across learners, and practical evidence-based strategies to support struggling readers.

Workshop Objectives: Following this training, participants will understand:

- How children learn to read, including the foundational cognitive, linguistic, and neurological processes involved in reading development.
- The characteristics and early signs of reading difficulties, including dyslexia, and how these may present differently across learners and classroom contexts.
- The relationship between phonological awareness, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, language comprehension, and reading comprehension.
- How reading difficulties may affect student confidence, engagement, behavior, and academic identity.
- The role of evidence-based instruction, structured literacy practices, and data-informed decision-making in supporting struggling readers.
- The importance of emotionally safe, culturally responsive, and strengths-based instructional environments.
- Practical instructional strategies that support literacy development for diverse learners, including Black, Latino, multilingual learners, students with learning differences and disabilities.

Key Concepts Discussed During the Workshop

Reading Is Not a Natural Process: Human beings are biologically wired for spoken language, but reading is not an innate developmental process. Reading requires explicit instruction and the coordination of multiple cognitive and linguistic systems. Fluent reading develops when students learn to efficiently connect sounds, symbols, language structures, and meaning. Research in neuroscience demonstrates that skilled reading involves coordinated activity across several brain regions responsible for word recognition, phonological processing, language comprehension, and speech production.

Dyslexia Is a Language-Based Learning Difference: Dyslexia is primarily associated with difficulties involving phonological processing, decoding, word recognition, spelling, and reading fluency. Dyslexia is not caused by low intelligence, lack of motivation, poor parenting, or visual problems. Students with dyslexia often demonstrate significant strengths in reasoning, creativity, problem-solving, oral language, or conceptual thinking while simultaneously struggling with accurate and automatic word reading. Dyslexia may present differently across learners. Some

students demonstrate obvious decoding difficulties early in school, while others may initially compensate through strong memory, oral language, or contextual guessing strategies.

Reading Difficulties Do Not Always Look the Same: Students with reading difficulties may present in different ways depending on their language background, instructional experiences, cognitive strengths, emotional responses, and support systems. Some students may:

- struggle to decode words accurately,
- read slowly and laboriously,
- avoid reading tasks,
- demonstrate strong verbal comprehension despite weak decoding,
- exhibit behavioral frustration,
- appear inattentive or disengaged,
- rely heavily on memorization or guessing,
- or demonstrate comprehension difficulties despite adequate decoding skills.

Reading difficulties may also be misunderstood in multilingual learners when language development needs are confused with reading disabilities. Effective evaluation requires attention to language exposure, instruction, and cultural responsiveness.

The Importance of Phonological Awareness: Phonological awareness refers to the ability to recognize and manipulate sounds in spoken language. This includes rhyming, blending sounds, segmenting sounds, deleting sounds, and manipulating phonemes. Strong phonological awareness supports decoding and word recognition development. Difficulties in phonological processing are among the most common indicators associated with dyslexia and reading difficulties.

Automaticity and Cognitive Load: Reading comprehension depends partly on automaticity. When students must devote substantial cognitive energy to decoding individual words, fewer cognitive resources remain available for comprehension, inference-making, and higher-order thinking. Evidence-based instruction helps students build fluency and automatic word recognition so that cognitive resources can increasingly support comprehension and meaning-making.

Reading Comprehension Involves Multiple Processes: Reading comprehension is not determined solely by decoding ability. Successful comprehension depends on:

- decoding accuracy,
- fluency,
- vocabulary knowledge,
- language comprehension,
- background knowledge,
- syntax,

- and working memory.

Students may struggle with reading comprehension for different reasons, which is why instructional approaches must be responsive to individual student needs.

Emotion, Stress, and Learning: Emotional regulation and learning are closely connected. Stress, anxiety, stereotype threat, repeated academic failure, and fear of embarrassment can significantly affect student engagement and performance. Students who experience repeated difficulty with reading may develop avoidance behaviors, disengagement, low self-confidence, or behavioral responses that mask underlying academic frustration. Emotionally safe and supportive instructional environments increase students' willingness to take academic risks and persist through challenges.

Structured Literacy and Evidence-Based Practice: Structured literacy approaches emphasize:

- explicit instruction,
- systematic sequencing,
- cumulative skill development,
- diagnostic teaching,
- multisensory learning,
- and frequent opportunities for guided practice.

Research consistently supports explicit and systematic instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension for many struggling readers. Instruction should be responsive, flexible, and informed by student performance data.

Suggested Reading and References: Foundational Texts

Moats, L. C. (2020). Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science. American Educator. A foundational overview of the knowledge teachers need to provide effective literacy instruction, including phonology, decoding, structured literacy, and language development.

Moats, L. C. (2020). Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers. Brookes Publishing. An in-depth exploration of the linguistic foundations of reading instruction and the relationship between oral language and written language.

Seidenberg, M. (2017). Language at the Speed of Sight. Basic Books. A cognitive science perspective explaining how reading develops, why misconceptions persist, and why evidence-based literacy instruction matters.

Additional Recommended References

Shaywitz, S. (2003). Overcoming Dyslexia. Alfred A. Knopf. A widely recognized resource explaining the neuroscience of dyslexia, common characteristics, assessment considerations, and evidence-based interventions.

Kilpatrick, D. A. (2015). Essentials of Assessing, Preventing, and Overcoming Reading Difficulties. Wiley. An accessible and research-based text emphasizing phonological processing, word recognition, assessment, and intervention practices.

Ehri, L. C. (2005). Learning to Read Words: Theory, Findings, and Issues. Scientific Studies of Reading. Explores how students develop word reading skills and the role of orthographic mapping in fluent reading.

Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting Early Language and Literacy to Later Reading Disabilities. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), Handbook of Early Literacy Research. Introduces the Scarborough Reading Rope framework, emphasizing the interaction between word recognition and language comprehension.

Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (1998). Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children. National Academy Press. A landmark report synthesizing research on reading development, prevention, intervention, and early literacy instruction.

Wolf, M. (2007). Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain. Harper. Examines the neuroscience and history of reading development and how the brain adapts to literacy.

Sousa, D. A. (2022). How the Brain Learns to Read. Corwin Press. Explores connections between neuroscience and literacy instruction with practical educational applications.

International Dyslexia Association. Structured Literacy: Effective Instruction for Students with Dyslexia and Related Reading Difficulties. Provides guidance regarding structured literacy principles and evidence-based practices.

National Reading Panel. (2000). Teaching Children to Read. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. A comprehensive synthesis of research regarding effective reading instruction practices.