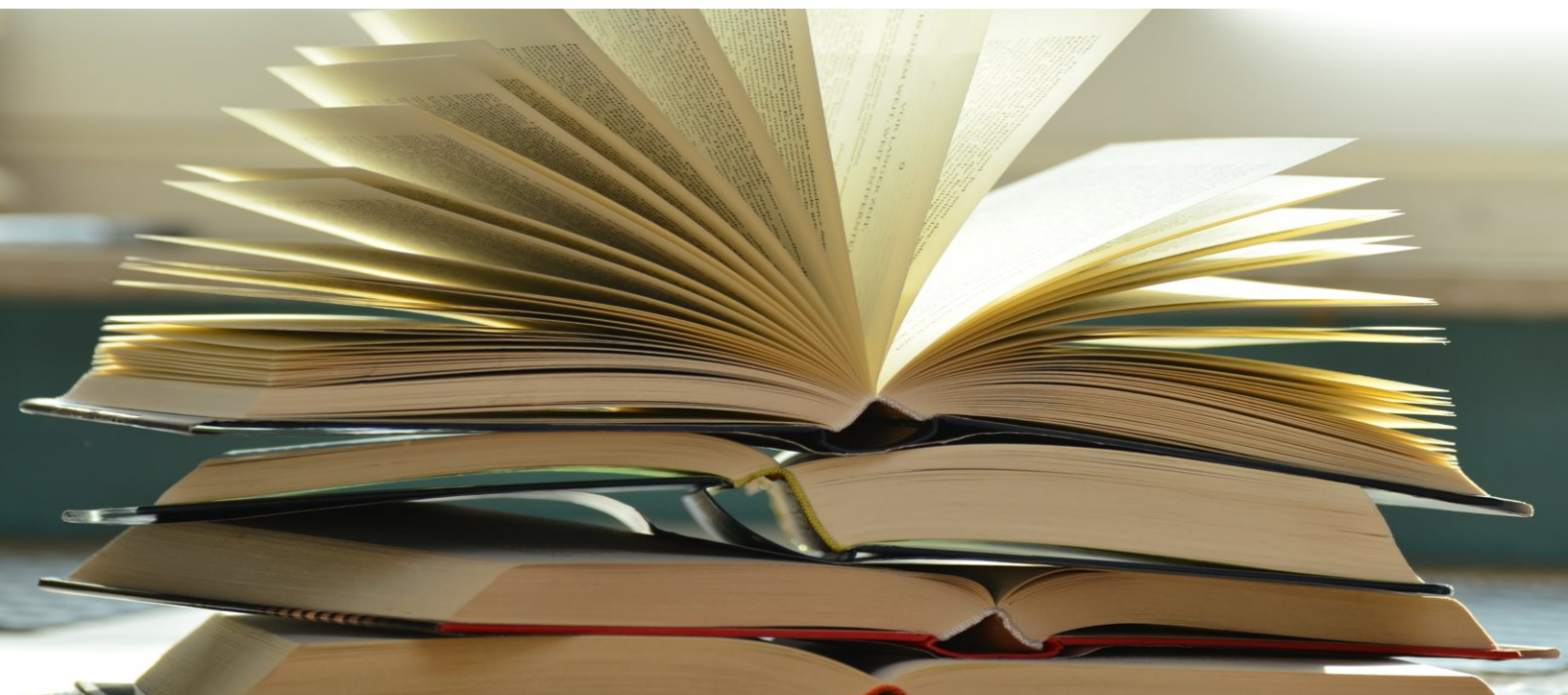


A MULTI-SENSORY STRUCTURED LANGUAGE COURSE FOR CLASSROOM TEACHERS

*Exploring Educators' Practices and
Perceptions of their Professional Learning
in Reading*



Summary Report

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SUMMARY

Teaching reading requires considerable knowledge and skill acquired over several years, and while communities and families contribute to students' reading success, teachers are the most influential forces for delivering high-quality reading programs. Professional development (PD) opportunities in reading enable teachers to augment their current curriculum content and pedagogical knowledge and can have a powerful effect on their practice and, ultimately, on student learning.

This qualitative study explored teachers' perceptions of reading development and instruction from nine elementary educators enrolled in a targeted PD course. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted: prior to the start of the PD course, following the course, and approximately 5 months following the course. An inductive approach to analysis resulted in four main themes: seeking out new knowledge, evolving definitions of reading, transformative learning moments, and increases in self-efficacy for teaching reading. Individual profiles also stem from the analysis and share the stories of two participants' professional learning experiences over the 6-month period. In addition, specific feedback about the course content and structure resulted from the analysis.

Overall, this study illustrates the transformative power a targeted PD course can have on teachers' perceptions of reading. Understanding teachers' perceptions of their PD in reading can contribute to the development and refinement of professional learning experiences.

BACKGROUND

The literature documenting reading development is extensive (Castles, Rastles, & Nation, 2018) and a range of reviews reveal a strong scientific consensus about the importance of including a specific set of skills related to language comprehension (e.g., phonological awareness) and print (e.g., phonics) in all beginning reading programs (Castles et al., 2018; Hjetland et al., 2017; National Reading Panel, 2000). Unfortunately, research consistently shows that novice teachers lack the breadth and depth of knowledge required to implement effective reading programs and often feel inadequately equipped to teach reading (Haas-Barota, 2011; Joshi et al., 2009). As a result, in-service teachers continue to seek out professional development opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge about reading development and instruction.

Whether formal or informal, there is a general agreement about the features of effective professional development (PD). Darling-Hammond and her colleagues define effective PD “as structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes” (2017, p. v). Specific features of PD include: content focus, active learning, collaboration, use of models and modeling, coaching and expert support, feedback and reflection, and sustained duration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Given the complexities of reading and the consensus that teaching reading requires considerable knowledge and skill (Castles et al., 2018), it is no surprise that teachers report an ongoing need for PD in reading (Cordingley et al., 2015). This study, therefore, explored educators’ perceptions of reading development and instruction from a group of elementary educators enrolled in a targeted PD course. Understanding educators’ perceptions of their PD can contribute to the development and refinement of professional learning experiences. Additionally, hearing directly from educators about their learning experiences contributes to a more comprehensive picture of the needs, values, and goals of practicing teachers.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

1. To document classroom teachers' and professional educators' perceptions of their reading program.
2. To understand how their perceptions are influenced by a professional development course.
3. To understand how classroom teachers and professional educators incorporate what they have learned from a professional development course into their practice.

METHODOLOGY

STUDY CONTEXT

The Reading Clinic is a reading organization in Kingston, Ontario. The organization is known for its systematic, sequential, and multisensory one-on-one remediation—their goal is to “close the gap” for students who are reading below grade level and give them the skills they need to achieve academic success. The organization offered teachers and educators a 19-hour PD course in July, 2019. The course covered the principles of structured literacy, specifically the code of the English language, and provided those who enrolled in the course with the knowledge and resources to effectively teach reading to beginning readers.

“The Reading Clinic is Eastern Ontario’s only intensive reading clinic for students with reading difficulties and Dyslexia. Our goal is to teach struggling readers to decode text and attain fluency skills at a grade appropriate level. Providing instruction at a young age is the key to preventing these children from falling further and further behind.”

<https://thereadingclinic.ca/>

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Nine elementary teachers and educational professionals who were enrolled in The Reading Clinic's professional development course participated in the first two interviews. Five of the nine participants were involved in the final follow-up interview. Most participants were currently teaching kindergarten to sixth grade. Two participants were educational professionals directly involved with teaching and assessing K-6 students as well as supporting classroom teachers. Professional experience ranged from 3 years to more than 20. All participants completed informed consent forms.

*Note: Every effort has been made to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of all participants involved in the study. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms and are only accessible by the Principle Investigator. Any references to a specific school or other identifying information has been removed from the dataset.

INTERVIEWS

Three semi-structured interviews involved general questions about participants' reading programs and their professional learning experiences. While the main objective of all three interviews focused on participants' approach to teaching reading, each interview was influenced by the timing of the PD course.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature, where guiding questions were posed to the participants. These questions were meant to be flexible, and prompts and follow-up questions were added when appropriate or when more information about a specific topic was desired. All interviews were conducted by Pamela Beach, the Principle Investigator (PI) of the project. By conducting all of the interviews, the PI was able to build relationships with the participants, possibly contributing to their comfort level during the second and third interviews. Half of the interviews occurred face-to-face at a local coffee shop while the other half occurred over the phone. All interviews were approximately 30-45 minutes.

The main objectives of the *first interview* were to understand teachers' perceptions of their reading programs and the reasons for enrolling in the course. The following questions and prompts guided the first interview.

Demographic Questions

1. Can you tell me about your current position?

Possible Prompts/Questions for follow-up:

- a. How long have you held this position?
- b. What grades do you currently teach or work with?
- c. What grades have you taught/worked with in the past?

Reading Program/Practice

2. Describe your current reading program.

Possible Prompts/Questions for follow-up:

- a. What reading/writing skills do you incorporate into your program?
 - b. Do you incorporate guided reading or small group instruction into your program? How so?
 - c. How would you describe your teaching style?
3. What is your current understanding or definition of reading/reading development?
 4. What types of assessment information do you gather to inform your practice?
 5. What guides your planning process?
 6. What supports do you use when planning for your reading lessons? Why?
 7. What are the biggest challenges to teaching reading?
 8. What are the strengths of your current reading program?
 9. Why did you decide to enroll in the course?
 10. With respect to the upcoming course, what are you most looking forward to? Why?
 11. Do you have experience with multi-sensory structured language (MSSL)?
 - a. Can you describe your experience with MSSL to date?
 - b. What did that look like in your classroom?

c. Where did you learn about it?

Self-Efficacy for Teaching Reading

12. How confident do you feel teaching reading? Why?

13. Do you feel confident/supported meeting the needs of struggling readers? Why do you feel this way?

14. What percentage of struggling readers have you had in previous classes you have taught? What focused intervention have you included for those students?

15. Is there anything else you want to talk about/share?

The purpose of the ***second interview*** was to understand how participants' perceptions of reading development and instruction were influenced by the course. The second interview occurred 1-2 weeks after the PD course. Interview questions were based on a preliminary analysis of the first set of interviews as well as pre-selected questions about participants' general sense of the course. The following questions and prompts guided the second interview.

1. Can you describe the reasons why you decided to enrol in the course?
 2. Can you tell me about the course? What were the main topics, material covered?
 3. How did you feel about the course on day one? Mid way through the course? On the final day of the course?
 4. What did you find most valuable about the course? OR What course material/information resonated with you the most? Why?
 5. What would you change about the course? Why?
 6. Thinking ahead to the beginning of the school year, what are you most excited about trying?
 7. Has your understanding or definition of reading/reading development changed? How so?
 8. Has your confidence for teaching reading changed as a result of this course? Why or why not?
 9. Do you feel confident/supported meeting the needs of struggling readers? Why do you feel this way?
 10. Is there anything else you want to talk about/share?
-

The ***third interview*** occurred between November 28, 2019 and January 21, 2020. Five of the original nine participants responded to the email sent out requesting a meeting time to participate in the final interview. The main objective of the third interview was to understand if and how the participants were incorporating what they learned from the course into their practice. Interview questions were based on a qualitative analysis of the second set of interviews as well as pre-selected questions about participants' current practice. The following questions and prompts guided the third interview.

1. Describe your current reading program.

Possible Prompts/Questions for follow-up:

- a. What reading/writing skills do you incorporate into your program?
 - b. Do you incorporate guided reading or small group instruction into your program? How so?
 - c. How would you describe your teaching style?
2. What is your current understanding or definition of reading/reading development? How has it changed since the beginning of the school year?
 3. Have you been able to incorporate any of the course material into your practice? How so?
 4. What has been the most challenging aspects of trying to incorporate course material into your program?
 5. What types of supports do you/would you use to help you continue to build your reading program?
 6. How confident do you feel teaching reading? Why?
 7. Do you feel confident/supported meeting the needs of struggling readers? Why do you feel this way?
-

DATA ANALYSIS

This study was informed by qualitative methods. The primary aim of qualitative research is to describe, understand, and interpret phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the current study, qualitative methods were used to provide insights into how the participants, as a collective and individually, experienced a targeted professional development course in reading. Data analysis in qualitative research involves reducing the data into themes as a result of repeated coding, comparisons, and categorizations (Creswell, 2007). Our process was iterative and involved multiple meetings between the research team members over the course of the analysis.

Interviews were first transcribed verbatim. They were then entered into NVivo, a qualitative analysis software program. NVivo was chosen for this study because it aids in the organization and management of qualitative data sets.

Participants' thoughts were first unitized, in which meaningful phrases were identified. Initial codes were then discussed, the most relevant ones were categorized and defined, and main themes were selected to represent each category. These main themes provide a collective story of participants' experiences; the main trends across all participants are described. To highlight individual experiences across the three interviews, we include two narratives of participant profiles. Finally, our analysis highlights specific interview questions related to the course. The purpose of including specific responses, particularly related to the second interview, is to provide feedback about the course directly from voices of teachers and educators who participated in The Reading Clinic's PD course.

FINDINGS

THEMES ACROSS PARTICIPANTS



1. Seeking Out New Knowledge

Participants described their desire for new information about how to best teach reading to *all* their students. Participants' motivation to build onto their repertoire of existing knowledge appeared to stem from their experiences working with students, especially students who exhibited difficulties with the basics of reading (e.g., letter-sound associations). Prior to the course, participants felt they were "lacking on where to start"; they noticed that some of their students "were not progressing"; there was an overall sense of "doing a disservice" to their students when it came to teaching reading. A sense of regret and disappointment was expressed by most participants.

For many years most of the participants believed that they were delivering an effective reading program to their students, providing the majority of their students with the tools necessary for growth in reading and writing. For the small percentage of students that the participants couldn't reach with general classroom

instruction, additional support was sought out and usually provided by a special education resource teacher. This seemed to be expected each year.

Turning points for many of the participants occurred when they heard from colleagues and peers about an approach to teaching reading that could successfully reach all students, including the students who struggled. A few participants “just knew” that there was something missing from their reading program and started to independently seek out information online. About half of the participants shared their knowledge related to aspects of structured literacy prior to the start of the course. Regardless of their background experience and knowledge about reading instruction, participants had the desire to pursue their interest in finding out more about how to effectively teach reading to all students.

2. Evolving Definitions of Reading

During the post-course interviews, participants reflected on their misconceptions about reading instruction and how some of their previous practices were ineffective. “They’re like band aid fixes,” one participant described, “it’s not getting to the root of the problem. It’s just slapping on a band aid to get you through that time.” Many of the participants echoed their feelings of regret for accepting that a certain percentage of their students just wouldn’t make the same progress in reading as their peers. Participants mentioned specific reading programs that they were using or that their school board was recommending and that these programs seemed to lack some of the basic tools necessary for reading acquisition. Following the course, participants realized this; they had developed a new knowledge base for the science of reading.

After the course, participants described the basics of reading in greater depth and discussed “the science and structure of the brain and how we process information.” These ideas contributed to participants’ evolving definitions of reading. And components of structured literacy, including phonological and phonemic awareness, and phonics and word recognition were discussed by the participants. They also alluded to the importance of explicit and systematic instruction, that instruction should be cumulative based on the students’ needs, and multisensory, incorporating visual, auditory, and kinesthetic aspects. In addition to referencing structured literacy, participants emphasized how taking a direct approach to

teaching the letter-sound associations, for instance, was a good method for all students, and an approach that was essential for students with dyslexia.

3. Transformative Learning Moments

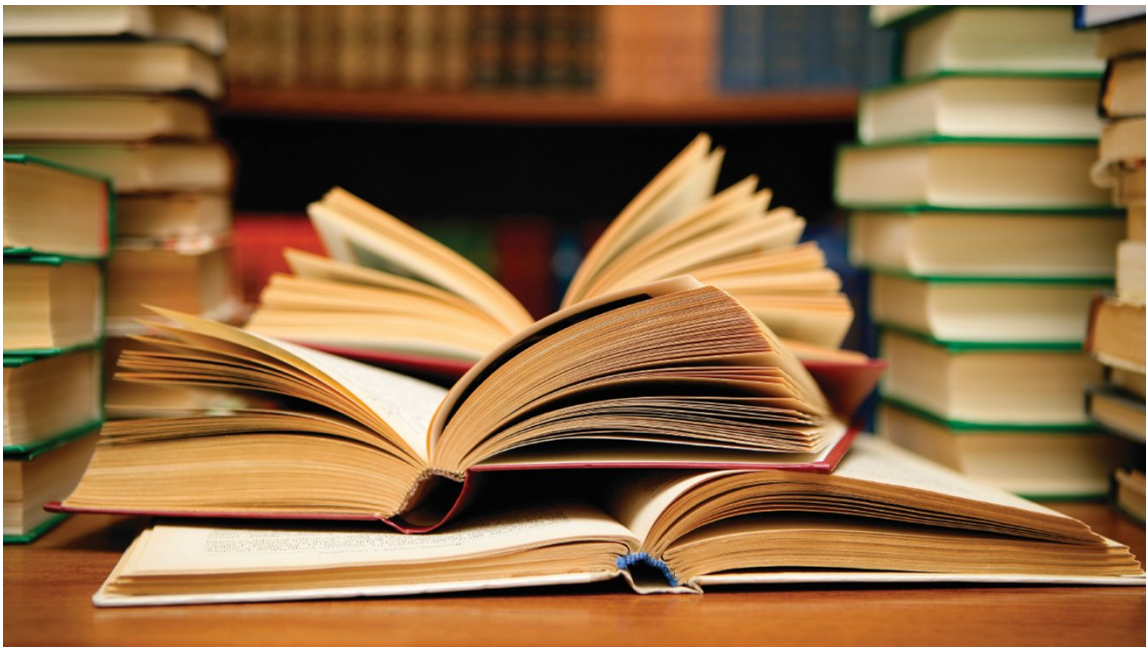
All participants described how the course affected them on an emotional level and that, in part because of their heightened emotions, they experienced transformations in their understanding of reading. While throughout the week “it was definitely a roller coaster of emotions,” participants highlighted the first day as particularly emotional, when many of them realized what their reading programs had been lacking. This was the first of several transformative moments of learning. Discussing in depth the logistics of reading and the rules of English were extremely meaningful. One participant shared: “I know for myself and some other teachers, we didn’t necessarily understand all of the logistics and all of the rules that some have just been taught to us.” After learning about some of the basics of reading and the structure of the English language, participants began to feel empowered; they felt inspired to make changes to their reading programs and realized that they could reach all of their students.

The instructors played a huge role in participants’ learning experiences. They were described as being incredibly effective: “I feel like they gave me this little key for unlocking certain kids’ minds.” The instructors provided in-depth material throughout the course; the course content was rich and offered both breadth and depth of information. The way in which the content was delivered was noted as being especially effective. Participants expressed how the instructors’ engagement with the material, their level of expertise, commitment, and passion for the topic had a tremendous impact on their own transformative learning experiences.

4. Increases in Self-Efficacy for Teaching Reading

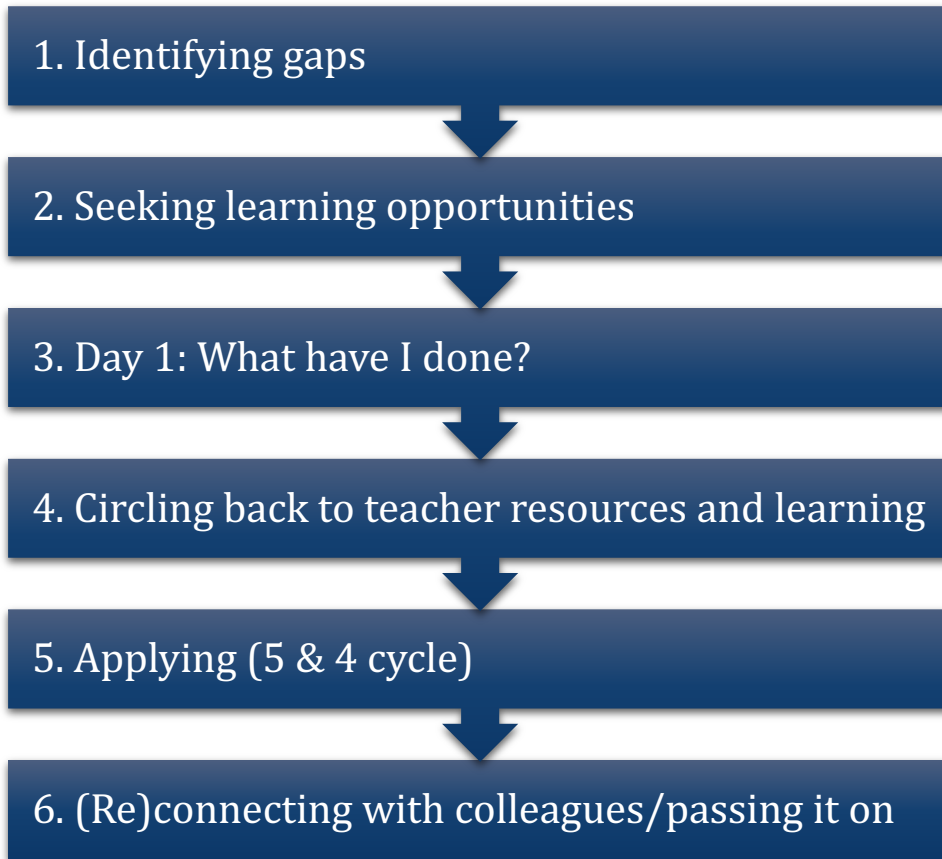
Participants’ self-efficacy for teaching reading appeared to increase as a result of taking the course. One participant described how “at the end [of the course] I was so relieved to know I’ve got this, and I know that I can do this, and if I follow the format that they taught me, it *will* work.” Another participant noted: “I’m really looking forward to being able to implement [the material], it’s going to take some time to get used to it, but I’ll just keep reviewing and reviewing.”

Participants were particularly influenced by one of the guest instructors, a kindergarten teacher who had been implementing structured literacy in her classroom. Hearing directly from a teacher who had tried and tested the strategies with her students seemed to contribute to participants' confidence for implementing the strategies in their own classroom. During the follow-up session participants were invited into this teacher's classroom where they were able to see firsthand the material and classroom set up. The timing of this follow-up session was noted as effective since participants were able to try out some of the strategies before meeting. While the follow-up session was inspiring and a place where the participants could share their success stories, participants also noted that they left the session feeling anxious about what they still felt they needed to do. Most participants realized that modifying their reading program would take time and that with time their confidence and ability would continue to increase. This increase in self-efficacy for teaching reading would be even more solidified with the progress of their students. Witnessing their students' growth in reading seemed to directly contribute to growth in their own confidence.



PROFILES

The first profile presents Rachel's story. Rachel (pseudonym) appeared to go through six phases during her PD experience.



When Rachel completed her B.Ed. six years ago, she immediately began working as a supply teacher. She spent about two years doing emergency supply work, and then she began to be offered occasional positions. Prior to her first conversation with the research team, she had been a Long-Term Occasional teacher in a grade 2 classroom. Her enthusiasm and energy for teaching are strong, and fed by her desire to learn more about literacy instruction so she can truly support her students.

Even prior to signing up for the Reading Clinic course, she had had an epiphany moment about literacy instruction after taking a webinar on research-based literacy practices: “My life’s changed, because that wasn’t ever taught to me. I don’t know if it affects it at all, but I was originally in the Intermediate/Secondary (I/S) stream for the first four years of my degree, so I don’t know if maybe it was taught during the first four years, but it definitely wasn’t taught in the others.” Despite the

sense that she was lacking information, Rachel was not daunted, and instead threw herself into learning as much as she could about literacy instruction and implementing it in her supply teaching assignments. She sometimes wondered if the gaps in her knowledge came from shifting programs from I/S to Primary/Junior (P/J) while in teacher's college, and whenever she spoke of the things she had not learned, she generously assumed that those gaps were things that had been covered in the P/J courses before she shifted gears. Instead of expressing frustration in her lack of preparedness to teach and support early literacy, she began to seek out additional learning. From reaching out to the other teachers in her hallway to reading and building off of the notes left by the previous teacher in her Long Term Occasional position to actively engaging with various Facebook groups for educators and deploying digital resources like GoNoodle, Rachel was already deeply involved in informal professional development before she enrolled in the Reading Clinic course.

Her energy for reading instruction is contagious, and she works hard to foster a love of reading, in part because of her own love of reading, but also because she believes that literacy is "something I can always make super relevant to their lives." However, before enrolling in the course, her descriptions of the literacy strategies she employed indicated that she did not really have a plan for reading instruction, but rather an eagerness to try new things and experiment as she came across resources that deepened her understanding.

She explained her decision to enroll in the Reading Clinic course because "that was actually brought to my attention by a kindergarten teacher in the year that I was doing the LTO, we became really good friends because I was an EA in her class the previous year, so she was talking about it, she was doing some photocopying, with the code, and she was saying I don't know if you've ever heard of this but you need to invest your time in this, it's amazing, it's life changing. [...] I jumped at the opportunity this year because she just sang such high praises. And she said that the differences it's made in her abilities and her kids' abilities has just been astronomical." Prior to beginning the course, she shared "I'm just really excited and I think that not only learning from whoever is teaching the course but also from the people that are coming in because they're going to have so many different

backgrounds than me. That's one of the things that I really love about the teaching community, is that everyone brings something totally different to the table."

Once the course began, however, Rachel's enthusiasm was confronted with the draining reality of realizing just how much she needed to learn: "it was definitely a roller coaster of emotions. So I went in super excited. Not entirely sure what to expect. But I went in the first day and I remember texting my friend who had taken the course afterwards, and I was like, I'm thoroughly convinced I have no idea how to teach literacy [laugh] I'm like, I've been doing everything wrong. So that was kind of disheartening after the first day. But on the same page it was like, okay, at least I've got some direction now. I know that what I've been doing isn't necessarily helping those bottom tier ones who really really need it, who are just flying under the radar, but now I've got direction for where to go, so it was kind of hopeful in that sense, and it was."

"And it's so funny because you know that little course that I told you, the webinar that I spoke about last time, it was actually run by [name], I just couldn't remember her name [connected to the reading clinic] and she taught us a super simple code but I didn't even put two and two together to realize that they were the same thing. So I've seen super small aspects of it, because I just did a tiny little bit with a student that I was working with, but I've seen those progressions and how he advanced in his studies, so I mean, it's definitely like actually based, I've seen it actually work in small, small aspects."

"It was a hard course in the sense that it's kind of teaching the teachers to re-wire their brains, to think about it in an entirely different way, because this isn't ever taught to us."

At the conclusion of the course, Rachel started the following school year in a kindergarten LTO, coming in shortly after the start of the school year. She was on fire to begin implementing everything she had learned from the course, and because of that learning experience, she felt prepared to begin early literacy instruction with her students and the support of the ECE in the classroom:

"To be totally honest, it sounds like I'm being a hype man, but this course is the only reason I have any confidence in the position I'm in right now." Because of that confidence, she was able to successfully implement code packs as daily homework

for her students, something she said her students' parents fully supported, and she was able to merge her continuous enthusiasm with her new literacy learning to create a literacy plan that is research-informed and engaging:

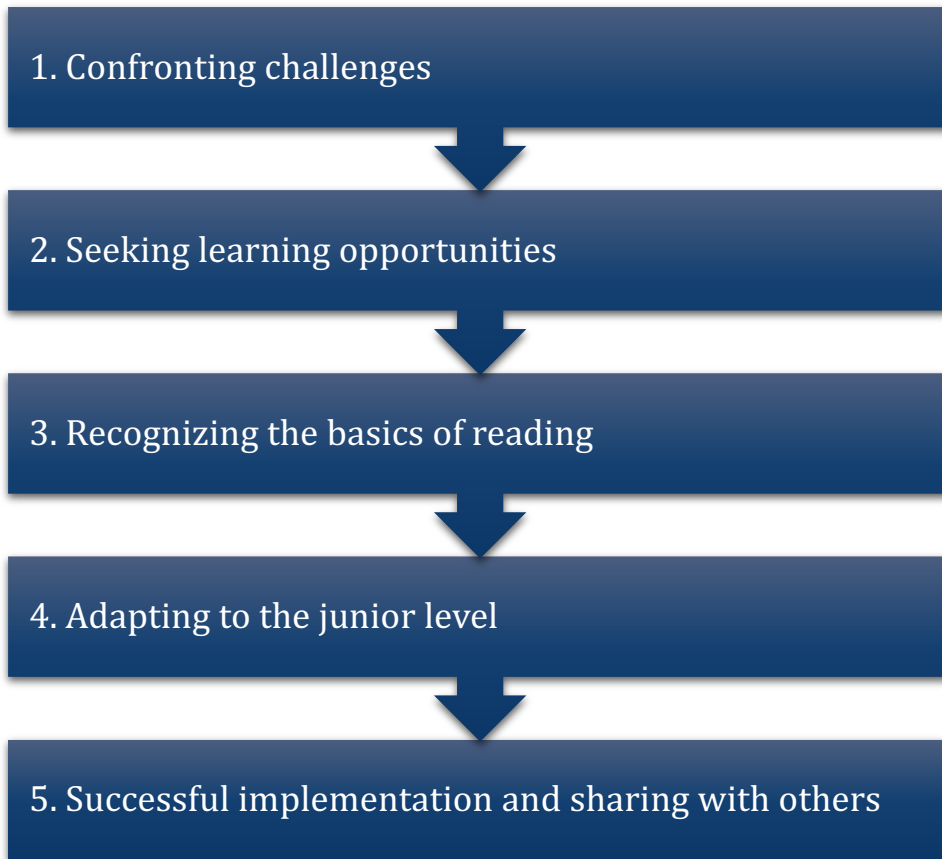
"Their little minds are so malleable that if you bring them a problem, they're going to find an answer, and if they can't find an answer and you give them one, they're going to accept it. And just to really break it down sound by sound. Don't jump in expecting them to be able to read full words, or even to read those sounds, Sometimes you have to do something as simple as, what does your mouth look like when you make that sound. Like the difference between the M and N was something that we really had to hammer in, like, mmm your mouth is shut, mmm cookies, you don't want to spill your food out when you're eating, whereas nnnn that's the sound we make when we're pretending to be an airplane. Something as simple as that, or like when they're saying O a good clue for Oscar is O what letter is my mouth making? Yeah, just simplify things. And it doesn't have to be a grand idea; something as simple as tic tac toe with some sight words or some sounds can be super fun."

Interestingly, despite Rachel's earlier willingness to seek out resources and support from a range of places, following the multisensory class, she did not mention any other resources that she had considered; instead, she seemed to be narrowing her focus to mastering the range of material that she had learned from the course. And even though her enthusiasm was high throughout this study, and she had found tangible success in implementing this learning, when the Reading Clinic class had an opportunity to gather together in the fall in the classroom of a master literacy teacher to discuss their experiences since the class, Rachel reported feeling a range of emotions, including an initial decrease in confidence.

"There was a few mixed feelings, I'm not going to lie, because going in and seeing all the wonderful things that she's doing with her kids, I honestly don't know how she has time to do all of what she does, because she's amazing, but on the same hand it was really nice to hear the stories from the other people who are trying it out as well, because it's kind of justification that even if you're not doing it all, you're still doing something. So it kind of took a load off my shoulders, because this is my first time teaching kinder, first time doing this program."

Reassured, she returned to her school and began to share what she had learned with others. “My principal, the one PD day we were supposed to meet up with our sister school, and talk about literacy, and he said I really want you to let them know what your day looks like so we can put that out there and if they want to pick it up they can or they can go in a different direction, but we were talking the one day finding all the bits of literacy in the kindergarten program [...] we’re finding that balance, and he had called on myself and the Early Childhood Educator (ECE) and he said, you guys are doing something really cool in there, I don’t know a lot about it, but can you share it?” With the support of her administration and the parents in her classroom, Rachel felt empowered to share the multisensory approach to literacy that she had learned through the summer course at the Reading Clinic.

The second profile presents Georgia's story. Georgia (pseudonym) appeared to go through five phases during her PD experience.



Georgia had been teaching at the junior grades for several years and at the moment of this study was teaching grade 5/6 , at a low SES dual track school. The majority of students in Georgia's classroom were reading at a grade 1/2 level and most students had learning difficulties. Georgia has eight years of teaching experience. Her first three years were at a rural school with only 9 students in the classroom.

Georgia's previous and current reading program focused mainly on reading comprehension strategies and critical thinking, with little if any focus given to the processes involved in decoding. Moving to a new school brought on different challenges that stood in the way of comprehension, since students had very low reading ability. Georgia felt at a loss and frustrated, which ultimately led to her professional development journey, first looking into phonics, talking to the school board consultant, and trying different approaches related to phonics and basic reading skills. Being involved in a targeted PD experience made Georgia realize that comprehension and fluency are only attainable if the foundational skills exist.

Georgia recalled her experience visiting a demonstration school and observing a remedial reading program. She ended up at the Reading Clinic because more than one of her students had been there and had shown great strides in reading.

During the PD experience, Georgia first identified negative feelings around her ability to teach reading and the quality of her instruction: “I don’t know how to help them to read!” This view ultimately took a toll on her self-confidence: “I felt like the worst teacher ever because I had no idea, it was just brutal, as if I didn’t really exist!”

Georgia had a hard time getting students to buy into the approach because they thought it was babyish, but eventually some of them did and realized that it actually gave them the tools that enabled them to decode words when previously these students would not even try. Learning and implementing these new strategies gave Georgia an understanding that allowed her to give more efficient feedback to her students. She was able to identify how deficits with working memory impacted students’ ability to retain information and how that could lead to reluctance and frustration. The latter required Georgia to develop a structured sequence that allows for repetition and review as both instructional and diagnostic tools in the classroom.

Georgia used Words Their Way, P.M. bench marks, and the Developmental Reading Assessment and had never administered phonemic and phonological awareness screeners to students prior to being involved in the PD course. She received support from school board consultants, the SLP, and the SST as a result of her own initiative and drive. This experience ultimately challenged Georgia’s view on literacy instruction: “so many things that we’re doing [...] aren’t necessarily helping.” One of the main struggles of applying these strategies was having to accommodate differentiation and manage behaviour and the lack of support in light of these challenges. There was also some resistance from parents and colleagues.

After the follow-up session Georgia’s understanding of reading changed from seeing it as a simple skill of simple acquisition to “this massive process that affects many areas of the brain [...] with so many more layers” which requires a plethora of skills to result in “efficient and independent” reading ability. As she stated during the third interview, “You just don’t know what you don’t know.”

At the end of the course Georgia felt that “reading is not as simple as getting the information from a text (...) reading is now this massive process that affects many areas of the brain and you have to have so many skills to read efficiently and independently.” Although Georgia had some background going into the course, most of the content was novel information and she didn’t really know what to expect. She felt minor discomfort with the practice component and felt that in her personal case, she needed more time and preferred to do it on her own. However, Georgia recognized that practice was an important element because it showed how to teach and practice decoding skills, sight words, spelling rules, and writing. Practice in class also enabled learning around how to be diagnostic, since this piece is crucial to lesson development as well as ideas around existing resources and how to create your own (texts, games, etc.). The course structure allowed for practical, positive, and helpful feedback.

Georgia said that she was “really looking forward to just seeing their process, and listening to people who work every day with kids who struggle and just the practical steps in what they do and also of the reasons, the why.” Because Georgia was teaching intermediate grades at the time of this study, she was concerned and inquired about how to teach multisyllabic words, and learned that there is a course that is a follow-up to this level with a focus on multisyllabic words and morphology. Another challenge was transferring the approach to a classroom level with a variety of reading levels and learning abilities.

Looking forward into the new year, Georgia felt excited and at the same time anxious about the prospect of bringing these strategies into the classroom. Towards the end of the year, Georgia started to feel “that there was a light at the end of tunnel.” She planned on creating her schedule to include an intensive literacy block to work on all of these reading skills both at a one-on-one level based on need and as groups and independent practice. Georgia would try to accommodate and overcome the challenging circumstances that come with a diverse classroom by including the Educational Assistant and technology support as needed, and also look at including opportunities to develop fluency and comprehension.

One important constraint Georgia admitted feeling that needs to be confronted is the conversational piece around this approach and the inadequacy or insufficiency

of the existing one when considering all students' needs: "We need to have these conversations about what we really need to be doing". During the course, her confidence was challenged and restored in that she began to feel more confident going into the school year and knowing how to and where to get support and resources to implement the strategies learned in the course.

During the third interview, Georgia felt successful in implementing the program. She described how she was starting the day with reading for pleasure and then once the whole classroom was present moving to groups according to where they are in the code, the one's with most challenges receiving one-on-one support from both the teacher and the educational assistant. Georgia described how she would see all the kids at least twice per week. Code drills, sight word reading practices, and spelling were the main components of a 40-minute literacy block.

"I have groups, some people are working on the long a, and we do centers, we have game day, we do coding, have spelling activities, shared reading, and we do writing." So far, students' responses were positive, "they respond really well to it, I'm impressed." Students were engaged in the activities, despite the fact that breaking the habit of guessing at words had taken some effort. As predicted by the teacher, the biggest challenge had been the number of students and the diversity in levels and learning ability. Trying to provide support as needed to the lowest students while maintaining engagement with other students was a main challenge. Another struggle was accessing instructional resources adapted to this approach, namely because existing material are often geared towards a younger demographic (SK-Gr.1). Georgia made use of the resources distributed in the course. She also researched, purchased, and created her own materials to use. Georgia also reached out to the Reading Clinic and the course group (who have shared ideas and online resources), as well as the school support team.

Georgia also talked to colleagues and coworkers about the importance of the Human Rights Commission Inquiry and the importance of early diagnosis of dyslexia and the terminology used because it can ignite the necessary steps to create the supports that are needed. In terms of the development of Georgia's understanding, she felt she had deepened her knowledge and expanded her lens on what teaching literacy involves. The course also triggered her to become interested in learning more about the reading process: "That's now become a little passion

project of mine, to continue this journey and hope to attend more workshops, keep investigating, and continue reading about reading.”

Course Feedback

Reasons for Enrolling in the Course

- Interested in knowing more about the English language
 - Already incorporating aspects of structured literacy into practice, interested in knowing more; to build onto existing knowledge
 - Witnessed the benefits of structured literacy with own children
 - Didn't have the tools to help struggling readers
 - Recommended by a colleague or a peer
 - Felt that there was something missing—"I could bring students only so far, but couldn't get that final piece."
-

What Participants Found Most Valuable About the Course

- Learning more about dyslexia and the relationship between phonological awareness, working memory, and reading words
 - Scope and sequence; the specific order for teaching the code
 - Course structure and organization
 - Practice component and instructor feedback
 - Learning about the spelling-reading connection
 - Opportunity to talk with people and ask questions; all with the same goals
 - Lesson planning with instructor feedback
 - Having a teacher in the room who had incorporated structured literacy into her class; translating one-on-one instruction to small group and whole class
 - Learning how to balance intentional teaching with unstructured play
-

What Participants Would Change Or Add

- Additional meetings beyond the refresher in November
 - Moving beyond the basics; information for upper grades
 - Supporting junior and intermediate students
 - More time to talk and interact with other course participants
-

How Participants Have Incorporated Course Material Into Their Practice

- Using the code pack and focusing on building decoding skills
 - Focusing on the sequence of sounds
 - Reviewing sounds
 - Adding the writing component to each lesson
 - Using decodable books
 - Incorporating the multisensory approach
 - Integrating and paying attention to red words
-

Challenging Aspects Of Incorporating Course Material Into Their Program

- Having access to decodable texts, especially texts geared towards junior students
 - Supporting students one-on-one and in small groups in large classes
 - Time
-

Necessary Supports To Continue To Build Their Reading Program

- Supportive school administration
- Access to decodable texts

DISCUSSION

The aim of this report is to present the findings from our study as well as discuss the implications of our findings for teachers and professional development administrators. Below we discuss five main points to consider when designing and implementing professional learning opportunities for practicing teachers. We want to acknowledge that we are bounded by the context in which this study occurred, and limited in terms of the number of participants who took part in our research. While we cannot generalize our findings, we hope that by presenting these discussion points we can shed some insight into the professional learning experiences of the practicing teachers who took part in a PD course about reading.

-  Selecting Learning Experiences via a Trusted Source of Information
-  Targeted Professional Learning is Key
-  Connecting Theory and Practice: Practice and Patience
-  Seeing is Believing
-  Continued Support for Continued Growth

Selecting Learning Experiences via a Trusted Source of Information

School boards and school administrators sometimes mandate training and PD during the school year. However, it is common for teachers to seek out information on their own time to enhance their pedagogical and content knowledge. Most of the teachers who took part in this study either heard about the course through a colleague or learned about the course from a friend whose own child had benefitted from The Reading Clinic's services.

Hearing directly from a reliable source can inspire someone to pursue and ultimately enroll in PD.

School and PD administrators can leverage the positive influence word-of-mouth has on whether or not individuals pursue PD by allotting time for sharing at staff meetings and workshops. Teaching staff can informally discuss their recent PD experiences with their colleagues and potentially invite interested colleagues into their classroom for a firsthand observation of the PD implemented with students. Informal conversations between colleagues have often been a venue for learning about new teaching strategies and approaches.

Targeted Professional Learning is Key

It is not surprising that targeted and focused PD can have a stronger effect on teachers' motivation for learning and knowledge growth than PD that is too broad in scope. The teachers who came to this PD experience already had a background in elementary education and were delivering and supporting reading programs that included many key components of an effective reading program. They weren't necessarily looking to review what they already knew. Rather, the teachers who participated in the Reading Clinic's course were interested in specific elements of reading development and instruction. They wanted to close the gap in their own understanding and realize the missing components of their reading program.

Participants were engaged in their learning, in part because the PD course offered information on a deep level. The basics of reading were discussed, modelled, and practiced, and became a foundation for course participants to continuing constructing and building knowledge. In addition, the instructors had the expertise and experience to hone in on the most relevant skills and information. PD administrators and organizers must ensure that the material is delivered by experts in the field and that the experts narrow the scope of course material so that deep levels of learning are possible.

Connecting Theory and Practice: Practice and Patience

When professionals develop deep levels of understanding for a particular topic they can effectively apply their knowledge to their practice. As teachers,

especially novice teachers, begin their career it can be easy to design and implement a lesson, or teach a child to read, without truly understanding the science behind the learning. Having the background knowledge is critical to knowing *how* content should be delivered. The participants in this study were taught concepts, facts, and theories directly related to their practice. With this set of information, teachers can accurately and successfully assess and implement appropriate skills that are targeted towards each individual's needs. Without this background or content knowledge, teachers might provide inaccurate and inefficient instruction resulting in little to no progress in their students.

It is essential that any educational instructor introduce concepts and theories of specific topics before showing how the topic is taught. Laying this foundation allows teachers to make connections during practice. Instructors are also encouraged to make explicit the connections between theory and practice. This could be done through demonstration videos, classroom visits, or live observations, where the instructor can point out connections as the event is happening.

Seeing is Believing

Educational researcher, Thomas Guskey described how changes in attitudes and beliefs come after teachers begin using a new practice successfully and see changes in student learning. When PD is deliberate, purposeful, and targeted, teachers can feel motivated to apply the PD to their classroom. This is just the beginning stage of real and long-term change in practice. It has been suggested that until teachers see their students progress, evidence of student learning, their beliefs and attitudes will remain unchanged. As Guskey stated: "the crucial point is that it is not the professional development *per se*, but the experience of successful implementation that changes teachers' attitudes and beliefs" (2002, p. 383).

During any PD with teachers it is important to emphasize the gradual process of change and that overtime and with practice, teachers may see real progress in their students. The instructors in the current study stressed this idea and encouraged the participating teachers to look for small moments of success. The follow-up session that occurred well into the fall term also

contributed to the teachers' continued effort to implement their new strategies. A few of the teachers expressed their concern for employing only a few of the strategies; they felt as though they should be further along in their program. Meeting with the instructors during this follow-up session helped the teachers understand that lasting change in their practice takes time, and that this is okay.

Continued Support for Continued Growth

Given the journey teachers take following any type of PD, including how and when they implement new strategies and practices, continued support is crucial. PD is most effective when it can be supported for a sustained duration. This aspect of PD is perhaps the most neglected, likely due to time and financial constraints. However, sustained and continued support contributes to a teacher's determination and ongoing use of strategies. Teachers might be confronted with failed attempts or what they perceive as forced instruction. However, with continued support teachers have opportunities to develop habits of teaching where the newly learned material becomes an extension of their practice.

Continued support can also focus on individual needs and goals. Instructors, or in some cases coaches, can offer feedback and reflection, ultimately helping the individual teacher move forward with their practice. While time and finances are often barriers to sustained PD, informal professional learning communities that occur online or face-to-face provide spaces for teachers to share their ongoing learning journeys.

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