



TEACHING READING IN BRIEF

VOICES FROM THE FIELD, 1

OCTOBER 6, 2025

Voices from the Field with Shelby Lindley, Structured Literacy Classroom Teacher

Throughout the year, we will feature the reflections of PreK-12 and higher-education faculty in an occasional series, ***Vermont Voices from the Field***. Professionals offer their perspectives on implementing evidence-aligned literacy practices in their own classrooms, school-wide, or university courses. If you are interested in getting involved as one of the Vermont voices, please email us at dorinnedorfman@gmail.com or brenda@vt.thereadingleague.org.

Welcome to our first edition, featuring Spaulding High School teacher **Shelby Lindley**, who shares her courageous journey to transform her instruction.



Shelby Lindley, M.Ed., teaches Structured Literacy at Spaulding High School, with 18 years in the Barre Unified Union School District and 21 years in education. Previously, Ms. Lindley has taught in elementary classrooms as a special educator and K-4 literacy interventionist. She earned her Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education from Johnson State College, her Special Education License from the University of Vermont, and her Master's Degree in Education from Mount St. Joseph University, a premier graduate program that prepares teachers in the science of reading. Her interests include advocating for dyslexia awareness and helping to ensure that every child is afforded the opportunity to read. By sharing information on reading and the brain and the foundations of English, Ms. Lindley hopes to increase awareness about Vermont's literacy legislation and its implications for teaching practices.

Dorinne Dorfman: What is your background in reading and writing education?

Shelby Lindley: Learning to read just kind of happened for me. Going to Barre Town Middle and Elementary School as a student, the curriculum was Balanced Literacy. The instructional focus was making meaning from text, but very little phonemic awareness or phonics, though maybe we had some fluency focus. I was very lucky that my brain was wired to read. My original undergraduate and graduate studies also used Balanced Literacy. I completed a special-education licensing program that introduced me to Orton-Gillingham, but overall, its focus was on Balanced Literacy, too. I had taken courses at the University of Vermont, at Johnson State College, and at Lesley University. Later, I added a second Master's Degree in the science of reading at Mount St. Joseph University in Ohio. I finished the program in 2023, which took about three years.

Curious Question

What are some original, distinctly Anglo-Saxon, Latin, and Greek names for children, especially those that have gone out of fashion?

When I first started teaching, I taught with Lucy Calkins's Units of Study for both reading and writing, which were two separate curricula. It seemed fine to me as a classroom teacher, but in 2015, I moved into K-4 literacy intervention, and my eyes were opened. I was using LLI [Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention]. The teachers demanded I use it, but students weren't making progress, and I didn't understand why. That's when I started doing my own research. I listened to the 2019 podcast ***Sold a Story*** and discovered The Reading League. I researched higher-education programs based on the science of reading, but there were very few to be found. I chose Mount St. Joseph because it was based on current research. The faculty was amazing and had direct ties with current top researchers in the field, such as Anita Archer, Louisa Moats, and Carol Tolman. The professors all regularly collaborated, and I knew I would learn about the most current research.

I've been a teacher for a long time. I was in the classroom for about fifteen years before I became an interventionist. I spent five years in that role in grades K-4, and in fall 2022, I began teaching a Structured Literacy course for grades 9-12 in the English department at Spaulding High School. I now teach three levels of courses for students who have intensive literacy needs

and foundational gaps. Classes are 70 minutes a day, 5 days a week, for the semester. Most students attend all year, and some for more than one year.

DD: That's incredible. How did Spaulding come to hire a high-school literacy specialist to teach credit-bearing English courses?

SL: The Barre School District learned about the model from Dr. Julie Brown at Woodstock Union High School and advertised the position. I applied and was hired. The Spaulding English teachers are very supportive of my program. We are slowly working towards developing their knowledge of structures in the English language. Teachers know that more students need Structured Literacy than we can currently serve. Content-area teachers ask me to screen students in their classes who are struggling with reading and writing. Every student I have screened has shown phonological awareness difficulties, decoding deficits, and significant gaps in the alphabetic principle, that words consist of letters/letter combinations that represent sounds. This is the foundational knowledge everyone must have for reading fluency and comprehension.

This week was a clear example of a student with deficits in the alphabetic principle. We were learning about syllable division patterns. We were dividing the word, **construct**, with the VC/CCV syllable division pattern. We were looking at the root **struct**, and a senior had an *Aha!* moment. His eyes popped open and he gasped. He discovered that **struct** had six sounds and he could spell it by slowing his brain down and connecting the sounds to the letters.

DD: What are the similarities and differences between what you learned initially and what you now find in current reading research?

SL: When I taught LLI in K-4 intervention, a typical lesson involved previewing the book and looking at the vocabulary. The text was supposed to be rich. It might also include a random phonics piece that may or may not have connected with the text we were about to read. My instruction focused heavily on encouraging students to guess the words based on contextual information. I would encourage students to look at the pictures and to think about the context. The program did not have me ask students to match sound to print. What's different now is that I have an understanding that the foundational skills need to be explicitly taught in a sequence. Students need a lot of time with supported practice. They need to understand how the brain learns to read, which is why we do things the way we do in my classes.

When I first started teaching, I was told that some students were not going to learn to read. They said, "That's our population and that's how it works." We were all brainwashed by the thinking behind Lucy Calkins and Fountas and Pinnell programs: accept students' failure and believe that reading will eventually happen. But I did not know how to make reading happen. It sounds so ridiculous now, but back then I had drunk the Kool-Aid.

The pivotal experience for me was planning my lessons and watching my students make no gains in Balanced Literacy. I knew I had to dig deeper. It's true that not every student is missing the same things, but I now understand that students often have gaps in their knowledge, and I have learned to identify those gaps along with the

skills I need to teach. I know how to monitor their progress. We aim for increased progress so that students make more than one year's growth to catch up. I also know now that it's never too late to do this work. All students benefit from this instruction. Of course, it's better to catch kids before the end of second grade, so they don't have to spend years catching up. Students not on grade level by third grade might not ever receive the instruction they need to catch up.

DD: What are your goals now as an educator in literacy education?

SL: I have a lot of goals. My biggest goal right now is to develop the curriculum for my courses at Spaulding High School. Another goal is to help develop a better MTSS system for my school and district. We need true systems that help all students, PreK-12. I also want to incorporate more syntax into my instruction for both reading and writing. High school syntax needs to be more intense, and I'm gathering more materials appropriate for my high schoolers.

These are a lot of goals, but I also want to help establish progress monitoring in all three tiers. I want to help people in my school and district understand the importance of progress monitoring. Lastly, I would love to co-teach morphology with content-area teachers in my school. What skills do their students need to learn in order to access grade-level text? My dream is to work with science, English, social studies, and math teachers.

DD: At this point in time, what should Vermont's priorities in literacy education be?

SL: Vermont's priority should be that every teacher is given the opportunity to learn about the science of reading and to teach based on the research. Every school system needs to have an effective early screening measure in place. All schools should focus on the prevention of difficulties with K-2 students – making sure they get evidence-aligned instruction and early intervention. Another school focus should be placed on students in the later grades – reaching students who are still struggling to read, who don't have teachers with the right knowledge.

These students require intensive intervention to fill their gaps. Schools would need to provide Structured Literacy in very small groups with an hour of daily instruction **for years**, because it would take that long to catch these older students up. That's why early intervention is key! Great classroom instruction and highly effective intervention save time, money, and the students' well-being.

At Spaulding High School, I see students who constantly call themselves stupid. They don't know how their brain works to become a reader. They don't know the basic alphabet sounds. They don't have sound-symbol correspondence. They guess at words they don't know. Most have a suppressed vocabulary from not having the same amount of time in text as their peers. They suffer from depression; they've given up. They don't even think it's possible anymore. In my class, it takes a good month to build the rapport needed for them to try their hardest. Every year, they've been told they're going to learn how to read. They've been duped by the system for years. Students were maybe unintentionally duped by the school, but they were still duped.

DD: It seems to be the case that America was duped when it comes to how students learn to read. What else would you like Vermonters to know about literacy education in our state?

SL: One big thing I haven't discussed yet is that not all higher-education programs are created equal. There are still colleges teaching Balanced Literacy curricula in teacher-prep programs. I would like to see Vermont step up and say that we won't allow this to happen anymore. I also think that higher education should be held accountable for this. Professors should know current research. If they don't prepare teachers to teach children to read, they should absolutely be held accountable. Those teacher-education grads should get their money back for false advertising and being sold a story about how kids learn to read. I watch all these young student teachers excited to teach, all wide-eyed, but they are not prepared to teach reading. *I* was one of them. I cried a lot when I had that realization. I was sad, angry, and embarrassed, but then I decided to take action. That's why I went to the high school, because I wanted to see the students who I had in the classroom back in third grade. I had failed those students, and now in high school, they still can't read.

By the time they finish a year with me, they are readers. They may not yet be reading on grade level and may still be dysfluent, but they can read a lot of text accurately. Now they view themselves as readers. Their negative behaviors in other classrooms have diminished, and you can see them start to shine. They come in excited about what we're learning. They ask me, "What are we doing today?" They read aloud in front of each other. They like to help teach others what they've learned, and they're proud of what they know.

DD: I am struck by what you said about earlier in your career, when colleagues told you that some students wouldn't be able to learn to read. Where does that come from? There are many countries with higher literacy rates than in the US, and some countries are at 100% literacy.

SL: I'm not sure. That idea usually comes from lack of research knowledge, low expectations, and not enough support for students. When people believe some students can't learn to read, those students often don't get the help they need to succeed. In countries with high literacy rates, schools have strong programs and provide the resources students need. This shows how important it is to believe every student can learn to read and to provide the right instruction and support.

DD: Is there anything else you would like to add?

SL: Right now, it's very difficult to tell the difference between students who have true disabilities and those who are struggling because they have received the wrong kind of instruction. We have a responsibility to catch all students! This includes those who may have dyslexia as well as other language-based disabilities. It's essential that we stay informed about the latest research and understand how to apply it effectively in our teaching. Our children deserve instruction that is based on the most current knowledge to give every learner the best chance to succeed.

Answer to this issue's Curious Question:

Some Anglo-Saxon names for boys included *Alfred*, *Cuthbert*, and *Godwin*, and for girls were *Audrey*, *Ethel*, and *Hilda*.

<https://www.historyextra.com/period/norman/baby-names-popular-royal-history>

Many common Latin names shared the same root, but added a different suffix based on gender. For example, some common girls' names included *Antonia*, *Julia*, and *Marcia*.

Common names for boys were *Fabius*, *Gnaeus*, and *Maximus*.

https://mariamilani.com/ancient_rome/roman_names.htm

Ancient Greek names could include compound names (think Jean-Luc or Maryellen). Some interesting names for boys included *Nikomachos* (victory + battle) and *Polykrates* (much + power) and for girls *Stratonikē* (army + victory). Other girls' names included *Glykera* (sweet one) and *Kalliopē*, (beautiful-voiced). Both versions of *Alexandra/Alexander* and *Nicole/Nicholas* have yet to go out of style.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Greek_personal_names#Naming_women

Meet the Editors

Dr. Brenda Warren has been studying and evaluating reading instruction for the past 20 years through three different lenses: as a pediatrician, school board member, and parent of a now-adult son with dyslexia. Her main interest has been examining how districts can overcome barriers preventing scientific reading research from fully impacting classroom practice, with a goal of ensuring that academic equity is present in our schools. In 2010, her work led her to pursue a doctorate in Education Leadership to study this topic in more depth. She graduated with her PhD in 2018. Her dissertation title is: *Closing the Science-to-Practice Gap for Reading Instruction: A Case Study of Two Schools Transitioning from Balanced Literacy to Scientifically Based Reading Instruction*.



Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.S., Ed.D., OG/A, has served as a teacher and principal for nearly 30 years in Vermont schools. After completing her undergraduate studies at Goddard College, she earned her Master's and Doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Vermont. As a postdoctoral Fulbright Scholar, she taught at the Technical University of Berlin and conducted research on democratic education in Germany. Since completing an Education Specialist Degree in Reading and Literacy Instruction at Bay Path University, Dr. Dorfman teaches evidence-aligned literacy at Barre Town Middle School.
