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WRITING IS COMPONENTIAL

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A Componential Approach to Evaluating Student Writing: An Interview with Dr. Melissa Farrall

Conducted by Karen Heath

Dr. Melissa Lee Farrall

Dr. Farrall served as Director for Evaluation at the Stern Center for Language and Learning and taught graduate courses in language and evaluation for many years. She is the author of *Reading Assessment: Linking Language, Literacy, and Cognition*, and the co-author of *All About Tests & Assessments*.

Karen Heath: Melissa, would you please tell us about yourself and what brought you to the field of reading assessment?

Melissa Farrall: I started out many years ago in the field of Slavic linguistics. The Russians have a tremendous literary history – there's nothing that compares to 19th century Russian literature. I eventually moved into the field of education, and I taught as a learning disability specialist for several years. That was the hardest job I've ever had in my life, and I went into it with limited preparedness. I'd taken one course on reading. I had no training. We didn't call it structured literacy; we called it phonics, but I had no real training in phonics. My student teaching was set up at a school that didn't permit the teaching of phonics. Everything had to be done through discovery. So you can imagine what my first few years of teaching were like. Over time, I had an opportunity to study assessment with John Willis, who's very well known nationally in the assessment field, both cognitive and achievement-type testing. I became a SAIF, a specialist in assessment of intellectual functioning. SAIFs are required to have a command of the research and experience in teaching, because the most important thing about writing a report is taking good data and linking it to instruction.

I have two sons, one of whom learned to read very easily, and the other was dyslexic, dysgraphic, and had ADHD. Now at age 36, he's

actually reading for pleasure. He had a lot of instruction.

KH: Many people find their way to education through their children. Let's move to our next question. Why is learning how to write important? What does, "Writing is thinking," mean to you?

MF: Writing is important. Writing is much more than our efforts to communicate on paper. Writing is a channel for learning. In the same way that we understand *learning to read* to *reading to learn*, we do very much the same thing with written expression. We learn how to master the process of putting our thoughts on paper.

In that process, we don't have the opportunity to exercise conversational repair in the way we do during back-and-forth conversation. When I write something, it has to stand on its own at any time or place. So my message has to be ultra clear, ultra logical. Everyone reads between the lines to a certain degree, but we really want to be sure that our thinking is well laid out, so people can follow and learn from the writing.

That's not easy to do. I mean, that's a really hard thing to do. In order to write with that kind of precision and logic, we have to think deeply about our topics. When we ask someone to write about a volcano (that's my eternal example), we're not just asking them to put thoughts on paper; we're asking them to think deeply about volcanoes, to assemble those facts into an organized structure. When we write, we think deeply. We make all kinds of connections between facts and ideas, which we store as permanent structures in our background knowledge.

When we engage in reading, we build our vocabulary. We build our command of language structures. We build our overall background knowledge, our command of facts. We build our ability to think inferentially. The same thing happens when we engage in writing over time; we avail ourselves of a more sophisticated vocabulary. We become better adept at expressing ourselves with a variety of sentences, and that's important because different types of sentences allow us to pose different kinds of logical relationships. We can add things together. We can talk about exclusions. We can talk about temporal sequences, such as when something happens or why something happens. The ability to work with a variety of sentence structures really expands the possibilities to take facts and group them together into meaningful units such as paragraphs. Over a long period of time, when we write, we learn about our subjects. We learn about them very deeply, and essentially, we make ourselves smarter.

KH: We have readers of* Teaching Reading in Brief *at different levels of knowledge and experience with reading science. Let's start at the beginning of writing development with the relationship between speaking and writing, since these are both expressive language skills.

MF: Yes, they are. I have sort of a saying, "If you can't say it, you'll never, ever, be able to write it." When I was initially trained as an educator, we thought about reading and writing as essentially separate domains. When I learned about assessing written expression and how to teach

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written expression, they had very little to do with that oral language foundation. Now we know that written expression is what we call a language-based activity. It is built on a foundation of our oral language skills. When we write, we avail ourselves of all those different linguistic tools that we have at our disposal. We can write with a very sophisticated vocabulary. We can make use of different types of sentences to express different types of relationships between facts and ideas. We can think not just at a sentence level, but how to relate different sentences together, which is what we call discourse. All of those things really come to us from that oral-language foundation.

Sometimes I think that when we are looking at children who struggle with written expression, the remediation may not so much be with pencil in hand. Instead, it may actually be working with that oral-language system to be sure the foundation is there to serve as that leaping-off point for thinking on paper, getting their oral language flowing.

KH: As a teacher, sometimes I would have kids say something to a partner before they tried to write it, just to get the ideas going.

My next question is, What do you see as the relationship between the development of text comprehension and writing skills?

MF: We know that when we write, we become more sensitive to and we develop greater skill in [recognizing] different kinds of text structures. So we become more aware of different kinds of literary devices and how those tools help us to express ourselves. That increased awareness we develop when becoming better writers we take to the reading process. It's something that helps us to discern not just the writer's content, but also the way in which they've chosen to express it, and the logic behind it.

Learning to become a better writer makes us better readers. Becoming a better reader and having a wide experience in reading builds our oral language skills. It all kind of works together.

KH: Writing is described as a componential skills set. What is meant by this? What are the components?

MF: Let me just start with this: Writing is one of the most complicated things that we can ask a human being to do. It involves a lot of disparate skills that have to come together with a high degree of automaticity and accuracy so that we can develop a flow of thought. We understand this with respect to reading. We understand how important it is to read with fluency in order to fully devote ourselves to the content. The same thing is true with respect to writing. We have to be able to execute all of these individual component skills so that they blend together, mold together, and ultimately flow and allow us to focus on the quality of our thinking and the way in which we want to express ourselves. Now, I think about the written aspects of putting all these component skills together as a really messy process. There's a lot that can go wrong. There are just a whole lot of

different skills that we have to coordinate and execute within our working memory.

Let's talk about working memory for a moment. I think about working memory as a platter. Some of us get really big platters, and some of us get smaller platters that are really easily overloaded. The thing about written expression is that in order to get to the point where you can write with a flow, all of these component skills have to be integrated. There's a lot that goes into writing. I said it was the most complicated thing that we could ask of human beings, because it's everything from handwriting and letter formation and spelling, to punctuation and grammar and capitalization, as well as the words that we choose to use, the different kinds of sentences that we opt to write, how we link and organize those sentences into larger units of discourse, that is a paragraph. In addition to all that, we have to have something to say. We have to have some knowledge that we are trying to impart, or we have to have some sort of creative content to put on paper. And all of these things have to fit on that working memory platter.

The best, easiest way to make that happen is to ensure that all those different strands are fine-tuned and honed to a degree of automaticity. For example, you know how hard it is to write about something or take an exam when you don't know the topic well – a student's nightmare.

We need all of the mechanical aspects of written expression, including a functional writing system. We must have command of our [oral] language system. We must have command of the written code, spelling, to put words on paper. And we must have command of our content, what we're writing about.

KH: It's a lot, isn't it? It's amazing that we learned to do that. Do you think good handwriting, spelling, and writing mechanics really matter when it comes to writing? These three skill sets have been deemphasized over the past two decades in favor of encouraging students to write longer prose unhindered. Should these have been? And do they matter when it comes to school screeners or comprehensive psychological education evaluation?

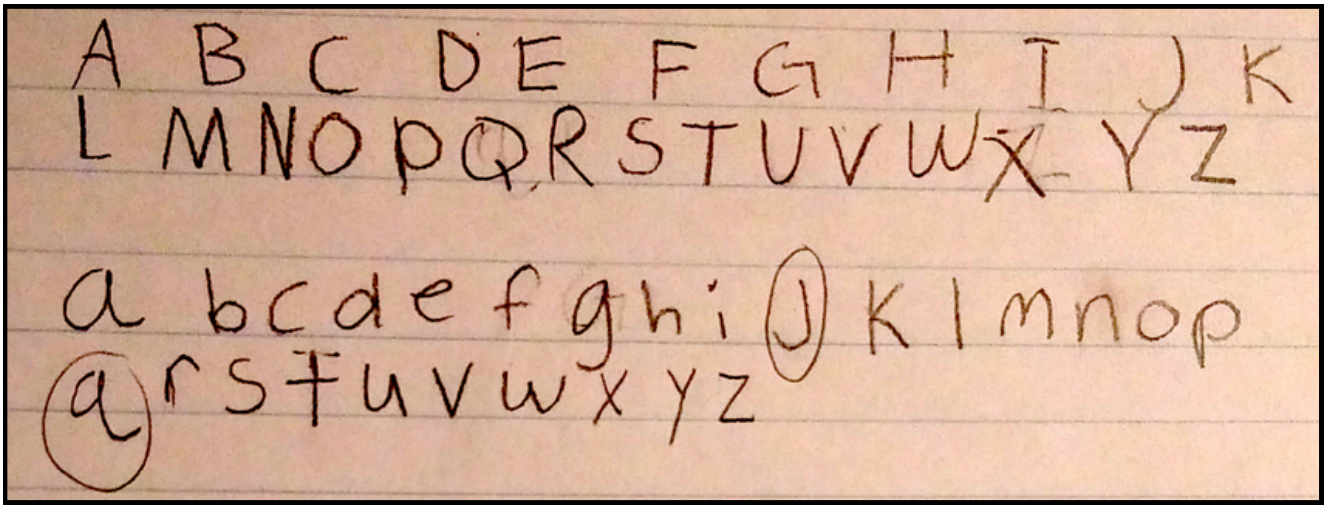
MF: Let's go back to that idea of the working memory platter, and all the different strands or skills that make up written expression, and that must be executed with accuracy and a degree of automaticity. For example, any time we are writing and are unsure how to spell a word, our chain of thought is suddenly disrupted. We have to switch gears from conceptualization to, "Oh my goodness, how do I spell this word?" That takes away from thinking those really good, deep, heavy thoughts. Our writer then has to figure out how to spell the word and try to find their way back to their train of thought. The flow of thought can be disrupted by just about anything. Any time we are taken away from our higher-level thoughts into things such as spelling and writing mechanics and letter formation, that's going to undermine that flow and quality of thinking. It's going to disrupt the creative process.

Many writing problems are due to our students not having what I call a functional writing system. By that I mean skill with handwriting, and when appropriate, skill with keyboarding, or skill with

voice-to-text. We have so much research now on the great benefits of handwriting – it's such a shame that most schools have moved away from teaching handwriting. We're really anxious as a society to get to all the good stuff – all the deep thinking. We have come to see handwriting as this kind of lower-level skill that's not worthy of our attention. Instead, handwriting is really the vehicle that allows us to think on paper with flow. The research shows us this. The ability to form our letters with automaticity in first grade is highly predictive of writing skill at the elementary and secondary-school level (Graham,, et al., 1997; Truxius, et al., 2024)). It's one of the best multisensory pathways. When we are able to write with a pencil in hand with ease, we activate the language portions of our brain, and we actually retain all that information much more successfully.

When children struggle with handwriting, when it's hard for them to control their pencils, when it's hard for them to isolate the stroke that they want to make, to make round, tight circles, and write with a flow, it can be really tough and discouraging. Think of it as if you were right-handed and tried to write for a day with your left hand. In the beginning, it would be kind of novel and fun, but you would find yourself taking shortcuts. You would find yourself writing less, because it was just so gosh-darn hard. Because of that, you would get less practice. Yet we know how important practice is in developing a skill. The answer is yes – handwriting is foundational to the development of written expression.

Learning something as simple as learning to write the alphabet is highly predictive of what kind of writers our students are going to be (Graham, et al., 2000). Students who are still struggling with the alphabet in the spring of 1st grade are probably going to struggle with written expression. We consider legibility and automaticity, because both pieces are needed to get that flow.



Upper- and lower-case aphabet-writing assessment of a 3rd grader, with poorly formed letters circled

KH: What is the role of working memory, short-term and long-term memory in writing?

MF: Working memory is a major component of our Executive Functioning [EF] system. Our EF system allows us to act in a goal-directed manner. We can execute tasks with a fair degree of efficiency and flow, and take these disparate skills, such as the components of writing, and integrate them. When students have a limited amount of memory to work with, that integration can fall apart. You know that expression, "walk and chew gum at the same time"? That's the quintessential comment about EF. Students need to have enough working memory in order to manage, manipulate, and integrate all the components of written expression. When a student has limited working memory, oftentimes we see a written product that's short and poorly integrated. Sometimes adults look at those writing samples and say it looks careless, thinking, "Shouldn't that student have been more careful?" It almost becomes like a character issue, when the truth is it's a failure of working memory. It's the writing components falling off the edge of the working-memory platter that are very difficult to recoup. These students will produce text that is short, poorly integrated, prone to lots of different kinds of errors – capitalization, punctuation, spelling, omitted words, and incomplete or poorly constructed sentences. This is not an issue of character.

KH: What do you recommend for writing screeners?

MF: We have a lot of tools for assessing reading, but not so many tools for assessing writing, in particular, screeners. We should be able to assess writing as part of a curriculum-based measurement system and identify students at higher risk of writing problems. Then we'd figure out the skill deficits and provide the instruction needed to develop their writing skills. First and foremost, have students at all grade levels write the alphabet. You would not believe the number of our students in middle school and high school who never mastered their alphabet. How can they possibly become writers if they do not know the 26 letters as a foundation? In addition, we can look at passage length. It turns out that passage length correlates with quality. How much students write correlates with quality. Students who are adept writers tend to write more. Students who struggle with writing tend to write less.

One thing we might ask students to do is write a response to a writing prompt for two minutes. We look at what they've written and count the number of words. Creating a chart of student performance in any given class will allow us to see a range from high to low. We can identify the students who fall in the bottom third of the class. These students will stand out as high risk.

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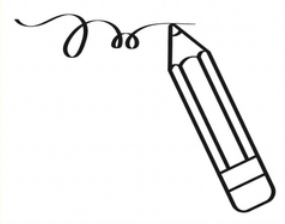


They're minimal writers because it's so hard and effortful for them. We can also look at spelling accuracy as part of the screener. The number of correct words over the total number of words written is a way that we can get a handle on overall writing quality, because we know that spelling is an important component in that working-memory platter. The method that's earning probably the most attention right now is something called correct-incorrect word sequences. There isn't time for a full explanation here, but let me say that successive pairs of words in the sample are assessed for spelling, grammar, mechanics, and meaning. I total up all the correct word sequences in the student's writing, and I subtract the incorrect word sequences. The resulting number has been found to correlate with overall writing quality, and it is sensitive to improvement over the short term. However, these screeners are limited in terms of what they can do for us. They can point to children at risk, but reveal little more. Nevertheless, it would be very helpful to administer benchmark assessments, like the correct word sequence (Videen, Deno & Marston, 1982), to all students for progress monitoring and informing instruction.

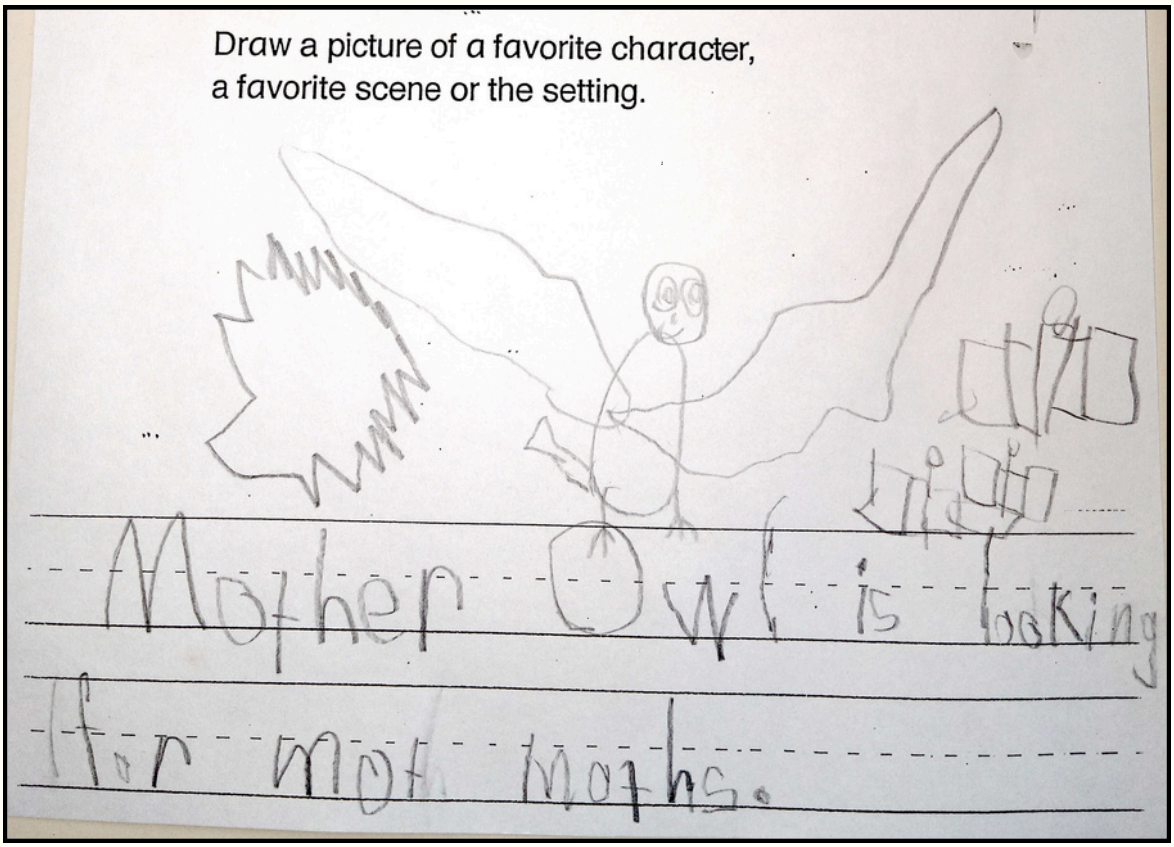
An important note here: we educators need to be careful to monitor the skills that we're teaching, or else we are not really monitoring response to instruction. Secondly, I'm not a fan of frequent progress monitoring. It's probably a good idea to assess [writing] in the fall, winter, and spring. Written expression is not something that develops very quickly. I don't think that we need to take time away from instruction in order to get more data from our students.

KH: That makes a lot of sense. I remember in one job when I was teaching literacy intervention, I needed to assess before and after a four-week cycle. That bothered me. If you want students to learn a certain grammar or spelling rule, okay, but you're not going to change a whole course of writing in three or four weeks.

MF: The one thing that's really hard to do is to look at the quality of student writing and the quality of thinking behind it. We don't have a good way of quantifying that. That's not something we can count. The number of high-quality, well-expressed, and well-structured ideas is much more elusive. Yet ultimately, isn't our goal to have our students produce really high-quality thoughts on paper?

KH: What else is involved in evaluating students for writing?

MF: Our training as educators permits us to evaluate our students' performance. Different tests have different requirements in terms of who can administer them and interpret the results. Test authors and publishers are the authority that determines who can do what, and that information is provided in the test manual. Tests are divided into three levels. The lowest level progress-monitoring tools can be administered by all educators. The next level involves special educators and learning-disability specialists who are trained to administer different achievement tests for reading, writing, and math. The highest



Sample of a 1st-grader's writing for a book-report activity in the classroom

level involves cognitive testing and emotional and behavioral functioning conducted by a psychologist or school psychologist. Intelligence tests and tests of emotional functioning require a lot of training because misinterpretation is very problematic. Underestimating a student's potential can have devastating effects.

Ideally, we would have a test battery that would look at whether a student could write persuasively, write a narrative, and write for information. This test battery should also look at handwriting, mechanics and spelling, sentence quality and paragraph formation, and, of course, fluency or flow. I like asking children to write both a narrative and some expository writing. Then I have samples in two genres, which is really helpful.

KH: I always wanted a measure for craft. I'd say, "I know it when I see it," but that wasn't enough. Maybe it's sentence length, vocabulary, or multisyllabic words. As a school literacy coach, I experienced that finding a way to systematize writing assessment to put all teachers on the same page was tricky.

MF: I think it was two editions ago when the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (Breaux, 2020) came out with a writing test that took seasoned evaluators hours to score. Questions arose. How do we analyze a writing sample? What sort of things do we look at? This required a lot of thinking, and the field was in an uproar because educators simply don't have that much time to score an individual writing sample. So Wechsler created a shorter form, something that could be scored with greater ease and efficiency. The Wechsler folks have now moved to correct-incorrect word sequences, what I call "all things countable." They are not looking directly at the quality of thought. If our ultimate goal is to

turn our children into in-depth thinkers, then we need a way of not only counting, but a way to look at quality. As you said, craft is much harder to assess because, to some extent, it's subjective. When rating the sophistication of vocabulary, you may see a different level than I do. That's one of the challenges of developing tests that are going to be reliable and valid.

We know that handwriting and spelling affect the way in which adults perceive the quality of students' writing. Passages written with poor quality handwriting and spelling are undervalued for their content.

KH: Yes, they're hard! They're hard to read and unappealing on a certain level. You have to read through it.

MF: We have very few tests that include the quality of handwriting. We also don't have tests able to accommodate technology, student responses that are keyboarded or using text-to-speech. The Wechsler Individual Achievement Test has an alphabet writing fluency task, but it's only normed for children in Pre-K through 4th grade. What about the middle and high schoolers? We don't have that. There is a Feifer Assessment of Writing (Feifer & Nader, 2016) with a section on graphomotor skill, where you can assess the student's ability to control their pencil, from PreK through high school. Once again, it is important to understand exactly what a test measures; if you do not, then the scores are not interpretable.

KH: There are different components of writing that may need instruction. Would that just happen in English class?

MF: I think this is really hard. As educators, we're responsible for all of our students, whether they're identified or not. The stakes here are really high; the development of writing skills has the potential to turn students into critical thinkers, which is really important right now. We have to attend to the writing skills of all our students, even those who don't necessarily have a specific learning disability, because they're all going to benefit immeasurably from being able to express themselves on paper and being able to engage in that thinking process.

KH: What should teachers stop doing and start doing?

MF: We know there's tremendous benefit to integrating reading and writing, with children reading and then writing about the content they read (Graham, et al., 2018; O'Donnell, 2026). This forces them to make all those connections. But I have seen far too often situations where children are asked to write about content when they need to be mastering their alphabet. We have to know our students well.

KH: What is your view on what effects Artificial Intelligence might have on students' writing development?

MF: There is absolutely no substitute for handwriting, for thinking deeply on paper and making all of those logical connections. And if we are not doing that ourselves, if we are not actively engaging our own brains, then we are not going to develop our thinking skills and we're not going to

become better writers. For proficient writers, there are certain practical things that AI helps us do. Let's say I've written a summary and it's 200 words in length, but can't be more than 100, I can use AI to kind of crunch it down and then reread and make sure that the new text has preserved the essence of what I was trying to say. However, there's no substitute for the heavy-duty thinking that's part of writing. There just isn't, and if we try to offload that, we're not going to develop ourselves as thinkers. Let's not lose what writing really is. There's no substitute for thinking about things in depth. Writing is a cognitive process, not just an endeavor.

KH: Can you just unpack that for a moment?

MF: We can think about writing as an effort just to put a message on paper. In that respect, it's directed to whoever is going to pick up that piece of paper and read it. But writing really is an activity in which we must think things through with a high degree of precision. We have to ensure that our message is fully clear to anyone who reads it. And in order to do that, we have to make all the connections between the facts. We have to think in terms of the structure of what we want to say and the words we want to use. All that benefits thinking skills. We don't assign an essay on volcanoes just to make them write. We assign the essay so that kids will actually learn about volcanoes and learn how to make the connections between all the different characteristics of volcanoes. It's that thinking process that they come away with. It becomes part of their background knowledge.

KH: What else would you like to share about writing instruction with Vermont educators?

MF: When children fail to learn to write, they lose a channel for developing their oral-language and critical-thinking abilities. As educators and parents, we want to ensure that our students have, at their disposal, the problem-solving tools required in order to solve what ails us as a society. Teaching children to write is an investment in our future.

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About Dr. Melissa Farrall

Melissa Farrall is the author of *Reading Assessment: Linking Language, Literacy, and Cognition*, and the co-author of *All About Tests & Assessments* published by Wrightslaw. Melissa Farrall recently retired as Director for Evaluation at the Stern Center for Language and Learning in Williston, Vermont. Melissa also held an appointment as a Clinical Assistant Professor in the Department of Neurological Sciences at the Robert Larner College of Medicine at the University of Vermont where she trained medical professionals about learning disabilities and reading. She continues to train evaluators and teaches courses on the assessment of reading, writing, and language through the Stern Center and Vermont State University.

Previously Melissa taught the structure of language and assessment in the Language and Literacy program at Simmons College in Boston and at The Reading Institute in Williamstown, MA. She worked as a learning disability specialist in the public schools for several years. Dr. Farrall received her Doctorate from Brown University in 1981 in the area of Slavic Linguistics. She received her Master's Degree from Rivier College in Learning Disabilities in 1994, and her certification as a Specialist in the Assessment of Intellectual Functioning in 1999.

Meet the Team

Karen Heath has been an educator for over four decades. She earned her Bachelor's Degree in English at Middlebury College and her Master's Degree at the University of Vermont in education. She has taught everything from preschool through graduate school. She began her work in alternative education for struggling high school students, and then spent the bulk of her career focusing on literacy and social studies in elementary and middle school as a classroom teacher, instructional coach, and literacy coordinator. In 2005 she was honored to represent her state's teachers as the Vermont Teacher of the Year, which furthered her statewide and national literacy activities, including helping to implement and assess the Common Core State Standards. Now retired from full-time work in education, Ms. Heath serves as an instructional coach with career and technical education teachers as well as volunteers on boards and with organizations that support literacy, students, and the arts.

Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.S., Ed.D., A/OGA, has served as a teacher and principal for 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.

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.*