Taking the First Steps with Science of Reading

By Stefany Bragg

Becoming a teacher was never a question for me. I was made to be a teacher. As a little girl I had an entire classroom set up in my parent's basement and spent my weekends begging my mom to take me to the teacher store to buy materials for my classroom. There was no question that becoming a teacher was my true calling. My dream of becoming an elementary teacher came true after graduating from a small college in Illinois. I landed my first teaching job at a rural school in Illinois teaching kindergarten, and I was so confident in my pedagogy abilities and passion for teaching that I had no reason to believe it would be anything less than remarkable.

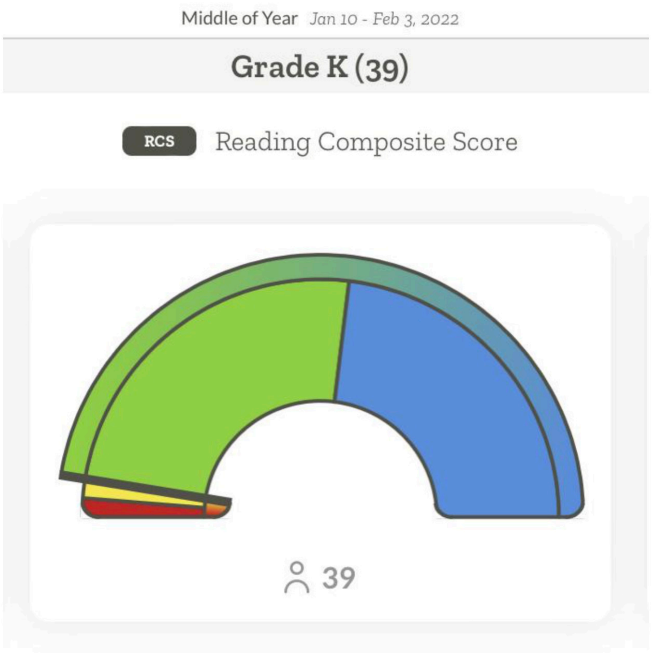
Still to this very day, I remember the exact feeling I felt standing in my classroom about two months into school thinking to myself that I had no idea how to teach these sweet eyes looking back at me how to read. I immediately began asking for help from colleagues and tried to figure out exactly what skills I should be teaching and the best approach to teaching the foundational skills, but the reality was none of the teachers I was surrounded by knew how to teach children how to read. I didn't know that then, but I do now. The hard truth was all my colleagues, who graduated from different colleges and universities, had received the same minimal, theory based instruction in regards to teaching reading from our preservice training. There was little to no instruction on teaching phonological awareness, phonics and or most importantly why these skills are crucial for developing readers. We were not taught about the makeup of our language so we could explain the "whys" behind the spellings of certain words to our students. We were only left with the explanation many teachers have to fall back on such as "English is just a crazy language and you just have to learn it". I can only speak directly from my own experience but most of the courses spent the majority of the time highlighting rich literature, which by all means is important, but not the only key students need to open the door to literacy.

Fast forward 11 years into my teaching career, and let's pause and think about the amount of students I had instructed over those 11 years. I happened upon the knight and shining armor that was going to save my students from walking out of my classroom not knowing how to read. I was introduced to the Science of Reading. It just so happened that a conference I signed up to attend was virtual due to the new pandemic our country was fighting, and while I was watching the sessions, Deanna Jump kept referring to the Science of Reading. She voiced the importance of phonological awareness, explicit phonics instruction, student grouping, decodable readers, and teaching high frequency words using letter/sound knowledge rather than memorization. All the research she was sharing made complete sense to me, but I was left with so many more questions. I had to know more so I began searching for articles and books that discussed the reading brain and research about what scientific based instruction looked like in the classroom. This knight and shining armor showed up and saved me from continuing to make the same mistakes I had been making for the past 11 years and in return has set up ALL my students for reading success when they walk out of my classroom.

The next school year, which was the year we returned from our country's shutdown, my partner teacher and I made huge changes to our reading instruction in kindergarten. We already knew it was going to be a hard year so we had to give it a chance, because the instruction we were giving before the pandemic wasn't moving mountains either. We implemented a phonological awareness program with an appropriate scope and sequence, we quit using leveled readers and cueing strategies such as look at the picture and say the first sound, and instead gave our students the code to unlock the words we were asking them to read through explicit phonics instruction. We now only use decodable readers that reinforced the phonics skill we were working on that week. I began learning so much about our language that explained why words like have and edge are spelled the way they are. I no longer had to say that English is crazy and too hard to understand. I could explain the reason why and my students understood. Parents were tracking me down to tell me how their child was coming home explaining rules such as no English words end in an i, u, v, or j. They were as shocked as I was that these rules existed, often questioning their child and looking it up for

themselves. One parent told me she couldn't wait to pick up their child each day to see if they learned a new rule, because she was so intrigued by this knowledge of our language, too. When other educators ask me how I found out this information, I suggest to them the text *Logic of English* (2012) by Densie Eide or *Speech to Print* (2020) by Louisa C. Moats. These are both engaging texts that present the logic behind the language.

Two years later, and now pursuing my master's degree in the Science of Reading, I have witnessed what these changes can do for students. I no longer dread assessing my students, because I know they have the skills they need to be successful. My Acadience benchmark scores in kindergarten look much different than they did before making these shifts previously mentioned. I see a sea of blue and green and a sprinkle of yellow or red. The difference now is I know what to do if I have a student in red or yellow. We can fix it before they leave my classroom with the right intervention and support. Teaching kindergarten, I feel as though I have a huge impact on my students' future reading success. Research suggests that if a student leaves first grade not meeting the foundational benchmarks on specific skills, they have an extremely low chance of ever catching up to grade level. The gap actually begins to get bigger each year. I now have the mindset that I must continue my learning with fruitful resources and affiliations such as the *The Reading League Journal,* attending Plain Talk About Literacy and Learning Conference in New Orleans sponsored by The Center of Literacy and Learning this past year, connecting with other teachers who are shifting to the Science of Reading through Facebook and Twitter, and attending countless webinars for my students. Along with my own journey, I have grabbed many colleagues and our school principal along for the ride as well. During the Plain Talk About Literacy and Learning Conference, one of the presenters challenged educators by explaining that it isn't good enough to just know better, you must share the knowledge and bring others along with you. One thing my coworkers and I constantly do is share articles or webinars with each other on topics we have recently learned new information about and discuss the material. When educators work together, it can be so powerful for our students. As a country, we can not count on teachers incidentally happening upon the science and research of the reading brain. When a person bravely takes on the responsibility to teach children, educators have the right to receive this information and so do the students that will enter the educator's pathway.



Author Information

Stefany Bragg is a classroom teacher at St. Mary of the Knobs Catholic School in Floyd Knobs, Indiana. She has been teaching for 13 years with experience in both public and private school settings. She has experience teaching grades fifth, fourth, second, kindergarten and prekindergarten with the majority of her experience in kindergarten. Currently, Stefany is working to obtain her Master's Degree in the Science of Reading at Mount Saint Joseph University. She has committed to learning and implementing instructional approaches that are supported by the Science of Reading to ensure literacy for all students in her classroom. Feel free to contact her at sbragg@yoursmk.org or find her on Facebook (Stefany Jaso Bragg) and Twitter @StefanyBragg.