

Stefanie Husejnovic's Transformation Journey

My name is Stefanie Husejnovic, and I am a Kindergarten teacher and collaborative teacher in Indianapolis, Indiana. I first heard about the Science of Reading about four years ago. It was my 10th year of teaching, and I was a member of our school's instructional leadership team for our charming centralized early childhood school just outside of downtown Indianapolis. I was on a team with some of the smartest women and most dedicated educators I have ever met. My assistant principal at the time had been sharing with our team about the reading research and strategies she was using to help her daughter with dyslexia. The practices that she was talking about really made sense, and we agreed that all students would benefit from a structured approach to literacy, but especially our struggling students and novice learners—which was the vast majority of our student body of around 450 Kindergartners, many of whom received free or reduced lunch.

Prior to this point, we always considered ourselves a reading school and focused on building fundamentals of reading and writing for our students. We did daily read-alouds, shared reading with big books, guided reading groups, and worked hard creating many literacy stations for students to rotate through while we worked with small groups. We used data to inform our instruction and had plans in place for intervention. Despite our best efforts and intentions, there was always a group of students that we could never quite get to meet those end-of-year Kindergarten benchmarks. Even the students that were meeting the benchmarks, somehow were not able to pass state testing when they reached third grade. We grasped for answers, but the truth was that we didn't know what we didn't know.

Now that we were beginning to hear about the science of reading and how the brain learns to read, we started digging deeper as a leadership team. We did book studies, read articles, watched videos, and started with a goal on oral language development. As a centralized Kindergarten school, we knew that oral language greatly impacted students' ability to become readers and we already had some good things happening in this area to build on. We connected with our school SLPs and provided professional development to staff on developing oral language through read-alouds with rich language, vocabulary instruction, and intentional work on oral language instruction using the Expanded Expression Tool. We worked on creating more opportunities for student-to-student interactions and discussions through natural conversations, directed interactions, turn and talks, sharing with the group, and play-based interactions.

There were great things happening around oral language development in the school, but it was only one piece, and we still were not seeing much change in regards to reading and writing scores. We knew our next focus needed to be on phonemic awareness and phonics instruction. We continued on in a snowball effect of learning more, building our understanding of the classroom implications of what we were learning, trying it out and sharing with our teachers with support. It was truly a team effort.

It was not always easy and there were many bumps in the road along the way. Change is very hard. Pushback happens; especially when teachers are used to new initiatives coming and going so frequently in education. We knew as a leadership team this was different. It was not a pendulum swing or fad; the research had been there all along. This was a necessary shift

that needed to be made for the sake of all of our students, and we needed to approach it with urgency, clarity, and the ability to meet the teachers where they were in their knowledge.

Personally, as a classroom teacher on the leadership team, I had to be willing to go first and make changes in my own 20 square feet of classroom and be honest about how it was going and transparent with my student data. I worked closely with the leadership team and SLPs making small changes at a time, shared videos of myself teaching, opened my classroom to observers, and had many coaching conversations with the teachers in my building. I got nervous many times and wanted to revert back to what I was familiar with, but stuck with it until my literacy block was completely transformed from balanced to structured literacy. One of the first changes I made was to stop having students memorize high-frequency word lists. I taught students to decode the words and used the heart word method to teach the irregular spellings. With the help of our school SLP, I took down my word wall and started introducing new phonemes and graphemes with a sound wall. I stopped using leveled readers and used decodable books for students to practice reading the phonics patterns they were learning. Teaching students to decode is a big labor of love as you're listening to them sound out each word, but great things are happening in the brain, and it WILL get better! I continued to read books aloud to my students and teach vocabulary every single day while making sure to select a variety of books around the topics we were learning in social studies and science. Each time I made a new change, I would ask myself, "ok, what's next?" and I'm still doing that today.

The chart below shows assessment results from the iReady diagnostic test for the 21-22 school year after a full year of structured literacy instruction. The striped green section indicates students who are above grade level and the solid green is on grade level. The 15/21 students assessed indicate the students that were present for both test 1 at the beginning of the year and test 3 at the end of the year— some had moved out or in between each test. Teacher knowledge of the science of reading is invaluable and critical! Very few of our student body of Kindergarteners had attended preschool, many were learning English, and every class had students with IEPs. I had the same student demographics in my classroom, the exact same curriculum and the exact same assessment as the other 19 classes, but much different results. This work is important and it is possible!

Class		Overall Grade-Level Placement					Students Assessed/Total
LANGUAGE100KLANG1... HUSEJNOVIC, S.	21-22 Test 3		67%	33%	0%	0%	15/21
	21-22 Test 1		0%	20%	80%	0%	

I have since moved schools and my focus has shifted toward impacting a wider group of students as a classroom teacher and collaborative teacher. I coach teachers on instructional practices aligned to the science of reading with a focus on strong tier 1 instruction, and I closely monitor the MTSS process for our grade level. At the end of the 2022-2023 school year, 92% of our entire grade level of Kindergarten students ended the year on or above grade level.

This journey is ongoing as I continue to learn more, adapt, and change as an educator and leader. I am so thankful for the one person that helped spark my SOR journey and hope that this story encourages you to start or continue on with yours. Here are a few tips of advice I would give anyone who is starting out:

1. Find your group of like-minded individuals. For me, I was lucky to have the support of my administrator and coworkers, but often teachers are starting this journey alone. Get connected with your state's chapter of the Reading League to start building those connections for support.
2. Get a copy of the Reading League's Defining Guide to gain a clear understanding of what the science of reading is and what it is not.
3. Connect with the speech pathologists in your buildings. They can be great resources for oral language development and speech to print approaches to reading.
4. Start somewhere! You don't have to know everything about the Science of Reading to begin making small shifts in your classroom that will make a big impact.