

Meeting the Challenges We Face

The seismic shifts emanating from the pandemic have been far-reaching. One of these shifts has been that children missed months of schooling, and it is unclear what school will continue to look like this fall. The long-term ramifications of this time away from school are unknown at this point. Parents have to step in to fill the void left as their children are away from the classroom. Many parents feel overwhelmed and like they are not doing enough for their children. They are worried about what the time away from school will mean for their children.

As any parent knows, children do not come with a user's manual. And there are not crash courses in making sure that learning continues at home. These same realities impact teachers and their schools. Flipping the switch on remote learning is not straight forward nor easy. Providing intervention during these times comes with its own set of challenges. And testing for learning disabilities has been impacted severely during these times.

Even during these trying times, the center's mission is still central to all that we do. As such, we support children and their parents. We are also still supporting teachers. The pandemic has created obstacles for the center for sure. Yet, these obstacles have provided us with opportunities to reconsider how we meet our mission.

As we strive to do this work, we have switched over to providing reading therapy to children with dyslexia through telehealth. Some of the challenges that educators face when doing this are highlighted in this newsletter. Also, we are redesigning how we test children for dyslexia to ensure the safety of everyone involved. It is our strong hope that testing at the center will begin again after we return to campus and put safety precautions in place.



During these times, we have still been actively providing professional development to educators across Tennessee, the nation, and the world. The training that we provide looks and feels a little different. We have redesigned the professional development that we provide to teachers. We now offer teacher training through videoconferencing and hybrid approaches. At the same time, the quality, professionalism, and wealth of knowledge that the center team brings to all that we do remains of the highest standard. Some of our continued efforts to deliver high-quality professional development to people are highlighted in this newsletter.

It is undeniable that these times have presented all of us with unprecedented challenges. Yet, we stand firm in our commitment to meet them head-on and continue to be a valued and reliable resource for Tennesseans and the nation. As such, we continue to provide support to children, parents, and teachers. ■

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Instruction Matters

Study with National Experts for Free

As the world hunkered down in the wake of the pandemic, “business as usual” ground to a halt. The abrupt transition to social distancing created challenges of many kinds. In the past few months, we have seen determination and resilience from educators, families, and students.

Educators quickly pivoted to find ways to continue teaching and learning with their students. Our profession’s resilience and care have been on display. Many have newly embraced technology for teaching and learning. Remote professional development options have also become available. The staff at the center have worked to respond and pivot as well to meet our current environmental and educational needs. We continue to collaborate with school districts and share in-person professional development when health safety measures are met. We have also added remote workshop delivery as an ongoing option for schools and districts within and outside Tennessee.

We are especially pleased to maximize a resource we have recently curated. The video recordings of our national expert presentations are being made available, at no cost, for professional development. Generosity of time and spirit is a hallmark of our profession. These leading researchers and practitioners are supporting efforts to maximize existing resources to meet our changing times and needs. We are grateful for their ongoing leadership in literacy. We are particularly grateful in this moment for their unwavering dedication to educators and students. We are able to offer these resources for free due to their generosity and commitment.



Dr. Suzanne Carreker presents strategies for spelling instruction.

The videos can be easily accessed under the Video Resources tab on our website www.mtsu.edu/dyslexia. These expert presentations are a wonderful resource for self-study in order to deepen your own knowledge and bolster instruction. They can be incorporated into a group study on literacy topics in a more formal setting, such as a PLC group. Schools and districts can also extend learning by adding the presenter’s associated book for in-depth learning on the topic. ■

Recent Findings

Developing a Decoding Measure that Quantifies Features Within Words

We must ensure that students get plenty of time reading books and other print and digital sources of connected text throughout the day. Reading actual text is critical. It gives students opportunities to apply skills they are directly taught. And to transfer them to new contexts. These skills should be part of explicit reading instruction at school. Yet, teachers and parents alike often ask about how best to select texts for their children to read.



This takes some thought because it gives rise to the Goldilocks problem. We do not want a text to be too easy nor too hard, but rather, just right. That is to say that the text needs

to be *accessible* to the student. By accessible, we mean a text that the child can read relatively independent of their teacher or parent. The child may need some support

Not all practice opportunities are the same. success.

or guidance. However, the child should be able to accurately read most of the words in the text on their own.

Reading Instruction and Opportunities for Practice

As a starting point, we must support accurate word reading. To support this goal, students should receive explicit phonics instruction. This work should be part of the reading instruction provided to them at school. Explicit phonics instruction helps children build their decoding skills. Children need opportunities to

practice reading words in different contexts in order for these skills to stick.

One context where they must read words is connected text. Reading words in connected text is most beneficial when the selected text promotes accurate, efficient, prosodic reading. It is essential to ensure a tight relationship between a chosen text and the instructional targets of the child's reading program. Doing so will support a student to be able to successfully read that text. This pairing is often referred to as *lesson-to-text matching*, and it helps to reduce the frustrations that emerging readers can experience when reading. The goal of this approach is to foster a desirable level of difficulty for a child.

Practice is most beneficial when it promotes the experience of success.

Recent Findings (continued from page 3)

Developing a Decoding Measure that Quantifies Features Within Words



How to Choose Accessible Texts for Students

When striving to promote a desirable level of difficulty, there are important things to consider. One is to make sure the selected text features the reading concepts a student has already been taught and mastered.

The texts should also have reading concepts that a student is being taught to read as part of the current explicit reading instruction. For example, when digraph “ck” is introduced, practice texts should have words with it.

Several metrics exist to help classify texts, but it is still difficult to choose texts for students.

Some reading programs build connected texts into their sequence of instruction. So in some ways, they have done part of the work for you. Yet, students require more opportunities to apply what they are learning. They need to read more connected text than what they typically obtain by reading the text passages included as part of a reading curriculum. Thus, educators need to be able to identify and provide their students with additional text offerings to read. We often hear from educators that they want clear guidance to help them do this. Likewise, parents have similar questions. They want to foster opportunities for reading in the home. They, too, want support in selecting books for their children.

Our esteemed colleagues Neena Saha, Ph.D., and Laurie Cutting, Ph.D., at Vanderbilt University, are developing an exciting new tool to help with this process. Saha gave us an update on this ongoing research project that she is leading.

Several metrics exist to help classify texts. Yet, they vary. They measure different components. Some are objective, and others are more qualitative and subjective. The metrics also vary in their transparency. This means that sometimes calculation formulas are unclear and difficult to reproduce.

In an article published in the *Annals of Dyslexia*, Saha and Cutting examined existing studies about text complexity tools. These studies analyzed the relationship between text complexity ratings and students’ reading performance. There were differences in how complexity predicted student’s oral reading fluency. Ratings from more fine-grained tools related to student outcomes more strongly. Here, fine-grained means measuring variables that are sub-lexical. This finding implies that paying attention to features within words themselves improves predictions. These results underscore an important point. The difficulty of the individual words

in the story or passage matters. It matters even more so when choosing texts for a struggling reader to practice their skills.

Saha also told us about their new quantitative measure of decoding. This new tool focuses on individual words. And it will be in a web application. Each word in a connected text passage is examined and coded. The coding focuses on components within the words themselves. It looks at things like what letter patterns are present. They also record if those letters can represent more than one sound in the English language. The coding includes ratings of how common the letter patterns are in English. And they code other features as well. These are sub-lexical variables, and these variables impact an individual's ability to read a word. Then, the decoding tool reveals the average difficulty of words within a passage. It also tells you about how different the difficulty ratings are across the words in a passage. These researchers collected data to provide initial empirical evidence for their tool's validity. Children were recorded reading passages. The researchers looked at how well ratings from the tool predicted reading performance. A research article reporting on their findings is under peer review.

Evidence suggests metrics focused on features within words are best at predicting student outcomes.

Validity studies like this one are crucial. Text complexity measures exist to describe how difficult texts are. So, ratings from them should correspond to how easily the texts are read. Also, text complexity measures are most useful when they involve measurable components. Doing so makes it possible to apply the tool to new materials. Quantifiable text complexity measures focused on features within words will benefit researchers. They will also help educators. Both groups need to examine when and how a student's reading changes over time. They need lots of passages with similar difficulty ratings to do so. Otherwise, it is difficult to know why a student's performance changed. Was the passage today easier than last week? Or, did the student gain expertise in decoding the letter patterns targeted in lessons? If the passages used in testing are of similar difficulty, then there is support for the second possibility. Thus, the preliminary evidence suggests this new decoding measure is a useful tool.

The under-development web application is also intriguing. It will allow individuals to get metrics about passages they input. Saha highlighted another feature that may be particularly exciting for educators. She is working on calculations to facilitate lesson-to-text matching based on the scope and sequence of instructional programs. We will be keeping our eye out for future updates and expansions of their new decoding measure. ■

Center News

Conference Presentations

Recent presentations at the eighth annual Literacy Research Conference hosted by MTSU's Literacy Studies Ph.D. program on Feb. 29:

"Using EEG with an Audiovisual Oddball Task to Investigate Letter-Speech Sound Perceptions" by Kaitlyn E. Berry, Robyn M. Sessler, Kellie Payne, Sarah Pope, Emily A. Farris, and Timothy N. Odegard

"Impacts of Experimental and Linguistic Frequency: A P300 Analysis of Grapheme-Phoneme Correspondence" presented by Robyn M. Sessler, Kaitlyn E. Berry, Kellie Payne, Sarah Pope, Emily A. Farris, and Timothy N. Odegard



Dr. Emily Farris (l) with doctoral students: Tamera Hutchins, Susan Porter, Pam Shewalter, and Shonna Phelps

"The Impact Cognitive and Environmental Factors Have on Children's Reading Resilience" poster presented by Hannah Johnson, Emily A. Farris, and Timothy N. Odegard

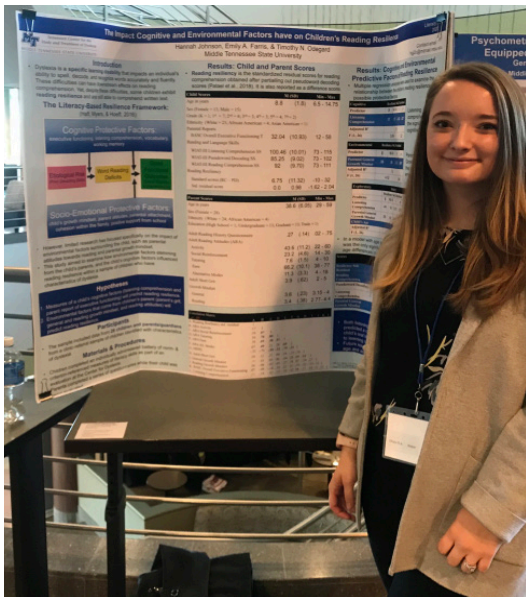
"Reading Profiles of Students in Response to Intervention (RTI²) and Special Education" presented by Tamera Hutchings, Emily A. Farris, and Timothy N. Odegard

"Analysis of Diagnostic Information Provided by Published Texts of Decoding and Word Reading" presented by Jessica Dainty, Timothy N. Odegard and Emily A. Farris

"Online Educator Training in Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction is as Effective at Improving Knowledge of Areas that Inform Literacy Instruction as Analogous Stand-and-Deliver" presented by Shonna Donovan Phelps, Timothy N. Odegard, and Emily A. Farris

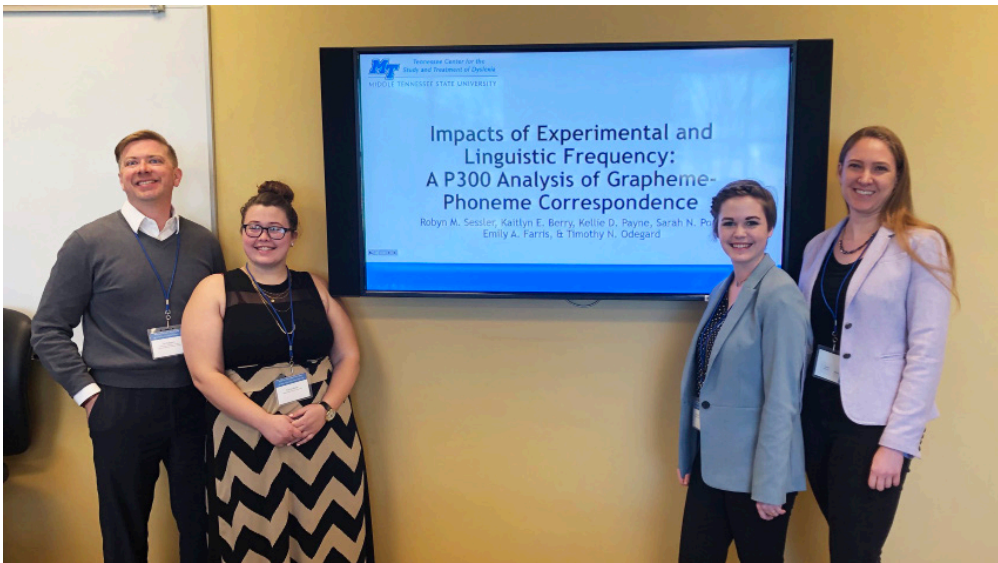
"Characterizing the Knowledge of Educators Across the Tiers of Instructional Support" presented by Susan Porter, Emily A. Farris, Melissa McMahan, and Timothy N. Odegard

"Dyslexia Legislation and the Identification of Dyslexia" presented by Timothy N. Odegard



Master's student Hannah Johnson presents a research poster at the MTSU Literacy Studies Conference.

Conference Presentations



Presenting findings at the eighth annual Literary Research Conference are (l-r); Tim Odegard, Ph.D.; Kaitlyn Berry; Robyn Sessler; and Emily Farris, Ph.D.

Presentation accepted to the National Conference on Undergraduate Research in Bozeman, Montana on March 28, an event unfortunately cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic:

“Mismatch Negativity Responses to English Vowel Sounds During an Audiovisual Oddball Task” by Kaitlyn E. Berry, Robyn M. Sessler, Kellie Payne, Sarah Pope, Emily A. Farris, and Timothy N. Odegard

“Experimental and Linguistic Frequency: A P300 Analysis of Grapheme-Phoneme Correspondence” presented by Robyn M. Sessler, Kaitlyn E. Berry, Kellie Payne, Sarah Pope, Emily A. Farris, and Timothy N. Odegard

Other recent conference presentations:

“From Identification to Instruction: Tools to Organize Student Data and Structure Tiered Intervention” presented at Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network’s online 2020 Literacy Symposium by Melinda Hirschmann, June

“Setting Them Up for Success: Choosing Accommodations for Students with Characteristics of Dyslexia” presented by Erin Alexander at the Tennessee Department of Education Partners in Education Conference in Nashville, January

“Getting from *Cat* to *Catastrophic*: How Explicit and Systematic Early Literacy Instruction Sets the Foundation for Proficiency with Advanced Reading Skills and Comprehension” presented by Melinda Hirschmann to the Tennessee Department of Education Partners in Education Conference in Nashville, January

Accolades



Congratulations to our student affiliates who have won awards or are graduating!

Research assistants and Psychology majors Sarah Pope and Kellie Payne graduated in December 2019. Payne will be staying with us as she begins the MTSU School Psychology graduate program and her new position as a graduate assistant at the center.

URECA scholars and Psychology majors Kaitlyn Berry and Robyn Sessler graduated in May, both from the Honors College at MTSU. Berry was awarded the Larry W. Morris Outstanding Senior in Psychology award, Tyler A. Schultz Memorial Scholarship, Belsky Scholarship award, and Provost Award from the University. Berry and Sessler will begin Psychology graduate programs at MTSU.

Berry will be in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, and Sessler will be in Quantitative Psychology.

Graduate assistants Re'Khel Burke and Caroline Stroupe will begin their school Psychology internships this fall. Burke will work with Shelby County Schools in Tennessee, and Stroupe will work with Greenville County Schools in South Carolina. ■



Graduating seniors Kaitlyn Berry (above) and Robyn Sessler (r) present research findings at the eighth annual Literacy Research Conference.

In Focus

Challenges and Opportunities of Remote Teaching and Learning

Tips for Teaching and Learning at Home

- Create a designated work space (e.g., desk or table)
- Have materials ready before the session begins (e.g., pencils, workbooks, etc.)
- Eat a healthy meal before class
- Stick to a daily routine or schedule

Like most of the country, this spring our center had to stop providing in-person tutoring and other services for the health of our clients and staff. However, the need to help students learn to read and spell has not stopped. The COVID-19 pandemic has offered us a unique set of challenges as well as opportunities to develop new skills.

Like us, the students that we tutor are learning to adjust to a new way of learning. We have all had to quickly learn how to use videoconferencing (i.e., Zoom) when we are used to meeting face to face. We have had to deal with the distractions of being at home, such as people talking or cooking in a nearby room, dogs climbing into our laps, or the doorbell ringing. We have been frustrated by slow internet speed that has caused us to have trouble seeing or hearing each other.

Despite these difficulties, good things have still happened. Parents are able to observe the lesson and learn new ways to support their child's learning. In addition, we have deepened personal connections with students. We have been able to share glimpses into our homes and introduce our pets. We have shared and laughed about computer problems, such as someone forgetting to turn on their microphone. Together we have learned how to use different features in Zoom, like figuring out how to share our screen to show the other person what we have written. We have learned that many practices that are helpful during a typical, in-person session still apply to remote learning. Many of the strategies that we would recommend for students can be helpful to teachers as well. You can start by choosing a quiet place where you will work. Get up in time to eat a good breakfast. Have materials ready before class begins so you do not waste time looking for pencils or other needed items during the lesson. Sticking to a routine, such as meeting at the same time each day, helps you and the student know what to expect each day and can reduce stress. Another way to reduce stress for the teacher and the student is to follow the same procedures as you did



In Focus (Continued from page 9)

Challenges and Opportunities of Remote Teaching and Learning



when you met in person. For example, if you did the reading portion of the lesson, then handwriting, and then spelling, keep doing that. This way, the lesson feels more “normal” and you can focus on learning new skills instead of learning a new order of doing the activities. Finally, be patient with yourself and with others as we are all learning together! ■



Additional Tips for Remote Reading Intervention

Model how to read and spell words on the virtual whiteboard.

Share your screen for students to watch as you decode and write words. This is very similar to writing words on a whiteboard in a classroom.

To increase engagement, give students the choice of spelling words on their virtual whiteboard (sharing the screen for the teacher to view) or writing on paper or a small dry-erase board they have at home. The student can then hold up their work to the camera for the teacher to see.

Practice manipulating sounds in words by using colored squares found online (e.g., change cat to mat by changing the first square to a new color).

Use virtual letter tiles to spell words. Take turns sharing your screen so the other person can observe. The website www.reallygreatreading.com/lettertiles is one good option for these activities.

In Focus

Going Virtual: 2020 Fox Reading Conference and Beyond

It comes as no surprise to our longstanding supporters and attendees of the center's professional development events that the Fox Reading Conference is our showcase event. Our team spends over a year preparing to bring this event to Tennessee educators. The biennial Fox Reading Conference has been offered as free, quality professional development to educators in Tennessee for over 30 years. For 2020, our team wanted to expand the reach of the Fox Reading Conference and bring the conference to educators beyond Tennessee and the capacity of a 300-seat auditorium. In collaboration with MTSU's Center for Educational Media (CEM) and with the generosity of our sponsors, our team made this a reality by offering the conference online to educators across the nation as well as the traditional in-person conference.

As the conference approached, the coronavirus pandemic landed on our doorstep. Our first challenge arrived as sponsors slated to attend the exhibition hall for the conference began restricting travel for their employees. This was followed closely by MTSU's decision to cancel all on-campus events, and registration for the in-person conference was already full. There were several hard conversations amongst our team as we faced these challenges. We even lost a sponsor or two as we transitioned to a completely virtual conference, but we are proud to say that we pulled it off. Thanks to the technical expertise of the CEM team, the cheerful willingness of our wonderful speakers to adapt to the situation and offer their presentations via Zoom, and the unbridled enthusiasm of educators around the world, the 2020 Fox Reading Conference went on as planned—even better actually. Over 4,500 registered attendees from around the world showed up online for the conference, and now, the 2020 Fox Reading Conference—which is still available for viewing—has had over 18,000 views!



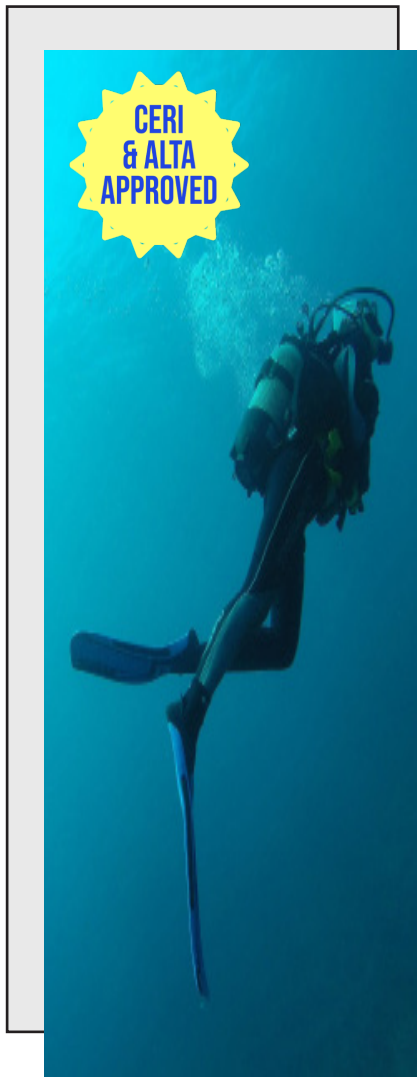
Fast-forward five months later, we are still in the midst of a pandemic, but thanks to experience gained with the Fox, we are ready to meet the challenge of delivering high-quality professional development virtually. We continue to offer workshops to schools across the state and the nation, and we'd be pleased to bring one of our workshops to your school district. For a listing of available workshops, please see: mtsu.edu/dyslexia.

Thanks to all you--the educators, administrators, support staff, parents, and future educators who have and continue to support the education efforts of the center. Thank you to Tom and Elizabeth Fox who created the Fox conference with their generous endowment. Also, thanks to the kind sponsors who supported the 2020 Fox Reading Conference. We are here for you and because of you.



Upcoming Workshops & Conferences

2020–21 Literacy Success Series: Taking a Deeper Dive Into the Core



Direct, explicit, systemic literacy instruction in the Tier 1/core setting benefits all developing readers. Integrated sessions in our 2020–21 Literacy Success Series focus on explicit instruction in the foundational skills needed for skilled reading. Core instruction for the K–2 ELA block will be modeled using the CKIA curriculum and the Tennessee foundational skills curriculum supplement materials. A flipped content model will be used, allowing you to build background knowledge at your convenience. Educators will attend the live, remote Saturday sessions together via Zoom. Live session activities and instructional modeling will build on the knowledge gained from the flipped content. Each session will include:

- An overview of the research supporting the content
- Reading instruction modeled for the K–2 core classroom setting using the CKLA curriculum and Tennessee Foundational Skills Curriculum Supplement materials
- Student assessment modeled using the curriculum embedded measures (CEMs) within the CKLA curriculum

Join us as we explore the science of reading and take a deeper dive into the K–2 core.

Registration: \$199 for the six-part series (36 hours of PD)

Sessions: Saturdays, 8:30-11:30 AM Central time

Dates: Oct. 24, 2020
Nov. 14, 2020
Dec. 12, 2020
Jan. 9, 2021
Feb. 6, 2021
March 6, 2021

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