

Casting an OPAL (Observation Protocol to Assess Literacy):
Examining Teachers' Instructional Practices

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2021 SoTL Grant Submission

18 October 2021

Abstract

The overall purpose of this project is to design and validate an Observation Protocol to Assess Literacy (OPAL) with the aim of capturing literacy teaching and learning that is grounded in principles of effective literacy instruction. There are three objectives to be achieved in the process: 1) conduct research on existing observation protocols, 2) create the Observation Protocol to Assess Literacy (OPAL), and 3) conduct the research necessary to validate it. This study aims to yield a valid literacy observation instrument that will serve as a practical guide for teacher educators as they deliver and observe literacy instruction. The findings of this study have implications for both practice and future research. For reading researchers and reading education faculty in the Cato College of Education, a valid literacy observation instrument could serve a part in a multifaceted teacher observation system and would help to document preservice teachers' literacy practices to ensure they can effectively teach literacy.

**SoTL Budget Request Page
January 15, 2022 to June 30, 2023**

REVISED BUDGET: *Request by budget category. Joint proposers must select one PI to be the lead and one department to receive this allocation.*

Lead Principal Investigator: **Adriana L. Medina, PhD**

Principal Investigator 800#: **800564400**

Title of Project: **Casting an OPAL (Observation Protocol to Assess Literacy): Examining Teachers' Instructional Practices**

Allocate operating budget to Department of: **Reading and Elementary Education**

Fiscal Year One (January 15, 2022 to June 30, 2022)		
Faculty Stipend	Paid directly from Academic Affairs fund on May 15, 2022	\$ 3850.00
911250	Graduate Student Salaries	1500.00
911300	Special Pay to Faculty other than Grantee	4,100.00
915000	Student (Undergraduate or Graduate) Temporary Wages	
915900	Non-student Temporary Wages	
920000	Honorarium (Individual(s) not with UNCC)	
921160	Subject Incentive Fee	
925000	Domestic Travel	1400.00
926000	Foreign Travel	
928000	Communication and/or Printing	
930000	Supplies	150.00
942000	Computing Equipment	
944000	Educational Equipment	
951000	Other Contracted Services	
Year One Subtotal		\$ 11,000.00

Fiscal Year Two (July 1, 2022 to May 30, 2023)		
Faculty Stipend	Paid directly from Academic Affairs fund on May 15, 2023	
911250	Graduate Student Salaries	
911300	Special Pay to Faculty other than Grantee	
915000	Student (Undergraduate or Graduate) Temporary Wages	
915900	Non-student Temporary Wages	
920000	Honorarium (Individual(s) not with UNCC)	
921160	Subject Incentive Fee	
925000	Domestic Travel	
926000	Foreign Travel	
928000	Communication and/or Printing	
930000	Supplies	
942000	Computing Equipment	
944000	Educational Equipment	
951000	Other Contracted Services	
Year Two Subtotal		\$ 0.00
TOTAL FUNDS REQUESTED (Year One + Year Two)		\$ 11,000.00

Budget Narrative (\$12,000 in total requested)

Faculty Stipend (\$3850 requested)

- The amount of \$3850 is requested for the principal investigator's stipend. This stipend is compensation for several components of the research process that are time intensive, namely overseeing the instrument design, co-planning the pilot study implementation, supervising data collection and analysis for validation, and disseminating the results.

Graduate Student Salaries (\$1500 requested)

- A total of \$1500 is requested for graduate student salaries. This amount will be used to cover research activities such as literature review, data entry, and transcriptions of interviews.

Revised Budget Narrative Section: Special Pay to Faculty other than Grantee (\$4100 requested)

- The amount of \$3000 is requested for faculty. Three faculty members that are literacy experts in the Department of Reading and Elementary Education (i.e., Drs. Paola Pilonieta, Erin Washburn, and Miranda Fitzgerald) will each be compensated \$1000 (for a total of \$3000) for consultation in the development of the OPAL and participation in the data collection and analysis.
- One of these faculty member will also be compensated \$500 for managing course-based aspects of the pilot study.
- Clinical Literacy Educators (CLEs) will mentor Literacy Scholars (10 CLEs observing 24 Literacy Scholars at \$25 per observation for a total of \$600) for their part of utilizing the OPAL as part of the instrument validation process.

Domestic Travel (\$1500 requested)

- The Literacy Scholars will be doing their clinical field experiences at Niner University Elementary (NUE). Therefore, funds are requested to cover travel for faculty members between the University and NUE to conduct observations.
- A faculty member from the Office of School and Community Partnerships will serve as a liaison between the College of Education and Niner University Elementary School as well as a facilitator during the Literacy Summit in training the Clinical Literacy Educators (CLEs) on the OPAL. She too will need to be compensated for travel to and from NUE.

Supplies (\$150 requested)

- To validate the protocol, many copies of the instrument will need to be printed and used. Resources such as paper and other office supplies will be necessary. Funds are requested to cover such expenses related to office supplies and producing print material commonly associated with conducting and disseminating research.



October 21, 2021

Dear SoTL Committee Members,

I am pleased to offer my support for the SoTL grant proposal “Casting an OPAL (Observation Protocol to Assess Literacy): Examining Teachers’ Instructional Practices” submitted by Dr. Adriana Medina. The Cato College of Education’s mission is to prepare highly effective teachers who can teach literacy. This has never been more important than now during the COVID-19 pandemic where we are seeing a decline in students' literacy proficiency. We need to improve K-12 students’ literacy and to do this we need instruments that can serve to prepare pre-service teachers to better implement best-practices for reading instruction. This SoTL proposal has the purpose of designing and validating an Observation Protocol to Assess Literacy (OPAL) with the aim of capturing literacy teaching and learning that is grounded in principles of effective literacy instruction. I am pleased to support this proposal.

Thank you for your consideration of Dr. Medina’s application.

Dr. Teresa Petty

Interim Dean, Cato College of Education
UNC Charlotte

Project Narrative

Rationale

The Cato College of Education and the Reading and Elementary (REEL) Department's mission is to prepare highly effective and ethical professionals whose work positively impacts the people and organizations they serve in urban, rural, and other diverse settings. Recently, REEL was selected by the University of North Carolina System Office as a Literacy Innovation Leader. This designation has created many opportunities, one of which is to identify Literacy Scholars and provide them with experiential learning opportunities beyond clinical experiences associated with coursework as well as to develop the capacity of clinical literacy educators (CLEs) to mentor and supervise teacher candidates. The Literacy Scholars participate in two year-long internships comprising two consecutive semesters each. Within the classrooms, Literacy Scholars will be expected to engage in providing instructional literacy support, working with small groups of students, or working individually with one student all the while being supported through observation by their CLE and a REEL faculty member.

Preparing highly effective teachers, particularly teachers who can teach literacy, has never been more important. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, children have experienced a jarring shift in instruction that will linger well into the next few school years. The DIBELS', an assessment of foundational literacy skills, 2021 midyear report indicated almost half of K-1 students scored within the lowest category in early literacy skills, nearly two-thirds more than before the pandemic (Guidry et al., 2021). More worrisome, an analysis of DIBELS scores from 400,000 students across 41 states shows twice as many African American kindergarten students at risk of not learning to read when compared to pre-pandemic numbers (Guidry et al., 2021).

Here in North Carolina, 35,000 students (33%) who were in third-grade last year were retained due to failing reading exams (Doss Helms, 2021).

Part of teacher preparation involves observation of teaching in action. Observations are a necessary learning support as preservice teachers transition to full-fledged teachers where observations will be used for professional development and high-stakes decision making. Two important elements of observations are the instrument and the observer. Observation instruments are not “neutral” (Caughlan & Jiang, 2014); they reflect what is being valued. Thus, an observation instrument should align with the desired outcomes for teacher preparation. The observer should understand the elements of the observation instrument so that the feedback provided also aligns with the desired learning outcomes and leads to instructional growth. With the need to improve K-12 students’ literacy to pre-Covid benchmarks and better, pre-service teachers need to be observed implementing best-practices for reading instruction in order to gain the intended outcomes. Thus, a targeted literacy observation instrument is needed. Additionally, observers need to be well versed in the instrument so that the use of the instrument yield the intended learning outcomes.

Overall Purpose

The overall purpose of this project is to design and validate an observation tool with the aim of capturing literacy teaching and learning that is grounded in principles of effective literacy instruction.

Objectives to be Achieved

There are three objectives to be achieved in the process of validating an observation instrument to assess literacy teaching and learning: 1) conduct research on existing observation

protocols, 2) create an Observation Protocol to Assess Literacy (OPAL), and 3) conduct the research necessary to validate it.

Research Questions

There are four research questions guiding this project:

- What is the validity of the OPAL instrument in determining the quality of literacy instruction?
- To what extent do the Literacy Scholars appropriate/use the instructional practices in the OPAL?
- To what extent does the OPAL provide Literacy Scholars with actionable feedback that leads to growth over time?
- How is the OPAL used by observers to assess the Literacy Scholars' performance?

Impact

Analysis of the data and interpretation of the result will lead to a valid literacy observation instrument that will serve as a practical guide for teacher educators as they deliver and observe literacy instruction.

For reading researchers and reading education faculty in the Reading and Elementary Education department, a valid literacy observation instrument will help to document preservice teachers' literacy practices to ensure they can effectively teach literacy.

Alignment with Areas of Focus

This project provides Literacy Scholars with additional **experiential learning** opportunities because they will engage in an additional year-long internship (YLI) before the typical YLI experience that culminates with student teaching. The project also examines practices at the **course and program level**. The additional internship will take place while

Literacy Scholars are enrolled in two methods courses - READ 3224 and READ 3226. This change has implications for the current program of study and the traditional YLI program/experience.

Literature Review

Chronically poor reading scores (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019) have captured the attention of educators, legislators, and researchers over the last decade (Gewertz, 2020; Lyon, 1998; Shanahan, 2014). Additionally, concern has grown even more due to COVID-19's interruption of in-school learning (Dominigue et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2021). It has been suggested this disruption in learning has disproportionality impacted students of color (Lewis et al., 2021). However, these gaps in reading achievement between these populations and their white, English speaking peers were prevalent prior to the pandemic and perpetuate systems of inequality (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Snow et al., 1998; Warner-Griffin, 2017).

Researchers had identified what students need to learn to master reading and how teachers can support students in their learning (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000; Foorman & Moats, 2004). Studies suggest teachers must have specialized content knowledge, including knowledge of the structure of the language, as well as pedagogical practices, necessary to instruct students in reading (Moats, 2020; Phelps, 2009; Phelps & Schilling, 2004). Despite large bodies of research demonstrating effective methods to teach reading (NICHD, 2000; Petscher et al., 2020), teachers use a variety of reading instructional strategies they believe will help their students (Schachter et al., 2016), many of which have no basis in research or the understanding of reading development. Additionally,

studies suggest many teachers may be lacking this content knowledge and point to this as one key variable in current reading outcomes for students (Lyon, 1998; Pittman et al., 2019).

Although federal legislation (e.g., No Child Left Behind) responding to this situation was intended to increase focus on teacher instruction and accountability, the shift to prioritizing third grade reading, to address the first year of high-stakes testing in the elementary grades, may have left the instruction of foundational reading skills in grades K-2 behind (Nanton, 2021).

In addition to the federal legislation focused on improving reading outcomes, states have recently passed legislation related to increasing reading proficiency of their students by focusing on building teacher knowledge (Gewertz, 2020). An example is North Carolina's Senate Bill 387 which passed during the April, 2021 legislative session to modify the Read to Achieve legislation in order to attain statewide reading proficiency by the third grade (Truitt, 2021). This session law 2021-8 Senate Bill 387 prioritizes teacher knowledge and skills of PreK to fifth grade teachers to positively impact the current reading outcomes of students across the state. NCDPI has adopted Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) as the professional learning program (Moats & Tolman, 2019). As such, institutes of higher education and local education agencies will collaborate with NCDPI to receive training via cohorts. The LETRS website suggests their training provides teachers with the research, knowledge and skills to improve literacy and language development of all students and is accredited through the International Dyslexia Association (Voyager Sopris Learning, 2021). This initiative begins as recently released third grade scores on the 2020-2021 Reading End of Grade (EOG) assessment showed only 33.7% of NC third graders scoring at the College and Career Ready level. Implementation must be strategic, in order to promote change and gain intended outcomes (Fixsen et al., 2019). NCDPI has suggested models to support the selection, training, and

coaching of teachers, all key components of the competency drivers to support fidelity (Fixsen et al., 2019).

Other factors must be considered, as well. Observation instruments are used to measure teaching quality (Hill et al., 2012), as well as support the implementation of evidence-based practices (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010). It is likely that researchers developing observation measures will be more successful when thinking more broadly toward observation systems (Hill et al., 2012). In such, Hill and colleagues argue developers must consider instrument development (e.g., identifying any items needed to be removed or modified and consider the best number of items to measure the targeted constructs, training (e.g., qualifications, training, and certification), and scoring design (e.g., number and length of observations, number of raters/observation, and certification or rater requirements). It is important to consider that observation instruments are not neutral but reflect the programs for which they are used and are often standards-based (Caughlan & Jiang, 2014). Further, during tool development, attention should be paid to the unique items that make up content knowledge for the teachers of reading (Phelps & Schilling, 2004). The monitoring of preservice teacher practice allows for the training and coaching necessary to ensure all students have teachers who enter the profession prepared to execute quality reading instruction from day one of school.

Methods

The activities related to this project will begin during the fall 2021 semester and continue to the fall 2022 semester. According to Messick (1989) there are five elements to validity: “interpretation, relevance, and the utility of scores, the import or value implications of scores as a basis for action, and the functional worth of scores in terms of social consequences of their use”

(p. 13). For the OPAL to be useful, it should be valid. To examine validity of the instrument, feedback will be sought from those observed by the OPAL as well as those using the OPAL.

There are five stages to the research design.

Stage 1 - Creation: By the end of fall 2021, faculty will have examined existing literacy observation protocols and created the Observation Protocol to Assess Literacy (OPAL).

Stage 2 – Face and Content Validity and Pilot: Early in the spring semester 2022, faculty will begin to establish face and content validity by sharing the observation instrument with literacy experts. Based on expert feedback, the OPAL will be modified and finalized. Toward the end of the spring 2022 semester, one faculty member will pilot the OPAL in READ 3224 with Literacy Scholars.

Stage 3 – Modification and Training: During summer 2022, based on pilot data, the OPAL will be modified and finalized so as to determine how its use can be integrated into READ 3224 and READ 3226 in fall 2022. As part of the Summer Literacy Summit, training for CLE's for using the OPAL in the fall semester will be conducted.

Stage 4 – Integration and Data Collection: During the fall 2022 semester, instructors of READ 3224 and READ 3226 will weave the OPAL, how to use it and it's intended purpose, into instruction. For example, when a new instructional practices is introduced, the instructor and Literacy Scholars can identify how this practice is represented in the OPAL. Faculty will also review the OPAL with CLEs. The OPAL will be used in classes and in the field. Literacy Scholars' courses will strategically align with the elementary school's morning literacy block. This facilitates delivery of direct instruction by a reading faculty one day per week with the Literacy Scholars engaging in direct classroom experiences. Literacy Scholars will collaborate with the CLE to identify a small group of students (2-5) that they will develop a plan for and

deliver targeted reading instruction. Literacy Scholars will be jointly supported by the faculty member, CLE, and a faculty site coordinator (FSC) from the College's Office of School and Community Partnerships (OSCP). Notably, the faculty member, CLE, and FSC will supervise instruction and provide feedback on at least two direct teaching activities during the year-long internship. CLEs and the Reading Faculty will provide their feedback in a post-observation conference with the Literacy Scholar. Observation documentation will be collected. All participants will be interviewed individually or in a focus group, depending on their teaching and class schedules. Interview questions will focus on instrument validity and barriers and facilitators to the use of the OPAL.

Stage 5 – Data Analysis: During spring 2023, qualitative data analysis will begin. Focus group interviews will be recorded and transcribed and de-identified of individual information. NVivo (QSR International, 2019) will be used for data management and organization during the qualitative analysis process. The observation documents will be examined as a method of triangulation.

Knowledge Dissemination

The results of the project will be disseminated at the REEL department level as well as to the College. A manuscript detailing the instrument and its validation efforts will be composed and submitted to a scholarly research journal. A presentation proposal for a teacher education conference will also be prepared and submitted. In addition, faculty researchers can present the results at the following conferences such as North Carolina Association of Research in Education (NCARE) conference in 2022 which will be held in Charlotte and during UNC Charlotte's CTL's Teaching Week.

Human Subjects

IRB approval to conduct this proposed research will be submitted in Spring 2022. Once attained, IRB approval will be forwarded upon request.

Extramural Funding

No extramural funding was sought for this proposed research.

Timeline

Fall 2021: Examine existing literacy observation protocols and develop the OPAL; Begin the IRB process

Spring 2022: Establish face and content validity; modify and finalize the OPAL; pilot its use for teaching and learning

Summer 2022: Fine-tune the OPAL; Teach the protocol to CLEs at the Summer Literacy Summit

Fall 2022: Weave the OPAL into course content; Utilize the OPAL in class and in the field; Observe Literacy Scholars with the OPAL; collect data to validate the OPAL

Spring 2023: Begin data analysis

Summer 2022 and Beyond: Transition from undergraduate to graduate programs. In the future, as part of the leadership and coaching program focus and coursework, prepare candidates in the M.Ed. in Reading to use the OPAL to observe students in the Graduate Certificate program.

References

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