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Episode 40: Structured Literacy

Becky Lewis: Hello listeners and welcome to episode 40 of the leaders of Literacy Podcast. I am your host, Becky Lewis, and in this episode, I am joined with my co-host for the month Maggie Luma. Today we are talking all about structured literacy.

This is the West Virginia leaders of Literacy Podcast, where we engage in educational conversations to strengthen early literacy in West Virginia. Are you ready to become a leader of literacy?

Welcome Maggie, I am glad to have you back on the show with me today.

Maggie Luma: Hi Becky, I am happy to be here.

Becky Lewis: So Maggie, I'm sure that you and many of our listeners can relate when I say that it's difficult to have a conversation around English language arts instruction without hearing the term science of reading or structured literacy and the last episode that me and you did together was looking at the science of reading and what that term meant and so I felt like it was important to kind of extend that idea and look at structured literacy, because previously for me, this was a topic that was really confusing, especially when we were talking about what structured literacy looks like in the classroom.

Maggie Luma: Yeah, I totally agree. The episode we did together about the science of reading just scratched the surface and we knew then that we are going to have to have more conversations and you are right that another hot term right now is structured literacy, and that it can often be confusing. So today I'd like to take a little bit of a different approach to your typical podcast format because Becky, you've expressed a lot of interest in learning more about what that term structured literacy really means, and you've diligently dug into research about the topic, so I'd like to interview you this time. Does that sound ok?

Becky Lewis: Yeah, I think that sounds like a great idea.

Maggie Luma: Ok, so, let's jump into it. I read that Louisa Moats, a very influential presence in the world of literacy education, of course, say that teaching reading

well to all children is an urgent social and economic matter and that really stuck out to me because it just means, you know, there's this urgency to make sure that we're all teaching all children the way that decades of research has told us to because it goes beyond the importance of just that test.

So, by teaching reading well, she means teaching in a way that's not haphazard or just based on philosophy or based on what you feel is right or what's in your heart that's right but teaching it in a way that's based in research, and so in episode 32, you and I discuss the science of reading, of course. And this episode is going to be based on that science and kind of be an extension of that conversation, but more so we will be discussing the instructional practices and principles that follow that science. So, Becky, the topic is structured literacy and I want to know what does that mean to you?

Becky Lewis: Well Maggie, I first kind of encountered the term and the elements that make up the science of reading or structured literacy when I started off my educational career as a title one educator. A lot of the professional development that I received then was centered around a structured literacy approach and at that time what I was really learning was that structured literacy was a research-based approach to literacy instruction to support the needs of students who were struggling during core instruction, so during that Tier 1 time, because as a title one teacher I was primarily working with students who were in Tier 2 or Tier 3 that had not been identified for special education or may never be identified for special education they just needed extra support.

Maggie Luma: I think it's important that you mention that because so thinking about your role as a title one interventionist, you are working, essentially doing something different than what they're getting in their core instruction, right?

Becky Lewis: Yeah, I'm giving them additional time for making up the reading skills that they lack. So, the lessons that I was providing those students were very explicit and systematic, direct and really intensive. And so, these lessons met my students where they were in terms of literacy, knowledge, and their skills. So, I wasn't just picking and choosing I was using lots of diagnostics to help guide my instruction.

Those lessons were also embedded with lots and lots of opportunities for the students to practice the current skills we were learning as well as review

previously taught skills so that they could solidify that understanding. It also had opportunities for re-teaching if they weren't quite getting a current skill and of course, there was lots of multisensory learning opportunities happening within those lessons.

So, as I kind of continued to grow my knowledge base since my title one days, I've learned that structured literacy has been found by research, not only to benefit those students who were struggling in core instruction, those students that I was working with, but it benefits all students. So today in my mind when I'm using the term structured literacy for this episode, I'm not thinking of it as solely an intervention for some students. I'm thinking of it as an approach, a research-based approach that can be implemented into the classroom for all students to grow and become proficient readers.

Maggie Luma: So, it reminds me, and sorry to interject, but it reminds me of the concept of universal design for learning, where what's going to work for the students who may be at risk for struggling in literacy or at risk for literacy-based disability, it's really going to work for everyone. So, you're thinking structured literacy shouldn't be just intervention, but should be given to them during core instruction.

Becky Lewis: Right, because structured literacy when we really look at the heart of the definition of it. What it is, it's of course based on research like I mentioned, but it's integrating those elements of speaking, listening, reading, and writing simultaneously with multisensory strategies. So, it's a way that all students can acquire those literacy skills through lessons that are direct, explicit, appropriately sequenced, systematic, cumulative, and intensive.

Maggie Luma: Ok, so you mentioned a lot of different elements that characterize structured literacy. That was impressive. So, let's just break them down a little bit and take a closer look at some of those elements. I want to start by focusing on something you said that it includes explicit and direct instruction. What does that mean, explicit and direct instruction, and why is it important?

Becky Lewis: Right, there were a lot of terms in there that I used. To fully understand both those terms, explicit and direct instruction, and what that means, we have to think about what we know about literacy development. And we know from all of the research out there that learning to read not an automatic

process. We're not born with those connections in our brain to help us become readers, those connections have to be built over time through instruction of skills and concepts. So that means that as educators, our job is to help teach those skills and concepts to our students so that our students can practice them, review them, and repeat them to build those connections and make those connections strong and automatic.

So, in order to help our students, build those connections when we're presenting the information to our students, we need to do it in a way that is obvious and accessible to them by deliberately teaching them the essentials for that skill or concept or strategy. And this is where the term explicit instruction comes into play because explicit instruction requires educators to use a straightforward, consistent, and precise approach and language to directly teach these skills.

With explicit instruction, there's kind of this continuous teacher student interaction that takes place where teachers are continuously giving feedback to a student's response, and they're giving feedback to the student, no matter if that response is correct or incorrect, and they do that because the teacher and the student both need to be aware of where the student is in terms of their understanding and mastery of that skill or concept. So, if a response is incorrect, a teacher can use feedback along with different scaffolds and supports to help this student fix their errors in their thinking.

Maggie Luma: And I liked how you said too, that whether the student responded in a way that was correct or incorrect, you provide the feedback because you also need to reinforce that skill, like if they did it the right way I mean, it's kind of funny when you explain explicit instruction and you say you know we're going to be straightforward and consistent and use precise language and when you really think about it, it's like, oh yeah, if you're teaching a new skill, why would you do anything but that? Um, you know the feedback part is so important because to me that actionable feedback, like when you said giving corrective feedback so that the student can change it to become correct and you know, providing it immediately after the skill and after the response it gives them something they can do and the teacher also then has to make sure that they give the student time to then respond to that feedback. So sometimes teachers, or just people think

feedback is like one way, but really what you're explaining is a two-way thing where the teacher provides the feedback and then the student responds again.

Becky Lewis: Right even thinking about feedback to a correct answer, it's more than just saying good job or way to go, it's saying I really liked how you did XYZ.

Maggie Luma: Yeah, so they know what to do again?

Becky Lewis: Right.

Maggie Luma: To me that actionable feedback is just a non-negotiable when we're teaching literacy for sure. So now Becky, please talk about the direct instruction element to structured literacy that you described.

Becky Lewis: Ok, so direct instruction can often be confused or used interchangeably with explicit instruction, usually because the two terms are seen side by side and so teachers will just automatically use them, but they're not interchangeable. They're two different things, so direct instruction is when teachers are providing instruction directly to students in a way that doesn't leave any learning to chance. It's not haphazard. It's very intentional. Everything is very transparent for the students.

So, in direct instruction, the teacher is thoroughly explaining and demonstrating the skill or strategy. They're often using a gradual release of responsibility where the teacher is introducing everything upfront about the skill, then they are modeling how to use the skill or strategy in action. One key thing about that modeling phase of the gradual release is that the teacher is actually verbalizing step by step for students along with a visual of what they are doing. Then students are going to join the teacher with the skill or strategy, that's the next step of the gradual release, so they're doing it together, and this is where the teacher is going to provide some feedback. And then they're going to move onto the teacher is going to step back even further and let all the students work together on an activity and give them immediate feedback. And finally, you're working towards independence so that the student is independently able to apply that skill or concept. And like I mentioned, all while the teacher is providing that corrective feedback every step of the way that way students know where they're at and teachers can assess as they're going through that process.

Maggie Luma: Yeah, exactly, and so it sounds like when you're describing explicit and direct instruction in this context, it's really more of a both and situation, right? So, you want to use both explicit and direct instruction, and you're making sure that your instruction has both of these and you're not leaving out one of those elements because you're using them as synonyms, right? They're both equally as important, it sounds like.

Becky Lewis: Right, they are both equally important.

Maggie Luma: Yeah, and so now tell me what would be an example of an instructional practice or activity that uses these principles of explicit and direct instruction in your definition of structured literacy?

Becky Lewis: Of course, my brain goes back to when I was in a title one classroom, so it's easiest for me to describe a phonics lesson because that's what I dealt a lot with, but I just want our audience to know that explicit direct instruction could and should be used with other skills other than phonics. It's not just isolated to phonics, so you can think outside of that wheelhouse. Back to our example. So, if we're introducing a skill for our students, let's say we are going to introduce this skill long A spelled with a silent E. What you're typically going to do is you are going to begin the lesson, if it's direct and explicit, with connecting to their prior knowledge. So, you may show your students a card with a printed A on it and say you've learned that a vowel says its short sound when it's followed by one or more consonants and review what that sound is. And then you're going to tell them directly and explicitly today we are going to learn about how that sound changes if it's followed by a consonant E, then you engage in an auditory introduction to the activity to help the students exercise their brain muscles and stretch those and get them ready for the last thing.

So for this again, you're going to be very upfront and direct with them, and you can do an activity such as saying 3 words and all of them have the long vowel silent E pattern like cape, date, and made. And then you ask students to identify the common sound and then you move on to a direct instruction activity with visuals and this would be where you can present students with a symbol card with the A and most of the time these are written with a A_E to show that a consonant E pattern so that students can see it and you're going to tell them when a is followed by a consonant E. It's going to make its long sound A and then you ask

them what sound will a make when it's followed by the consonant E. So you're being very very direct with them, and they are giving you feedback. So if someone makes an error, you can go ahead and correct it there in the moment. Next you can add a multisensory reinforcement activity, such as a tracing activity and asking the students to trace the pattern that they see in words. That's made with an A consonant E and having them pronounce that long a sound at the same time.

Maggie Luma: So, can we pause there Becky, because you're explaining a lot in depth and it's amazing, but you've used that word multi-sensory a couple times now. So, I just want to reiterate so that multi-sensory reinforcement is just like literally what it sounds like where there tracing, so they're using one sense with their feeling and they are also saying the sound as they trace it.

Becky Lewis: Right, right, a lot of times with multisensory, too, I think teachers think it has to be messy with sand and playdoh and different things but it's all about involving the auditory, the kinesthetics and the visual for students, and the verbal because when they verbalize, you're using four different senses in a sense to help them teach and solidify that understanding of those sound patterns.

Maggie Luma: I'm so glad you said that because it's really easy to picture a sensory bin and sand all over the place.

Becky Lewis: Right, that's what I thought of when I first started teaching, so that's why I went there.

Maggie Luma: Ok, I'm sorry to interrupt you.

Becky Lewis: No, that's ok, so there's a lot of other activities you can go through and do, but the main part about this is that you are being very direct. You have a very intentional direct approach. Students are hearing exactly what you're expecting them to do. They're seeing it. They're hearing it, they're doing it, and they're receiving feedback the entire time.

Maggie Luma: Every step of the lesson you just described, I kept hearing your voice from the beginning of this episode where you said not leaving any learning left to chance like that you're just straight up. You're telling them what they're going to learn. You're giving them an example of it, and you're giving them practice.

Becky Lewis: Right and some of the processes that I didn't explain through that is, eventually you're going to have it tie back into spelling and reading because you'll want them to be reading a connected text to that spelling pattern, so again, it's not left to chance they're practicing it in isolation, but then within a text at the same time because that's what they're going to be expected to do independently.

Maggie Luma: So, you also use the term sequential and systematic approach to literacy concepts when you originally define structured literacy. Can you tell me what that means exactly?

Becky Lewis: That's a great question. Sequential is an approach that students learn concept in a logical order from a simple skill to a more complex thing you're building over time, you're taking small approaches to it. And then you take each of those skills as they're learning it, simple to complex, and you take it from reading the word to spelling the word, and then you take it into their comprehension so they're looking at the word in the text like I was just talking about a minute ago, and then they're using it in their writing as well.

Maggie Luma: So, let me throw another question out there to you because to me again it makes sense like it's obvious, you're going to move from simple to complex. But are you saying that everyone moves at the same pace? Like the whole class has to start? What if I'm entering kindergarten and I already know all of my short a sounds.

Becky Lewis: Right, that's a good question. No, you're going to base that instruction based off of your diagnostics. There are different ways that you can do whole group lessons and meet individual student needs at the same time and then pull students aside for small group lessons to work on those skills that they need more instruction on. So no, you're not going to start at the same point every year with the same group of students or even a different group of students, because they have different needs.

Maggie Luma: Awesome, I just needed you to say that out loud for me because it's so easy to say ok, here I have a scope and sequence and it's evident space. This is what my textbook gave me and then just go through it front to back for every student. And um, I just needed you to say it for me.

Becky Lewis: Yeah, and what we know with following a scope and sequence like that is what we're actually going to do is widen the achievement gap because our students that need that acceleration are just not going to get it. And the students are going to be bored and start checking out.

Maggie Luma: Yeah, and it goes back to how we opened the episode saying that, you know, learning to read is a social issue justice issue like we need to make sure we're not widening that gap, but that we're closing the gap. So, this is just so important. Sorry I keep going off on tangents.

Becky Lewis: That's okay. That was sequential. Now when we're talking about systematic, we're talking about an approach that looks at lessons that follow a fixed plan and allows for new learning to be added successively over time. And it's reinforced and practiced and reviewed over and over again.

So again, I apologize but I'm going to go back to phonics, just because it's easiest for me. But when we look at the phonics scope and sequence, you can see the sequential approach and you can also see the systematic approach. When I described the direct explicit lesson above, I used a systematic. Approach for introducing the concept and then a gradual release of going through the process of how to get them to that independent level by doing the hearing activities and the verbalizing and moving on to spelling and then ending and culminating it with them taking it to a text.

Maggie Luma: Ok, so you've touched on this a little bit, but what does it really look in the classroom? You've already said that structured literacy is often interpreted to be an intervention, but really, that's not the case, and I know that many of our listeners are general education teachers, and I think it would be helpful. For them to hear, like what does this mean for my universal instruction?

Becky Lewis: So structured literacy, again from my point of view, as an intervention standpoint. UM shifted as I began digging into research, and so now I don't see it solely as that intervention, but I see it for all students. So, it's really about taking the different elements of reading and integrating them and building off of one another so that our students can grow as readers and become proficient readers using those skills.

When we look at reading, we know that the big ideas that the national reading panel had come up with that come together to build proficient readers. It's all embedded within these elements of structured literacy, so you're going to hear different pieces of them.

The very first piece of structured literacy is phonology, and when you're thinking back to the national reading panel, that is where phonological awareness comes in. It's the study of sound structure of spoken language. The next element is phonics, which we know that's another big one that's that sounds simple association.

Another big one for structured literacy is syllable instruction and syllable instruction is really important because it supports our readers when it's time for them to decode unfamiliar words. It's just taking phonics that step further and making it more big picture for our students. Morphology is the next one and it's that studying the smallest meaning of words in our language. So that's not just building onto our phonics, but it's also starting to get into that comprehension territory that we talk about with the FAB 5.

Then we're looking at syntax and that is where our grammar instruction comes into play. We're also considering text fluency, so how fluent our students are with text, and that's another big Fab 5 one. And then semantics, semantics is a fancy word for our comprehension of what we're reading.

Handwriting is a huge one because there is a lot of research out there about how handwriting has a big impact on students, not just print, but cursive and typing. They need to have exposure to all types in order to get them to be fluently writing and talking about those comprehension skills. Then finally it's the integration of written language, so that's where that handwriting comes into play. They are going to start integrating, reading, and spelling and handwriting and written expression all together in that written language element. So, understanding those elements is kind of the first step into bringing structured literacy into your classroom and to start thinking when you're planning lessons around those elements.

Then the next step is actually going to plan and how to seamlessly take all of those elements and integrate them together. At first it can seem overwhelming and sometimes it takes a lot of time, but as you get used to this structure, you

become more fluent at it and it becomes much quicker and you start to think in this way. It's just a big shift at first.

Maggie Luma: Wow, so that was a lot. I'm so impressed with how knowledgeable you are about this and how easily you speak to the that whole process. But what I'm really taking away from your explanation is that first of all, it's important for all teachers to address all the components of literacy. You're not really isolating one skill for a long period of time, and in fact it sounds like you're intentionally making connections to all of those elements that you just described, and in a way that makes sense. Not to state the obvious. So, here's the \$1,000,000 question. Does the idea of structured literacy fit with our West Virginia State?

Becky Lewis: This was really a question I was waiting for, so we take a look at our West Virginia College and Career readiness standards for English language arts at the elementary level they're broken into five different domains. They're broken into literacy foundations, reading, writing, speaking/listening, and language. So earlier when I talked about structured literacy, I talked about that integration of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and that almost aligns perfectly with all of the domains we've talked about. Then when we look closer at this alignment, we can look at those literacy foundation skills and when we focus on those skills, you're going to see those elements I was just talking about embedded within those, so you'll see the phonology, the phonics, the syllabication, the morphology, text fluency, and handwriting. Those are all part of those standards, and they build from one another if you look from kindergarten through grade 5 at those progressions, you can see how they seamlessly start flowing.

Maggie Luma: Perfect. Becky, how can educators become more informed about structured literacy?

Becky Lewis: Well, one really great resource that really helped me to increase my knowledge and just learn more about literacy in general is called the *Multi-sensory Teaching of Basic Language Skills* book and I'm going to link that book in our show notes.

It is a wealth of information, and it has all the research in there, but it has it listed in a practical way that a teacher can pick it up. It's not light reading, but it's not the heavy thing that you would expect when you get research firsthand. The

authors have really taken the time to break it down and site all of the research for you.

There are couple great online resources for teachers who want to begin building their knowledge right away. The first resource that I'm going to share is from the International Dyslexia Association. They have great information on structured literacy, specifically their infographic on structured literacy and it's very bright and colorful. You can download it easily and you can even share that within your school with other teachers or even with parents if you would like to. I really liked it because a lot of the information in that is what we talked about today, it goes through what is structured literacy. It looks at the elements of structured literacy and how they all kind of work together with the three principles that should guide structured literacy approach.

The next online resource is from understood and they have an article titled *What is Structured Literacy?* What is really cool about this website is not only do they answer that question, but they have information for educators on how to get started as well as a section for families who want to help their students at home with a structured literacy approach.

Maggie Luma: Very cool, I think it's just so important for us all to become more informed so we can make sure all of our readers get the instruction that they deserve.

Becky Lewis: Right, I agree.

Maggie Luma: And Becky, I'm just so happy that you were able to be the interviewee for this episode. I really, really enjoyed listening to you and and learning from you, but I have to ask, because you get to ask this question also and now it's my turn.

Becky, what advice do you have for someone what wants to become a leader of literacy?

Becky Lewis: I think one of the biggest things is doing research and talking with colleagues about the research and getting excited about it. That's one way I have grown as a leader of literacy. I have found topics in literacy I wanted to know more about, so I would go and research them, but I kind of didn't do anything with it unless I had a colleague that was feeling just as passionate about it as I

was. So just talking and bouncing ideas off one another, sharing resources, and kind of building that professional learning community, even if it's not schoolwide, at least among you and another teacher, I think really helps.

For links to all the resources discussed in this episode, and for additional information, please visit our website at wvde.us/leadersofliteracy. Click on podcast and click on the show notes for episode 40 to learn more about being a leader of literacy? Be sure to like and subscribe to the podcast so you don't miss a single installment.

And the next episode I'm joined with my co-host for the month Britney Fike, and we are going to be talking about building positive teacher student relationships. You won't want to miss it. Thanks for listening.