

Structured Literacy: Principals Must Lead the Way

By Gregory Taranto, Ph.D.



I served almost 20 years as a middle school principal of 850 students prior to moving to my current position as an Assistant to the Superintendent for K-6 Curriculum & Instruction. In my time as a middle school principal, I found it baffling that around 15% of our student population struggled with basic reading comprehension.

It was not until I moved to this new position that I started diving deep into research and literature to discover that the manner in which our school district, like many others, approached literacy was not grounded in the research. We approached literacy by using a balanced literacy approach which is still the most popular manner to teach in our country despite increasing evidence pointing out its flaws.

A staggering 70% of the prison population in the United States cannot read beyond a fourth-grade level (National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 2003). This alarming statistic highlights the urgent need for effective literacy interventions that can help break the cycle of illiteracy and pave the way for a brighter future. One such approach that has shown promising results is structured literacy.

Structured literacy is an evidence-based instructional method that focuses on teaching the foundational skills of reading and writing in a systematic and explicit manner (Lorimor-Easley & Reed, 2019). It provides a structured framework that enables learners to develop strong phonological awareness, phonics skills, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension abilities. By addressing the core components of literacy, structured literacy equips individuals with the tools they need to become proficient readers and writers.

Principal Perspective

Principals and administrators need to be learning leaders first and foremost. As the administrator goes, so does the school district or building. As a result, these administrators must make an effort to learn evidence-based practices to how children learn best to read. This means, as the learning leader, you are reading journals and articles, listening to podcasts, watching videos, attending conferences, etc., on the topic of literacy.

Building Strong Foundations

Learning to Read

Structured literacy starts by laying a solid foundation in phonemic awareness and phonological skills. These foundational skills are crucial for individuals who have missed out on early literacy instruction or have struggled

with reading and writing throughout their lives (National Reading Panel, 2000). By explicitly teaching these skills, structured literacy helps individuals develop a strong base upon which they can build their reading and writing abilities.

In addition, students need to also have the opportunity to see that reading is a vehicle to learning. A knowledge-building component as part of the literacy block is essential.

Principal Perspective

Principals can facilitate this by making sure they have high-quality curriculum and training as it relates to structured literacy in these early years.

Principals can place a special emphasis on this area from the start with the master schedule in the building by establishing a common literacy block. The common literacy block should outline specific skills and timeframes. **Our Grades 1-2 Literacy Block is shown as an example:**

1st -2nd Grade Literacy Block
Approximately 120-135 Minutes

- Foundational Skills
 - 60-75 minutes
 - Whole Group Foundational Skills (Word Recognition Skills) - 45-60 minutes
 - Heggerty - 10 minutes
 - Foundations - 50 - 60 minutes
 - 15 minutes
 - Small Group
 - Target word recognition deficits with smaller group
 - Re-teaching
 - Other students are working on an extension activity (re-reading decodable, writing, practicing skills, etc.)
 - Knowledge Building
 - Geodes as a whole group - 30 minutes
 - Structured small group - 30 minutes
 - Target knowledge deficits with a smaller group
 - Other students working on extension activities based on Geodes content (writing, hands-on activity, dyad reading, etc.)

Growing Knowledge

Reading to Learn

Starting in third grade, a shift from learning to read to reading to learn should take place. In our previous balanced literacy reading program, the text was not viewed as the primary source of knowledge because the focus was placed solely on skills such as main idea, inference, etc.

Texts were disconnected; vocabulary development and writing were approached as separate aspects. In structured literacy, the text is the vehicle to learn knowledge about interconnected ideas and concepts tied directly to vocabulary and writing development.

Everything is tied together to create strong mental schemata about core concepts. Knowledge building in many approaches to reading has been a missing component to growing stronger readers (Catts, 2021).

Principal Perspective

The adoption of a high-quality curriculum with specialization in knowledge building is important combined with high-quality training. We adopted Amplify's Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) and English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum. However, there are a number of free knowledge building curriculum available including EL Education. One common theme among our teachers is how much of a difference it makes having a professionally written curriculum versus one created by the school district.

Another step we took was moving from self-contained third- and fourth-grade classrooms to a platooning concept. This allowed us to target professional development to a smaller number of teachers to receive this specialized structured literacy training.

Interventions

Dyslexia in our population is common, with nearly one in every five people having some form of it, according to the International Dyslexia Association (2023). If not accurately diagnosed and without the necessary interventions in place, this can lead to a misdiagnosis of a general learning disability and a lifetime of struggles.

Principal Perspective

As a school district, we implemented a strict screening process to catch reading problems as early as possible. All K-4 students are screened three times a year, in addition to all new K-6 students. We also screen 5-6 students displaying any form of struggle in reading. This has allowed us to reach students and put appropriate reading support interventions in place.

Summary

- 1. Support Teachers:** Principals can provide guidance and support to teachers in implementing structured literacy instruction in the classroom. They can ensure that teachers have the necessary training and resources to effectively teach reading and writing using this approach.
- 2. Make Informed Decisions:** Principals who understand structured literacy can make informed decisions about curriculum and instructional practices. They can select materials and programs that align with the principles of structured literacy and promote reading success for all students.
- 3. Advocate for Students:** Principals can advocate for students with reading difficulties by early and often screening. They can ensure that students who need additional support receive appropriate interventions and accommodations to help them succeed.
- 4. Monitor Progress:** By understanding structured literacy, principals can monitor the progress of students in reading and writing. Principals need to provide continuing support when implementing structured literacy. It is not something that is presented to a group and then the teachers are asked to do it on their own. There must be ongoing support and monitoring.
- 5. Collaborate with Parents:** Finally, principals can educate parents about the benefits of structured literacy and involve them in supporting their child's reading development. They can provide resources and information to parents to help them understand how they can support their child's learning at home.

Principals and administrators can and should be leading the way to ensure evidence-based reading instruction is taking place in our schools. It is time to embrace it and help our teachers implement it in their classrooms. Please contact the author at tarantog@cmsd.k12.pa.us for further information. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Greg Taranto, Ph.D., serves as Canon-McMillan School District's Assistant to the Superintendent for K-6 Curriculum & Instruction. Prior to his position, he served as Canon-McMillan's middle school principal for nearly 20 years. He is also an adjunct for PennWest University's K-12 Principal Leadership Program. Dr. Taranto was the 2012 Pennsylvania Principal of the Year and the 2013 Frank S. Manchester Excellence in Journalism Award recipient. He has published over 25 articles in the field and enjoys writing to give back to his field.*