

Lawrence Barns:

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Welcome to talk LD. I'm your host Lawrence Barns. Welcome our special guest Stacey Rickman.

Stacey, welcome. We're going to dive straight in because I know there's so much to talk about. So, Stacey, from where we left off last time talking about the pillars, let's just talk about how we develop reading skills in our students. What orders should the skills be developed in for example, is there a 1, 2, 3, does it matter?

Can you just mix and match? How'd you go about that?

Stacey Rickman:

Well, first we must begin with an understanding that letter sound correspondence and phonemic awareness should be taught together with targeted practice that moves along a developmental sequence.

Lawrence:

Okay. And again, just cause I pick up on terms and I think it's always better to ask, than to not ask and miss something.

Stacey, targeted practice, practice, what what's targeted. It sounds like there's a very specific word in that sentence. Can you unpack that for us?

Stacey:

When I say targeted, I'm talking about intentional teaching where a goal has been selected and there is just enough reinforcement and practice for the students to become proficient or to develop some mastery.

So, the target has been specifically chosen and will be practiced repeatedly in a targeted fashion, until mastery or a movement towards mastery is achieved.

Lawrence:



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Okay. So presumably that can also be, on an individual student level or with your whole class, depending on where you are in the cycle.

Stacey:

Absolutely. Yes.

Lawrence:

Okay, great. What's next?

Stacey:

Well, I would also say that when you're thinking about the order to teach these skills, there's no perfect order for teaching letter sounds, but our sequence of instruction can be guided by certain considerations. For example, we want to teach letter sound correspondences from simplest and most common to more complex and less common building on previous learning.

An example of this would be teaching that /a/ sound spelled as A-Y, as in the word day, or say, before we teach that a spelled E-I-G-H as in the word eight or neighbour. The grapheme E-I-G-H is a tetragraph. It's four letters that spell one sound and it occurs less often in English, orthography than A-Y for /a/.

And so, we want to make sure that we're teaching those more common ones before we go to less common.

Lawrence:

Okay. So again, as a layman, just asking my questions as always, Stacey, to learn as I go along. I guess when I was a kid at school, I learned letters first, it felt like to me. Like starting with the vowels AEIOU and away you'd go, you specifically talk about letter sounds, that obviously is different.

So, you're looking at the sound that the symbols make from most simple to most complex.

Stacey:

Well, yes. And also, the frequency or utility of the spellings, how often we can expect children to come across them in the things that they are reading. And so early on, we



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want to start with simple letter sound correspondences, moving to more complex, along the way.

Lawrence:

And they're complex in their letter makeup? Because again, I'm finding this so intriguing Stacey, cause of course it's like the, their, they're, there argument, right? The sounds are the same here. You'll just go into a different constructions of those sounds within the language.

Stacey:

Yes, that's right. We want children to understand that sounds can be represented with different spellings and different spellings can represent different sounds.

Lawrence:

Okay. So that's the letter sounds. What's the next. Building block.

Stacey:

Well, it's important to also keep in mind that we want to choose a letter sound sequence that allows words to be formed as soon as possible, because this is an efficient way to get our students reading and spelling very early in our teaching of the code.

Common beginning grapheme-phoneme correspondences to start with often include five or six letter sounds such as S A T P I N, or something very similar because these letters can spell many different words right off the bat.

Some other important things to consider when you're deciding the order to introduce letter sounds, include letters that are visually distinct. And those with contrasting articulatory features. So now we're getting into some speech pathology here. For example, the curvy S that spells the /s/ sound, and it's a long fricative sound contrasted with the tall straight T that's a short stop sound.

In other words, what I'm saying is that it's helpful to contrast visual and auditory features of letter sounds for children who are faced with this big task of remembering 26 symbols that represent 44 speech sounds. And this is also why we don't just start with ABC and work our way through the alphabet.

Lawrence:



Uh, I guess you're putting Sesame street out of business.

Stacey:

Haha. Yeah. Perhaps.

Lawrence:

So, what role does phonological awareness play in all of this, Stacey?

Stacey:

Well, there are definitely important considerations about the order in which to teach that second pillar of reading, phonological awareness. And it's really important to consider something here. Lots of educators, including myself for many years, have been thinking about phonological awareness in terms of a traditional hierarchy model that moves from larger units of speech, such as rhymes and syllables to smaller units of speech, which are phonemes or individual sounds.

But, but, but, but there's compelling research support for prioritizing blending and segmenting at the phoneme level, right from the beginning of the instructional sequence, as these are the two essential skills that are necessary for reading and spelling.

While very young children often develop phonological sensitivity in their preschool years because of the nursery rhymes, sing songs, rhythmic pattern books that we share with them. It's really important to remember that phonological sensitivity is not a necessary precursor to phoneme awareness. We can practice rhyming and clapping syllables at various times throughout the day, but we should be teaching blending and segmenting of sounds to form words during explicit systematic lessons, daily, right from early on in our teaching of reading and writing.

And then remember, as I said earlier, in our first discussion, when we include letters in phonemic awareness activities, such as blending and segmenting, the payoff is even greater for our students.

Lawrence:

Okay. You said a lot of important stuff there, Stacey. I like to try and distill it down to that learning point.



So. You've spoken about three skills there in terms of rhyming, segmenting, blending. So, what are you saying? It's a balance of the three, rather than trying to place one in front of the other, but actually seeing them as, almost on a level playing field? And let's make sure we're doing all three at a similar pace?

Stacey:

I would like to really stress here is that blending and segmenting is critically important for reading and writing. And we should put most of our eggs in that basket and not worry too much about rhyming and clapping, syllables and things like that. Those are good skills to have for sure they are.

And they are things that we can be exposing kids to and practicing throughout the day. But in terms of our targeted instruction, to use that word again, we want to make sure that we are really sitting down with kids and making sure that they can blend and segment. And we want them to be doing that with the letter sounds that we have taught them as early as possible.

Lawrence:

Yeah. And is that, Stacey again, as I think through what you're saying here, The blending and segmenting and you're clearly, if you like, learning to manipulate letters of the alphabet, whereas rhyming to me is much more of a sound. Is that why it has a different priority in, teaching a kid to read?

Stacey:

Well, the priority for blending and segmenting is because children need to know that words are made up of individual sounds that can be blended together to result in words that are part of their vocabulary. That leads to them being able to understand the thing that they've just read, being able to rhyme is not an essential skill for being able to read but being able to blend sounds together, the sounds that are represented by the letters that the children see, that is a completely essential requirement for the development of proficient reading.

Lawrence:

Perfect.

Now, even in my layman terms, I really understand what you were getting at there. Thank you for that. So, where does, of course, we're talking phonemic awareness and I



know that isn't now phonics after our last conversation, where does phonics come into this process, Stacey?

Stacey:

Well, a strong phonics scope and sequence is essential to the teaching of letter sounds and their functions in words.

So, a phonics scope and sequence outlines the order of introduction of the grapheme-phoneme correspondences that should then be introduced in isolation, practiced in the context of single words, and then in connected text.

Texts that follow a phonics scope and sequence to provide opportunities to apply newly acquired letter sound, correspondences, and review previously taught ones, in the context of connected text are called decodable or phonically controlled texts.

And they should match our phonics scope and sequence. And as I said, phonics scope and sequence is absolutely essential to this whole process. It's the foundation upon which all of the teaching needs to rest.

Lawrence:

Okay. So. When we talk about reading today, you hear a lot about the, you know, cultural sensitivity, comprehension, knowledge, where do those elements come into this process?

Stacey:

As we discussed earlier in our last chat, teachers are building background knowledge and comprehension of texts, that students can't yet read, through their robust read alouds, their classroom discussions, different classroom activities.

This should definitely continue until students have been taught the advanced code that will allow them to read more challenging texts on their own. So, we're doing two things at once. We're teaching the children how to decode the words on the page so that they can read themselves, but until they can do that at an advanced level, with some nice fluency and good accuracy, to really tap into their vocabulary and stimulate things that they already know in their oral language, we have to be reading those complex texts to them.

Lawrence:



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Okay. So, having dealt with that issue, can we talk a bit, Stacey, about vocabulary and how does the classroom teacher in this process deal with the vocabulary of, of a student?

Stacey:

Hm. That's a great question. I want to say those words targeted and intentional again, in responding to your question about vocabulary.

Teachers can engage students in targeted, intentional, vocabulary instruction through content areas and the arts. So, lessons in history, science, geography, religion, drama, visual arts, whatever content you're teaching in your classroom, results in the building of vocabulary for students and the growing background knowledge that they're going to be able to bring to texts once they can read. Once they can decode the words on the page.

Lawrence:

Okay. So, one other question I've got Stacey, and I think under this broader heading, we've just been dealing with about the skills. Obviously with the OHRC report, there are some new words that have started to bounce around. I think the one that I've sort of landed on, because no one owns it, is the one that systemic instruction, which seems to be just very much a key part of what the science looks like around reading today.

Can you explain what that term means?

Stacey:

Yes. Well, your original question was what order should these skills be taught in? And all of this is to say that, systematic instruction builds incrementally for letter sounds, and it includes phonemic awareness, especially blending and segmenting, which I have really emphasized today.

This, together, all makes a strong phonics program that ensures all students will learn to decode, or get the words off the page. Systematic instruction needs to be explicit and it needs to happen in a sequential order. It needs to be planned and intentional, following a decided upon instructional sequence.

And that's what that term means.

Lawrence:



So just digging into that a little bit. I think both for our listeners and also for my knowledge, what you just said would indicate that in the way we teach reading today with jumping around the map, maybe a little bit, or there's something that's not matching between the science and what's going on.

Do you want to speak to that?

Stacey:

Sure, I can. So, you're absolutely right. the way things work, for the most part right now, in our given curriculum, which is very vague in terms of how to be systematic around the teaching of literacy skills. We definitely see oftentimes that children are presented with texts to read.

And then, through the guided reading process, teachers make note of what children are struggling with and they try to act within the moment of the reading. So the book is in front of the child, that child is having difficulty with the word, and the teacher jumps in to support the student to be able to decode that word.

And that's backwards from what the science would tell us to do. The science tells us that we should teach the children the code, those letter-sound correspondences, and then we should put words, and then texts, in front of them that contain some targeted practice of that code that they've been taught. So, we should be teaching code first and then its application to reading words and connected text, rather than putting connected text in front of children and then, sort of willy-nilly, noticing what phonics patterns they don't know and trying to teach them, in that non-systematic way.

Lawrence:

Okay. That's great. Thank you for explaining that because I know it said that terminology in various forms is going to be kicked around a lot with the OHRC report coming out very shortly.

So, let's now talk about, you talked about building reading skills, let's talk about how we see our student or our budding reader and start to know it as you taught there. Exactly. It's where I want to go with this discussion. And, you know, you said there, the teachers intervening quickly when they see an issue, but in the, in the science of reading, how do we determine the skill gaps that are causing the young reader problems?

Stacey:



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Well, we determine which skills the reader is struggling with or is having success with, in fact, through assessment. And there are four kinds of literacy assessments we can choose from. They are screenings, progress monitoring, diagnostic and outcome.

Lawrence:

Okay, take me a little deeper then. What are those four screens going to share, Stacey?

Stacey:

Sure. So, screening tools tell us which students are at risk for reading difficulties. Progress monitoring tools tell us if our instruction is improving our students' reading skills, the ones that we've been targeting.

Diagnostic tests, tell us which skills a student should be taught next. And outcome measures tell us if our reading program has done what we set out to accomplish with it.

Lawrence:

And presumably in that wonderful sort of circular diagram where you always see these processes, I'm assuming because an outcome may just be one element of their decoding skills for example, that this process is one that continues through their early learning years.

Stacey:

Absolutely. Throughout the years, these assessments help us to pinpoint possible areas of difficulty that must be well-developed for students to become proficient readers. So, these different tools would be used at different times, throughout the students' learning, to give us feedback on our programming.

We want to be assessing letter sounds, phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension as our programming aims to teach these things

Lawrence:

Right! That makes complete sense from your earlier discussion. So, what other things should our teachers listening be aware of, Stacey, in determining where these skills are at in a reader.

Stacey:



Well, something to keep in mind, is that running records don't tell us which skills are contributing to a student's reading difficulties because they don't measure the letter-sound knowledge, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary. But I will say that traditionally these are the tests that we have used most often.

And I'm suggesting today that we move away from running records to measure students' reading abilities and look more at tools that get to the specific skills that children need to become proficiency.

Lawrence:

Okay. So why don't you give us an example of what that might look like in a certain area?

Stacey:

Okay.

So, for example, we know that children who are really struggling to learn how to read often have what is called a core phonological deficit. And so, if we are seeing that a child is having difficulty, despite our excellent explicit, intentional, systematic, teaching of the grapheme-phoneme correspondence.

And their application in blending and segmenting words to be able to read and spell them. If we're seeing that a child is having difficulty with that, we might want to look at their phonological awareness and specifically their phoneme awareness, to be able to determine if the child is having difficulty with those isolated skills.

So, for example, we would want to look at whether or not a child can take a word and segmented into its component sounds, orally, before we then put letters in front of him or her, and ask her to do that with the letters.

Lawrence:

I think that seems to make sense to me. So again, just, I just want to bring this back. Any thoughts as a Speech-Language Pathologist in terms of how often screening takes place? Is it, I mean, you know, I recognize a teacher's workload and the number of kids in a classroom and all of those things, Stacey.



I mean, does this approach, would it create extra work, or would teachers just have to change the way that the work is being done?

Stacey:

I would say that they need to just change the way that work is being done. You know, traditionally running records have been used. They're pretty time-consuming. And running a screener can be much faster.

A screening tool can be used to just sort of take the temperature if you will. You know, is this child where we're hoping he is, or should be at this point in the year with this particular skill? And if so, great move on. It could be quick and easily. A test for oral reading fluency, for example, can take just one minute.

So, in that one minute, we would ask the child to read aloud a passage, an appropriate, grade level passage that contains, content, appropriate to the age. And in one minute we can get so much information on the reading skills for a student. And like I said, that information can be used to measure fluency.

These tests can be, can be done, quite quickly. in fact

Lawrence:

Okay. I think that's super important because of course, whenever the report has been examined from the OHRC and we're looking at changes potentially to Ontario's curriculum and the landscape of teachers and teacher training, it's so important that we understand that, as you just said, in a minute, you can find so much relevant information to put your student on the right path.

Before we wrap up. I've got one other question. Cause there's another thing that as I'm listening to you talk about screenings and the individual students, I've got a question around UDL, because we so often talk about UDL as a panacea, because you know, what's good for one student is good for all. For those of you that don't recognize universal design for learning that are listening in, which is UDL. There you go. Lawrence, explaining acronyms. It used to be the story of my life as a parent. What does that mean? Anyway, how does this individual screening and UDL live in the same classroom? Stacey? I'm intrigued.

Stacey:



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Well, as you said, we know that what is essential for some students, is beneficial for all. In terms of our assessments that we're using, when we, check these skills. When we check to see that our students have these skills, or don't have these skills, we know what we need to do with our instruction.

It guides our next steps. And for the most part, we know that the next steps that are necessary for some students, so some increased, targeted, instruction in a certain area, for example, will be beneficial to most students. But what it also does is it tells us which students have mastered certain skills.

And they don't need any more time spent on that and they're ready to move forward. And that allows us to focus on the students who do need some extra practice with those particular skills. And so, when we're thinking about differentiating our instruction in the classroom, our assessments are so very important to determining which steps we should take next with which students.

Lawrence:

Great. Thank you. So, I'm going to also give a plug that, as you're listening to this podcast have obviously found this on the LD at school. Stacey's covered a lot of ground in two fairly high-paced interviews, shall we say, with me. There will be lots of other resources around LD@school, around the right to read, and literacy, and the science of reading, systematic instruction and all of those things.

So please feel free to dive into those. But as we close, Stacey, and round off these two fabulously informative discussions, I'm going to ask you to boil it all down and think about classroom teachers. A lot of whom, certainly in the discussions I've been having around the right to read report, unfortunately to a lot of our teachers the science of reading is actually, it's something they don't know a lot about. If you could leave them with a couple of thoughts as we close today, what would those be?

Stacey:

Well, I would say I have two main thoughts here. Two things I'd really like teachers to leave this discussion. Thinking about first, I'd like to encourage teachers to consider taking a prevention versus an intervention approach to literacy instruction in their building.

The current model for literacy instruction in Ontario is an intervention model. Currently our vague curriculum that encourages teachers to teach the strategies struggling readers use such as looking at the first letter in a word, or predicting a word based on a picture. This doesn't result in proficient reading skills for many students.



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We wait to see which students will fail using these methods. And then we tried to put intervention in place. The difficulty here is that we can't intervene ourselves out of a tier one classroom-based problem, because there are just too many children who don't become proficient readers, and then they require intervention.

So instead, if we could adopt a prevention approach where all students are taught the skills that result in proficient reading in the classroom, following a systematic instructional sequence like we've discussed today, we would have far fewer students who require intervention. So that's one thought I'd like people to leave with.

And the second is this. I'd like educators to know that there is research to guide their decision making when it comes to getting reading right. For our students, there are answers to the questions teachers have when teaching their students to read and write. And I would encourage teachers to seek answers to their questions by engaging with the science of reading and looking at their programming, including their assessment, as we've talked about today, through a research informed lens.

Lawrence:

Wonderful. I think that's a perfect way for us to sign off this series, Stacey. Thank you very much for sharing your expertise over these two special editions of talk LD.

Stacey:

You're welcome. It was a pleasure to be included.

Lawrence:

Well, we'll probably be back to you. Cause I think this is a topic that's going to run.,I think for a few years now, as hopefully Ontario, maybe to use a yachting analogy, turns its sails to the wind on reading and we try and accelerate the numbers of students who won't fail and will be launched in successful lives.

For all of you educators out there, I hope this series has given you some questions to ponder. As we say, please use the other resources around the LD@school website. I've been your host, Lawrence Barns. This is talk LD. Until our next discussion, bye-bye!

