Updated SL video script- Melinda Hirschmann

Our brains aren’t pre-wired for reading. Reading and writing must be taught. And the way it is taught to our children matters. Decades of research have given us evidence for the skills and concepts children need to learn to become readers, as well as evidence for how they should be taught. Structured Literacy Instruction is a term used to describe this evidence-based approach to reading and writing development. It’s not a packaged program, and it’s not just for students with dyslexia. It describes the instructional content- what to teach- and the instructional delivery- how to teach it. It benefits all learners, and it’s a necessary approach for those with dyslexia.

It’s not just about phonics. Children are taught the many integrated layers of skills needed to read and spell words, as well as concepts needed for reading comprehension and writing.

Teachers read to and talk with children to build their vocabulary and background knowledge. Students are given lots of intentional time for listening and speaking, as that lays the foundation for reading and writing.

Children learn to identify the individual sounds, which are called phonemes, that make up words, such as the 3 sounds in the word *sock, /s/ /o/ /k/*. Children learn how those speech sounds are mapped onto letters, which are the graphemes, such as the sound /s/ to the letter *s*, the sound /o/ to letter *o* and the sound /k/ to the two letters *ck* in the word *sock*. Students are taught how to blend the sounds together in words for reading and how to pull the sounds apart for spelling. This is first taught and practiced with easy words like *dig* and *sock* and then with more complex words like *stretches* and *unlawful*. Over years of carefully planned instruction and practice, students also learn to read words with prefixes, suffixes, and roots, which are all examples of morphemes. Morphemes are the units of meaning within words. Learning a lot about morphemes supports reading, spelling, and vocabulary development. Students are also taught how to read long words with multiple syllables. And, students are taught to spell the same word patterns they are learning to read.

Structured literacy instruction also includes writing. Learning to form letters and writing words by hand supports both reading and writing. The content of written expression is also integrated. Students are taught how words are put together in meaningful sentences and also how text is organized within and across paragraphs. Students are engaged in critical thinking about what they’re reading and writing, and that supports comprehension.

Teachers need to have deep knowledge and flexible use of these layers of language in order to provide structured literacy instruction, both the what and the how of it. Structured literacy includes a high level of interaction between teachers and students. Teachers support students promptly and thoughtfully with both positive and corrective feedback as they practice reading and writing concepts.

Structured literacy instruction is direct and explicit. That means that teachers clearly explain and model reading and writing concepts. Guided practice with specific and prompt feedback is given to make sure students are accurately practicing the skill, and then students are given independent practice to go beyond accuracy to become automatic with the skill. Children with dyslexia often need this explicit instruction intensified in order to become accurate and automatic with skills. Teachers, families, and the students themselves need to commit to practice, patience, and persistence- they’ll see progress over time.

Structured literacy instruction is also sequential. Teaching and learning starts with common, simple concepts, like how to read and spell the word *cat*. It builds in a logical order as reading and writing skills progress, so students can eventually read, spell, and understand the meaning of words like *catalyst* and *catastrophic*.

This approach to teaching and learning is active and engaging. Multimodal language learning means that students are listening, speaking, reading, and writing throughout all lessons.

Teachers are attentive to students’ progress and use observation and brief assessments to adjust the intensity of the instruction as needed. By closely monitoring a child’s progress, teachers are able to plan purposeful instruction and reading practice that targets specific skills and needs.

Teachers also provide supports to students as they learn new skills. This might include graphic organizers, decoding strategies, spelling routines, and editing prompts when writing. As students become accurate and automatic with skills over time, those supports are reduced.

Here’s the takeaway: There is no short cut to literacy development, and there’s not any quick fix for supporting students with dyslexia. But- the scientific evidence provides good news! When students with dyslexia are identified early and taught to read and write using appropriately intensive structured literacy instruction, their brains can build that literacy network and function like those without dyslexia. Structured literacy instruction ensures that all children get equitable access to the optimal foundations for reading and writing.