

Invited Column
Intentional & Explicit Phonics Instruction

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It was with great rejoicing that I finished the newest release from Natalie Wexler, *Beyond the Science of Reading: Connecting Literacy Instruction to the Science of Learning*. Her observations spoke directly to my soul, “True advocates...want more effective phonics instruction...” (Wexler, 2025, p. 2). Is there a way to shout this message from the roof-tops? To know me is to know my passion for ensuring educators know and receive evidence-based support and practices in their classrooms. My role allows me to provide instant instructional coaching across our state while also supporting districts with creating their professional learning plans.

While working with instructional leaders, a common theme was part of every discussion: “How much phonics instruction? And what does it look like?” For some reason, there was a gross misunderstanding that phonics instruction was to consume the entire foundational learning block with mind-numbing worksheets and no access to books. Excitedly, I began the journey of providing explicit phonics instruction with the evidence-based resource created by Dr. Holly Lane and her UFLI team.

Fortunately, the Dollar General Literacy Grant opened the door for the exploration of explicit phonics instruction across my region. My hopes included a ‘train the trainer’ model for explicit phonics instruction utilizing *UFLI Foundations Phonics*. If you had told me three years ago the grant would result in 95+ Instructional Leaders/Coaches/Teachers embarking on a journey to educate multiple educators in their districts (over 1530) plus their peers and additional staff members, with a touch on over 31,000+ students to date, I would have instantly shut you down. Not only has the student growth allowed for celebration and validation, but the relationships established along the way have built staff morale and collective efficacy across so many schools. Many of us look forward to reconnecting and sharing our success stories across districts and providing each other with support and resources. The best times are when we say, “Can you believe the growth?” And then we laugh and celebrate the success of it all.

Over the course of the last three years, training support & partnerships have grown to include 210+ Paraprofessionals & Instructional Assistants. These vital staff members have been embraced and included in professional learning opportunities. Instructional Assistants are often overlooked rock stars deserving of their own time and specialized training to meet the needs they encounter on a daily basis. I have lost track of the data indicating how many students they are now assisting, but the occasional emails of growth are an indication things are going well.

Instructional Assistants bring a wealth of questions and perspective to their discussions. It is inspiring to see them in action as they support each other to meet the needs of their learners.

It has been a joy to be a part of this ripple of change - and if you are trying to figure it all out yourself, here are some key action steps:

1. **Decide on professional learning opportunities and then provide support in the classroom to make it happen.** Many of us in leadership know this is critical, but

school life happens and something always slides. The main thing must remain the main thing: supporting the teaching and learning of our educators so they can ensure the educational growth of our students. There is nothing more frustrating than receiving materials and/or new expectations without the proper training and/or support in place to make lasting changes. Our ‘train the trainer’ sessions began with a full day of focus on explicit phonics instruction, the components, and what this type of instruction looks like in the classroom. Trainers received grant funded materials to utilize for their staff training work while also mastering the expectations of the curriculum resource. They were able to practice each component and many of them provided small group instruction in their own schools. Confident practice of instruction allowed each of these professionals to go back to their own buildings to model explicit instruction in various classrooms. Trainers also provided coaching support to ensure proper implementation across grade levels.

2. **Encourage teachers to observe in other classrooms. Use Professional Learning Community (PLC) time to focus on data and best practices.** Nothing compares with working with our colleagues to implement best practice strategies. While I was providing coaching and modeling, teacher leaders were also opening their classrooms to further support the growth across grade levels. It was empowering to see this in action - to hear the excited conversations centered around student learning and the exchange of ideas. Opening the door to these conversations during PLC times also built into the everyday language of our students, our grade level, our success. Sharing data across the grade level allowed for everyone to support the learning across classrooms. Students were moved as needed to receive smaller group instruction. This also allowed for additional enrichment opportunities as grade levels worked together to address the needs.
3. **Stay quick and brisk to win the race!** Explicit phonics instruction follows a 30-minute block of time. It is chunked and engaging - students are constantly reading, writing, or speaking. If teachers reported that students were bored, teacher leaders (or myself) visited the classroom to check the pacing and instruction. More often than not, the teacher was talking too much for too long! The best way to track this is to time yourself. Have a colleague time the instruction and tally the student interactions. Use this data to determine changes. Often it is a pacing problem. Our expert brains want to tell students everything they need to know. This is not best practice (and it is a quick way to shut them down).
4. **Read aloud. A lot. As much as possible.** Students need access to enriching and complex texts. As you know, they will make connections to the phonics instruction while also growing their vocabulary and content knowledge. Bring out the books! As you provide explicit phonics instruction, you are also guaranteeing that students will one day read these books successfully on their own. There is nothing better than success to fuel motivation (Archer, 2011)!

References

- Archer, A. L., & Hughes, C. A. (2011). *Explicit Instruction: Effective and Efficient Teaching*. Guilford Press.
- Wexler, N. (2025). *Beyond the Science of Reading: Connecting Literacy Instruction to the Science of Learning*. ASCD.

Author Information

Melissa Gill brings a wealth of experience to her role as WVEC's Instructional Outreach Director, having navigated the diverse landscape of education as a primary and intermediate classroom teacher, instructional coach, reading specialist, and administrator. After facilitating preK-12 district professional development and providing leadership support for MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support), Melissa is deeply committed to enhancing educator effectiveness and student outcomes.

Currently, Melissa channels her expertise into supporting and inspiring educators while fostering valuable partnerships with educational organizations to address the needs of all students. Her passion for literacy is evident in her role as a Literacy Course Instructor at Indiana University Kokomo and as a trainer with Keys to Literacy. Additionally, she serves as the Executive Board Secretary for the Indiana State Literacy Association, contributing to the advancement of literacy initiatives across the state.