

Structured Literacy at MCA

Over the years, researchers have put forward various models as the best approach to teaching children to read. In recent decades, these approaches have ranged from a whole language approach to a structured literacy approach.

At its most basic, a whole language approach means that from the earliest phases of reading instruction, students are taught to read by recognizing words in their entirety. A student would see the word “table” and directly associate that word to mental image of a table. The child would not consider the individual letters and sounds in the word “table.” Instruction in a whole language approach relies on a student building knowledge of written and spoken language by being exposed to various texts. Just as children learn to speak well through exposure to a language-rich environment, proponents of the whole language approach suggest that distinct skills necessary for reading happen naturally through exposure to texts and participation in student-directed discussions about the texts. This approach gained traction in the 1980s, and many parents will recognize this as the approach that guided their early literacy education.

While many students may well learn to read using a whole language approach, many will not, and even those who do would likely benefit from foundational phonics instruction. Recent national testing data from the National Assessment of Education Progress suggest that, nationally, fourth-grade students are reading below grade level at alarming rates. The fourth-grade year is generally regarded as the school year in which students should have moved from learning to decode a text to reading for information. In other words, students should be fluent enough in their reading to focus on the meaning of the words rather than on how to read the words.

While one approach to reading instruction cannot shoulder the entire blame for students’ reading level, something has to be done nationally to reverse these trends. The National Reading Panel (2000), along with numerous research studies prior to and in intervening years, has recommended a different approach to literacy instruction, one that relies, at its foundation, on instruction in phonics. This approach is beneficial for all learners but is especially important for those with reading difficulties, such as dyslexia or those who are learning English as a second language. The approach has been given the umbrella name “Structured Literacy” and includes several key components. “Structured literacy is characterized by the provision of systematic, explicit instruction that integrates listening, speaking, reading, and writing and emphasizes the structure of language across the speech-sound system (phonology), the writing system (orthography), the structure of sentences (syntax), the meaningful parts of words (morphology), the relationships among words (semantics), and the organization of spoken and written discourse.”¹ Instruction in using a structured literacy approach is explicit, systematic, cumulative, and diagnostic. “Explicit” means that skills are directly and intentionally taught, not left to naturally occur. “Systematic” means that skills are taught in a logical sequence, moving from the simple to the complex. “Cumulative” means that direct instruction builds on previous direct instruction and that students are given ample opportunity to practice those skills that have been explicitly taught. Students practice both what has been taught recently and in the more distant past. Students are given adequate opportunities to demonstrate mastery of key skills. “Diagnostic” means that assessment is directly related to what has been taught and is used to guide future instruction.





MCA has traditionally taught students to read and write using a structured literacy approach and has recently adopted a language arts curriculum called Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) which maintains that approach. According to developers of CKLA, effective phonetic instruction includes “(1) systematic order of phonetic targets that progress in number and complexity over time; (2) systematic practice in which children have intentionally designed opportunities to apply and use the sound-spellings they are taught; and (3) systematic instructional planning whereby methods of instruction are consistent and progress depending on a student’s learning.”² CKLA introduces the 150 spellings of the 44 sounds in the English language beginning with the most common, least ambiguous in kindergarten to the least common, most ambiguous in second grade. The program provides students with the opportunity through guided and independent practice to achieve fluent and automatic reading in order to develop meaning from

texts. It also gives teachers diagnostic assessments for instructional planning and differentiated instruction based on the specific needs of learners.

As you can see, there is a direct correlation between CKLA and the most current research regarding effective reading instruction. And, just because CKLA begins literacy instruction in a systematic, phonics-based sequence, does not mean that students are not, beginning right away in kindergarten, being exposed to rich, authentic literature. Students are reading Shakespeare as a part of the CKLA program by the time they are in fifth grade, and throughout the early educational years, teachers include authentic literature alongside their CKLA readers, which themselves lack the dry, language-controlled feel of most basal readers. In addition, CKLA uses a two-strand approach in kindergarten through second grade: (1) explicitly teaching the skills needed to become proficient readers, and (2) helping students develop rich vocabulary and a knowledge-base to grow their reading comprehension abilities. This double strand will be discussed in more depth in a later edition of *The Herald*. Students, equipped with well-developed foundational skills, find reading to be a rewarding and formative experience. If you have specific questions about your child’s literacy instruction, please feel free to reach out to his/her teacher.

Michael Reeves
MCA Lower School Director



¹ *Structured Literacy: An Introductory Guide*. (2019). International Dyslexia Foundation.

² *CKLA Curriculum: Links to Research on Teaching and Learning*. (2015). Core Knowledge Foundation