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Episode 45: How to Integrate Early Literacy and Early Numeracy

Becky Lewis: Hello listeners, thanks for tuning in to this episode, Sam I think we have planned a really great conversation.

Samantha Statler: Yes, Becky, I agree today we're just going to continue to focus on that school readiness piece through the idea of integrating early literacy and early numeracy.

And last month episodes we got to talk with our colleague Brandy Turner and we talked about the why the importance behind integrating early literacy and early numeracy and so today we are going to kind of shift our focus on the how can we integrate early literacy and early numeracy as it pertains to our early educators and other child care providers that are serving children from birth to age 6. Joining us in our conversation today is fellow early and elementary learning specialist Amber Myers. Amber thank you for joining us.

Amber Myers: Absolutely thanks for having me on the show and allowing me to be a part of it such an important topic.

Becky Lewis: Anytime Amber, so just to get our listeners introduced to you and acclimated to who you are and where you come from, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and the journey that you have had in the education world up to this point?

Amber Myers: Sure, I'm actually one of the newest members to our early and elementary learning specialist team. I have over 20 years of experience in early childhood at different levels I have worked in childcare and head start.

I've been a classroom teacher, worked in early childhood as an early childhood curriculum specialist, a consultant, an assistant professor and director of Pierpont

Community Technical College Laboratory Preschool. I've also had the privilege to study the Reggio approach in Italy and Pistoria and attend the conference is that they have in the state.

I spent most of my time in a pre-K and kindergarten setting using steam and supporting classrooms inspired by the Reggio approach.

Becky Lewis: Thank you Amber for sharing all of that information with our listeners and I just can't express enough how glad we are to have you on our team, because you bring such knowledge and expertise to our team, that's very different from the rest of us.

So, I would want to shift our focus back to this episode. Amber, I know you have a lot of experience and knowledge around this topic of integrating early literacy and early numeracy into classrooms and you shared a resource with us that's really going to help us guide our conversation today and I just want to share that title with our listeners and of course, link it in the show notes.

But that title is, "Young Investigators: The Project Approach in Early Years," by Judy Harris Helm and Lillian Katz. Uhm, this process of integration that we're going to talk about today really isn't isolated only to the early educators that we're going to refer back to through your experience, Amber and child care providers.

But this integration can be used in all classrooms. Again, we're just going to kind of go through this approach with the lens of early educators and early child care providers as the focus in an effort to help them begin to think of how they can start this process. So Amber, where would you like to start with in the process of how educators and child care providers can get started with integration.

Amber Myers: Hey, first Becky, I'd like to add to this what you were just referring to also and say that I have used this approach and using projects in classrooms with infants and toddlers all the way up to 5th grade. So, it's something that can be implemented even in middle and high school that it can be used in any grade with any age group of children, depending on how you want to start the projects and using your standards.

To come back to and look at and for infants and toddlers it would be your licensing and NAEYC requirements that you would look and refer to for those. But

I'd like to start with a quote from Morris Malaguti who is credited with helping create the educational philosophy of the Reggio approach in Reggio Emilia Italy and his quote begins with, "I observe and listen to children when they ask why they are not simply asking for the answer from you. They are requesting the courage to find a collection of possible answers." It's a very powerful quote when you're thinking about children because they say that they ask 400 to 500 questions a day just a four-year-old or five-year-old. We forget to actually stop and listen and we have to build their educational foundations, especially in the younger grades and to actually just stop and listen and start answering some of their questions. Not that we have to answer all four or 500 questions.

But just to be able to have those communication and conversations with them back and forth to help support their learning and build those foundations. And that leads me into when we usually start the journey in the classrooms each year.

It's important by starting to build those relationships and by opening that communication within the classroom, but also within the community, in the school, and the parents, the teachers, parents and the children. They need the time to learn about each other and how to work together in the small community, and by the small community, I'm referring to the community within the school, but also the community that they live in because the schools, the living part of that community.

Children need to know that they are accepted in their environment, that they can discuss their interests, ask questions, have someone there if they have. If they need help with a problem when they start these relationships, they learn about each other. They may find that they have things in common and then the teacher starts building projects of those common interests and trying to weave everything together within the standards and the projects and within the Community to begin that learning process and be able to tell the story of the children.

Samantha Statler: Yes, and I couldn't agree more with you, Amber just on how important it is that we are giving our students the opportunity to use their voice to tap into their interests. Because inherently they're going to be more engaged if it's something that they're interested. Then and anytime, we are integrating early literacy and numeracy into our classrooms, it's really important that we are familiar with our children and their strengths and weaknesses. Because as we are

building these lessons and planning these projects, it's important for us to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses as students.

Becky Lewis: Absolutely Sam and to go along with that, just observing children in general helps us to learn not just about their strengths and weaknesses academically, but it helps us learn where our children are developmentally so that when we are planning those lessons or that project work, we can ensure that we are using developmentally appropriate practices for those children who are part of those projects and lessons.

Amber Myers: Becky, you are so right! Making sure that we're following developmentally appropriate practices is crucial for our learning. I have a strong background in child development and I always think about that when I'm working on a project with children.

When you first start a project, it's important to know the developmental level of your children and the standards and the grade level that you are teaching. Everything we do connects back to those, everything kind of just circles back.

Samantha Statler: Yes, it is so critical for educators to know the developmental levels that their students are at and where they are perform at. But for some of our listeners, who maybe they don't have that strong tell development background, they may be wondering, how do you determine what is developmentally appropriate for the children in their care in their classrooms? So Amber, do you have a resource or tool to share that can help them get started with answering that question?

Amber Myers: Sure, Sam, one of the resources that I always turn to is NAEYC developmentally appropriate practice books and they just actually updated it and it's out this year to look at and then they have information online.

Another a good source that I like to use also is the West Virginia Child care licensing and then policy 2525 and policy 2520.15. It helps you to guide development appropriate practices for pre-K But then also, if you're doing other grades, any standard that would be a part of those.

There are always good resources out there through especially NAEYC. NAEYC is the one I go back to. I think the most for information and that would be anybody basically from infant all the way up to grade 3 for early childhood?

Becky Lewis: Great, thanks for sharing all of those Amber. I know that it's going to be very helpful to our listeners and I'm going to put links to all those different resources in our show notes. So, you mentioned that when you are starting looking at integration, you start by looking at the developmental level as children as well as the grade level standards. So, can you talk just a little bit more about what this work looks like?

Amber Myers: So, the first thing that I would do would be to observe the children and identify some common interest and that might take a couple of days saying really in the first couple weeks of a project you really might not be able to tell what the project is that you're working on because you're just taking notes and observing, watching where some of the children go most of the time, and it doesn't have to be an interest of all the children. I usually try to do at least one where maybe seven or eight at first, depending almost half the class interested in something to kind of draw everybody else in.

And then after I identified some interests and collected some ideas just from observing the children, I would start to look at my standards and choose a standard cluster to develop some ideas for the project I usually have a few specific pieces of literature already in mind for the projects, for example for using blocks.

"Jack the Builder," by Stuart J Murphy is a math start book that focuses on counting on and it uses unit blocks actually within the text, so it's a good example for them to look at and be able to model and recreate the structures that he has built in that. And it also encourages the children to use their imagination and create new things. So, the cluster I'd like to focus on is counting and cardinality.

Samantha Statler: And I think that's a great amber that you're sharing. Choosing a standard cluster to kind of plan and guide your lessons and projects is really important, because it helps to give us a focal point, but it's not so defined. And that way we do have room to pull in others standards I think sometimes we just choose one standard early on. It can really hinder our ability to kind of build in those additional standards as well as just develop that project or lesson. And I know when you and I were going over some professional development around learning maps. You really explain that to me, so I think that's something great for our listeners to hear.

So, after we choose a thread to focus on, we should then choose a rich text that's based on the interests of the students that we noted during the observation period, and that's kind of what Amber mentioned a minute ago.

Amber Myers: Exactly Sam, but I normally don't just pick one text. I already have a few in mine. I like to use a lot of books and have a lot of rich texts in the classroom, and I like to have them not just in the center that we're specifically speaking about in the blocks, but to have text and writing materials in each center so that they have access to those during projects.

Becky Lewis: I think that's a great way to start our educators off with thinking about integration. When we're talking about early literacy in early numeracy, Amber, there's lots of other planning steps that go into that process.

So, what else takes place during the planning phase?

Amber Myers: Well, Becky, the planning process for integrating early literacy and early numeracy activities is very similar to planning, integration lessons or steam lessons at any level. And again, it usually starts with the project and identifying a topic and then deciding if that topic is developmentally appropriate and practical to and are you going to be able to gather enough supplies for your centers and have their supplies within the classroom so it comes back to a lot of questions about yourself and how you want to set things up and the materials that you can have available for the kids to kind of foster and encourage the learning throughout the project.

So then after the topic is started which can be initiated again either by the teacher or it can emerge from the interests of the children, I always go through and I asked myself some questions. Is the topic anchored in children and experiences and does it help them understand and appreciate their own world? Does the topic provide opportunities for children to use a variety of skills during the investigation? Is the topic more concrete or abstract and will there be opportunities for children to solve their own problems? And do their own high-level thinking, including analyzing, evaluating and creating something.

Samantha Statler: Yeah, and I think those are some really great questions for our educators to consider when they are in this beginning stage. At this point I just think it's important for the teacher to start thinking about those possible

questions and those standard opportunities that they could pull in. I also think by creating a learning map or a concept map could be really beneficial for them as well.

Amber Myers: When I start a learning map or concept map or an anticipatory web. I mean, there's so many names for them. I usually start by labeling my topic in the centers and then draw lines to my centers or sometimes I would even start with steam for science, technology, engineering, art and math just to kind of have the outline there so I could stay on topic and stay on task.

But this helps you as the teacher guide the experiences and the research to the standard. It also helps if you discuss the ideas with other teachers and gain more information. There's a wealth of knowledge at your schools even at child cares, wherever your base is that if you just start collecting that information and having those discussions with colleagues. You can create more ideas and foster more projects and things to be actually put into play in your classrooms.

The project usually occurs in three phases and you can find that in the book by Judy Harris Homes and Lillian Cats and Phase one begins, usually with the topic emerging. So exactly like what we've been talking about. However, you want to choose your topic whether it is child-led or teacher-led. And then the planning phase is also included in phase one, where you would start with your webs.

You would start with researching your topics and then phase two is usually where you go back and you examine the webs that you've created. So, you're actually going to put your research into play, and you're going to start investigations and adding those concepts into the centers and tying everything together.

This phase is actually kind of the longest phase because it can go on for weeks, months. Phase three is kind of your debrief and reflect, and you want to kind of plan or culminating activity. And this can be something really simple. It doesn't have to be anything big; it can be just where the children are making a book and then they're presenting it to the class, or they're presenting it to another class, or maybe they're taking it home to their parents to where it might be like a five- or six-page book. And they can take it home and present it. And also, you have to remember that the documentation.

In my opinion, is the most important part of all three phases of the project, because you're documenting from the very beginning all the way to the end. And is very important because you have to remember the documentation is the heart of the project, because it's the story of the learning and it's the story of the children.

Becky Lewis: I know phase three in my experience, the documentation and the reflection, is the most important one because that's where we get our formative assessment from. It guides our instruction. You're able to see what students can do and mark, do they have mastery? Are they proficient at it? What else do they need to work on? This phase really does like you were mentioning tells the story of the journey that you've been on during that unit of study in your classroom.

I want to thank you again for continuing this conversation we started last month with integrating early literacy and numeracy. I think that educators and child care providers who listen to this episode are going to walk away with a wealth of ideas and knowledge about how to be more intentional about developing early literacy and early in numeracy skills.

But before we close this episode, Amber I want to ask you a final question. What is a tip or piece of advice that you could leave our listeners with who want to just take one small step forward into the world of integration?

Amber Myers: So, my advice would be to start small and gradually keep adding parts of the projects to your everyday routine.