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Episode 46: Interview with Melinda Mack

Becky Lewis: Hello fellow educators and Sam welcome back. I'm really excited to be sitting down with you and Amber to be talking about our integration of early literacy in early numeracy.

Sam Statler: Yeah, and just to recap for our listeners in our last episode, we discussed the importance of early literacy in early numeracy and how you might integrate them into your classroom.

Our colleague Amber shares some personal experiences and strategies from her days in the pre-K classroom she took the time to kind of walk us through the how part of integrating early literacy and numeracy and last week Amber and I actually had the opportunity to interview a professional in this area, and I'd like us to listen to that episode. But before we do, Amber, would you care to go ahead and introduce the interview special guest?

Amber Myers: Absolutely. Sam, the guest that we're going to be speaking with is Melinda Mack and she has been teaching in the profession for over 35 years. She spent 17 years teaching preschool second and third grade in Virginia and had a short-term role as an assistant administrator in a private elementary school. She was also nominated for Harrison County Preschool teacher of the year. Melinda also focuses on integrating math and literacy into the pre-K classroom by using this project study approach.

And I actually had the opportunity to work with Melinda for six years and we also traveled to Reggio, Emilia, Italy and got to experience the preschools together and also visited Pistoia, so we've done a lot of project work together and been able to collaborate and communicate for a number of years.

Becky Lewis: So, I'm sure Amber she just felt like a natural fit when this topic developed in a rose of someone to interview that has had lots of experience working on this topic of integrating early literacy and early numeracy through the work projects.

Amber Myers: Becky, she was the first person that came to mind.

Becky Lewis: That's great, so now I want to still all set in and tune in to Melinda's interview to see what she has to say. And after the interview will get back together and talk about it.

Sam Statler: Welcome Melinda, and thank you for joining us in our conversation today.

Melinda Mack: Thank you for having me.

Sam Statler: Yeah, absolutely, uhm. So how long exactly Melinda have you been using that project study approach in your classroom?

Melinda Mack: Well, I started with the like Creative curriculum studies, but actually doing projects myself. It's been about six years.

Sam Statler: Yeah, so you've definitely had time. Time to figure out you know what strategies that work and maybe strategies that don't work, so I'm sure that over the last six years you've definitely learned a thing or two on how to just make it a better experience for you and for your students so.

Melinda Mack: It's a constantly tweaking and trying to improve each time, right? It's still a work in progress, yeah?

Sam Statler: So, what made you decide in the 1st place to kind of implement project work into your instruction in your classroom?

Melinda Mack: OK, I had when I first started teaching, I was in a preschool room and it was a very preplanned curriculum where all four preschools were doing the exact same thing at the exact same time. And I realized that was not the best way of learning for all the students, and it really didn't allow a lot of space for spontaneity, or the exploration of the children interest. So, after I left preschool went second and third grade. I actually could do a little project type work.

And then I came to West Virginia and they had the creative curriculum which is not cookie cutter and I started doing project like work and then our county had Amber Myers come and speak to us at like an after school preschool workshop and she brought a lot of projects she had worked on at her school. And the

documentation and I saw how all that flowed together and I wanted to do that with my work and improve the quality of what I was doing.

And then about a year later, I had the wonderful experience of traveling to Reggio Emilia and seeing the preschools there, and the Mecca of project work and all that awesome time and energy that was just so natural to them. It worked so fluidly, and so I brought that back and I've tried from there to get my projects going.

Amber Myers: So, Melinda, how do you choose the topics of study for your projects within the classroom?

Melinda Mack: My projects have all come from the children interest, something an event that happened or Lisa and I will hear them. Continuously talking or asking us questions about something and there have even been a couple that it's just been an event or one study we did was just from a little boy commenting on.

A collaborative art project we had done and Lisa and I were hanging it up on the ceiling to dry and he was standing under it and he said, oh my gosh, that looks like the Northern Lights and we're like oh it does. And how do you know about the Northern Lights? And then all the kids just want to know and it turned into months long of talking about that, which then led into lights and reflection. And it was just amazing. None of the ones I've done have been teacher initiated.

Amber Myers: So, when you did the Northern Lights how did you start that off with the kids.

Melinda Mack: First, we just kind of discussed some of the things about the Northern Lights and tried to see who knew what the Northern Lights were and it was a big deal around here at the time there's a train ride that I guess is like The Polar Express train ride and they talk about the Northern Lights, so several of the children were familiar with that or the movie Polar Express, so we started there and then we just kind of put some things out and read some stories and the interest was there and we just kept going with it and then Lisa and I tried to discuss and I think we even called Amber.

Then it was great to be able to collaborate with someone else. Hey, this is where we're going do you have any ideas? And that's where it started.

Amber Myers: So then how did you plan and move forward and set up your classroom for the projects?

Melinda Mack: Once we saw that the interest was there it was probably going to stay there. I start like an anticipatory planning or teacher web so I can lay out where I think the projects going to go and what resources we might need. And again, that's where my assistant so good about thinking of open-ended materials we can put out in centers. And let's see what they do with these and while I'm writing that, I can also put what concepts I think will cover and I think of what possible activities we'll be doing, and then I can see, oh, these standards are going to be covered in that. And these goals or these are the skills I want to meet there and doing this you also get like authentic opportunities to get these standards, so it's not this week we're talking about Santa and I'm doing measuring or something like that. It just comes so naturally and we do have to rearrange the room sometimes and shift our centers around to either collect materials. Or what they're working on? Uhm, so we can leave it out.

You can move things around and we put like at the beginning we'll put topic related props and centers and open-ended materials in the Art Center and just listen to them and record observations and see what they're saying along the way.

Sam Statler: Yeah, so it seems you know with this kind of approach You do have to a lot of teachers are kind of that type A organized you know. Yes, here's where all you know we're all going to sit and move through all the things go. So, there has to be some flexibility in you know your project work as the students you know continue to learn and are making things so that sounds like you know if you've been doing this for six years, that's probably something that comes a little easier to you now than you know when you started. And I know that you mentioned using a web as far as helping you, kind of do some of that planning and that's when you can add in those standards, as far as assessing and documenting the students, work. How do you organize and manage those things?

Melinda Mack: Definitely a lot of it is we're observing and we're collecting data all the time. We tailor our materials and the experiences to respond to individual questions or the abilities of the children learning again from Reggio and Amber, we ask a lot of questions to uncover what the children are thinking, and that's

very helpful and we may set go over to the Art Center and have them Draw Something or paint something and then we get descriptions of them talking about their work so we can see what they're getting there. And collecting samples of work and saving it from the very beginning. I used to always forget to do that, but saving stuff from the beginning to the end so you can assess from there too.

Sam Statler: Yeah, I'm sure that's really neat. As you know you're saving those documents to see you know how the child is performing at the beginning, or kind of where they were in the work and then to compare it to how they're doing at the end. I'm sure you get to see a lot of really great growth there.

Amber Myers: Yes, I think one of my favorite things that I saw Melinda do was when she did the self-portraits at the beginning and then the middle and the end of the year and she had those posted so she had a picture of the kids up and then they drew their self-portrait and you could see the development even fine motor skill development from the beginning, middle and end of the year. And it was neat to have those comparisons up. And be able to have that visual throughout the learning of that year in the process, so that was one of the things that stuck with me.

Sam Statler: Yeah, thanks for yeah, thanks for sharing that Amber and I know Melinda, you had talked about how you can add in those standards, kind of Azure planning, but as far as integrating different subject areas, can you kind of talk a little bit about how you do that?

Melinda Mack: I think it definitely helps when you know you're familiar enough with your standards and uhm, you're knowledgeable enough to where you can put them in and then. As you're planning the web, you can see well in the Art Center this is what we're going to be doing or we have this octopus and the kids want to know how much it weighs? And how long are the arms so we can pull in. I know right there we're going to be doing measuring, and are we going to measure with standard units or non-standard units and?

All the size words and the math vocabulary will be going in there and they may want to label. So, are we getting some literacy in over there? And again, in that project the kids started doing so many things that Oh my gosh, they're retelling stories, or they've gone through the whole lifecycle of the octopus over here and here this child who didn't want to pick up a crayon or pencil or a paintbrush he

wants to label this thing over here so a lot. I plan a lot of them, or I think they're going to be there, but they also, as you're watching them, you say OK, here's my chance to get in here and start working on that and start scaffolding to where we can build that skill and move on to the next level.

Sam Statler: Right, and I think it's really important for our listeners to think about how you said you do have to be really familiar with your standards to do this type of work.

Melinda Mack: Yes, that definitely helps.

Sam Statler: Yeah, so I think that I'm glad that you said that. So, you mentioned the octopus a couple of months, which is one of my most memorable, crazy things that occurred. But what has been your most memorable project and why?

Melinda Mack: Uhm, I do have to say it is the octopus one and I know that uhm. It wouldn't meet all of the textbook criteria of a project because there wasn't really prior experience and some people would say it definitely didn't fit the demographics of the UM class I had, but it met every single criterion for learning and what you wanted to get out of these kids because we had experiences within that topic, the kids could examine closely.

We had hands on materials that they could look at over and over again and use and manipulate and do all kinds of things with. There was a lot of problem solving and I was able to cover a lot of standards and they were motivated to learn, so it was authentically done and it was pressure on me to try and cover all these standards and they don't want to do it, and they're going to fight with me over doing this it was just it was coming at us like who, I can't even keep up with what's coming on this is so amazing.

So, the overall effect it had on that class makes that probably my favorite study we did.

Amber Myers: Can you tell them how that study actually got started and the crazy thing that we had to find actually bring in the classroom.

Melinda Mack: And there here's one that just started from Lisa, my assistant had been gone for a while and she came back. And they were all jumping around and Mrs. Chris, we want to hold your hand everybody trying to be first in line and she just said I'd have to be an octopus to hold everybody's hand. I can't do that. And

they thought that was hilarious. So, we walked like an octopus back to the classroom. And they just could not stop talking about it.

So, I put on this wonderful National Geographic video. It was short, it was on their level and there was dead silence in the room. They watched it and they wanted to watch it two more times and they just kept talking about it. And anybody who came to our room like the speech therapist or the nurse or whatever. They had to tell them something about an octopus and even then, I didn't really like. We're not doing anything with this, it's just it's winter time you don't really think of the ocean and the beach or you just don't see an octopus and that they would not let it go. And it was like I have to do something because they're actually they really want to do this.

So, my husband was getting cancer treatments in Philadelphia and there happened to be a Seafood market there. So, I asked him in between your treatments. I hope you're feeling good, but could you stop and see if they have an octopus by any chance and they did so that octopus sat in his trunk covered in ice for a couple days and then he brought it back and I think. We had Christmas break or something, so I was kind of afraid the interest maybe waned and this was going to be a bust.

But I brought it in and it was just incredible and I think other than the smell for Mrs. Chris, she did not like it. But these kids had that thing out and we were measuring we were drawing. They were doing dramatic play with it and we would put it back and get it out and put it back and get it out and it. It really was amazing to see what some of my boys that could not get along at all and did not want to write and didn't want to be at school. They just couldn't wait to come back and get to work with this thing and some of me at the very beginning. Some of the kids thought, well, it's got to be lonely we need to put seashells in there so it feels like it's at home. And like you could see, they didn't quite understand it being dead, and one of my little girls want it well you give us ice packs when we get hurt. Let's give it ice so it feels better and when we put it in the jar and try, I think we used rubbing alcohol so we could use it again safely and we put it in there and one little girl said a prayer for it before she went home that it would feel OK and that we'd be back. And it was just amazing how it went from that to actual

science and real skills. And it is it as long as I am and just everything it was. It really was great.

Sam Statler: Yeah, I'm glad Amber that you asked that question because just think you know it was from only one thing that Miss Chris said. And if you all would have just kind of looked over it or laughed about it for a second and not brought it back up, I mean think that whole learning experience wouldn't have happened.

So, like you said, you know, you were really in tune with what the students were interested in and motivated about and they kept wanting to talk about it. So, I mean, I think that's. That's awesome I I'm so glad that I was able to hear kind of how that octopus project started. And I know, you know, I mentioned earlier, kind of maybe when you were first starting this project work approach in your classroom. I'm sure it was a little a little more challenging. Can you recall what the biggest challenge was that you faced when you first started implementing this kind of work in your classroom?

Melinda Mack: I think one of the things is you're intimidated by collecting some of the resources, or you think the time it might take and the documentation. I know there like times I put too much. It's hard to like tweak how much to put up and what not to put up, and I want to put all this stuff up and it's like no, find the you know trying to tone that down and the kit and then the children too.

A lot of times they want to put everything up so that was a work to try and narrow down and fine tune and webbing with the children. And you want them to go back and reflect on things. And then I'm like well the kids can't read. So, I've started putting pictures up with things they have said either clip art or actual pictures or something like that. Just as visual cues that they can go by and I don't know that this is really a problem, but having the wall space to actually have all the documentation up and to tell the whole story line. So, we've tried to come up with like mobile or portable documentation stations or hanging things from the panels from the ceiling that we can put things on so it's at their eye level and they can easily look at it and go back to it.

Collaboration too, like it's just pretty much usually Lisa and I are the ones doing it. It was nice when I could call Amber and say this is what we're doing or she would come in and take a group and do something and come up with just by talking to them, come up with something we didn't even think of. So that was nice

to have if you can get that more people to collaborate with. Yeah, and I know some people have said one of their challenges is they don't think the administration will let them do it. And I think with preschool we're lucky that since we have center and choice time, we're not cutting into blocks of time that principals may think you're wasting time or whatever. We can just put it right into our choice time in our centers.

Amber Myers: So then on that last note that you mentioned would you recommend project work to other educators and grade levels and why or why not?

Melinda Mack: I think. Number one, because you get more out of the kids when they're motivated and interested and the projects definitely do that and you are covering all your major chunks of literacy and math and all of that and project work isn't your entire day, so it's not that I have to fit everything into this project and it's not the project is just part of your day and part of what you're doing.

Amber Myers: And two sometimes if I recall when I was working with you guys, we actually worked with Pre-K Kindergarten, first grade and 2nd grade and we did a project with the three Billy Goats Gruff and so we integrated that story into four different grade levels and focused on different topics within those stories with the interests of the kids after reading that book. So, it can be done and you can't integrate it into that it's just trying to find the time and how to implement it in the classroom and use the activities and show the documentation within that.

Melinda Mack: And I think too. It's also a great way to meet your gifted children and your children with developmental delays. It's the best way for hitting and diversifying your teaching, cause it it's all in there and you can adapt the things to meet their needs.

Sam Statler: Yeah, that's a great point. You know, allowing differentiation to just kind of happen naturally for those students who are performing maybe above level and those who are having some challenges so.

Melinda Mack: Right, and a project doesn't have to be months long either. It can be as short like somebody who's afraid to try something smaller and it doesn't have to go months and months and months.

Sam Statler: Right, yeah?

Amber Myers: I think it's two. It's amazing when you start the projects the social emotional needs that are met that you don't even think about when you're starting it. But you can kind of see evolve and progress throughout the project to where the self-regulation you could that the kids didn't have before. But because they're interested in something that it kind of gets in. In a woven in those projects that you didn't even plan for, but for some reason, because they are so engaged and so interested in those topics you can start seeing these kids learn how to self-regulate and collaborate and discuss ideas to where they were never able to do that before.

So, I think it's a great advantage when you start implementing projects, work into the classroom to be able to see that and it's something that I don't really think we think about this issue, emotional aspect of a project when it comes into play.

Melinda Mack: And that's why I said the octopus one maybe wasn't the best on paper, but what I saw happened to that group of kids was amazing and that did happen. And I think we build better teacher child relationships through the conversations we have in the project and even child to child peer relationships; you get a higher level of thinking and conversation using it too.

Sam Statler: Yeah, well, you've definitely shared some really great tips and some just personal insight from your experiences with your students and I've loved listening to the things that you've shared with us. So, as we kind of wrap up our conversation, Melinda. Can you just answer one question for me, which is what advice could you offer other educators who are maybe starting to implement project work or maybe they want to start implementing it into their classroom? What piece of advice would you give them?

Melinda Mack: Uhm, don't be afraid to do it. Let go of some control. Someone I know who did these she just started by asking her children, do you want to learn about transportation or do you want to learn about? Dinosaurs for example, just that was enough for her to kind of like give the power to the children. Let's see how they do that. They were capable of making a decision and that the children are capable of doing this and they are capable of leading this project into the right direction, and it's up to you, as the teacher to keep them on track and keep it going. But they can do it. They are stewards of their learning and can co-teach with you and work with you.

Becky Lewis: So, ladies, I think that was a phenomenal interview that you had with Melinda. I could really hear the passion in her voice and feel it just by listening to the way she talked about her children and the projects that she did in her classroom.

Sam Statler: Yeah, Becky, it was really great getting to hear some about the personal experiences with project work in her classroom, and it still really just amazes me that it's all being done in pre-K.

Amber Myers: I have a lot of memories with Melinda and working with projects and it was always interesting walking in her classroom because there was always something new going on and being integrated within the projects that we were working on so the kids were always engaged and it just made my heart for joy to go in there and see the learning that the children were doing and also how she documented it and put it on display for everybody to see throughout the school and even dropped the documentation that was given to the parents, it was always impressive and the collaboration and conversations that were going on with the other pre K teachers and even the kindergarten and 1st grade teachers in that school always amazed me. So, it was always great to be able to visit her and see them and work on their projects.

Becky Lewis: And I know as educators, sometimes we feel that our creativity gets stifled when we are following our Basals and our curriculums and I think that being able to integrate more into our classrooms and use some of the materials from those and create projects around them and tie into students interests is great and it just it just amazed me listening to that story about the octopus that she went and that her husband get and bring back and I could just hear how her creativity and the interests of the kids just exploded that project into something more than what it could have been had they just you know, did the quick one and done conversation about it and ended it there.

So, as a new early and elementary technical assistance center, the really great thing about the work that we do is that we are able to provide professional development to educators who might be interested in this project-based approach in their classroom and implementing it in their pre K5, so I think that's really exciting and I just want our listeners to know that we have that support for any West Virginia educators who are out there and interested.