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## Episode 58: Teacher Clarity in the Classroom

**Becky:** Welcome listeners! Sam and I have been busy planning out the next few months of episodes for you.

**Sam:** Yes, we know how valuable your time is and we wanted to be very intentional about our upcoming episodes. As former classroom teachers, we know that at different times during the year, different concepts or topics are at the forefront of your mind, and we wanted to ensure that the episodes that we are releasing the next five months take that into consideration.

**Becky:** Right and speaking of being more intentional with our episodes, the next five months are going to be focused on that sense of intentionality in the classroom. Today our episode is going to begin that journey by taking a dive into teacher clarity in the classroom. We are going to discuss what it is, why it is important, and how to ensure that it is a part of the classroom daily.

**Sam:** But before we get started Becky, I just wanted to let our listeners know that teacher clarity fits into our WVCGLR component of high-quality instruction. To be able to provide that high quality instruction, teachers must have a deep understanding about what to teach and why, and how to teach it and help students be successful. You know if you look up teacher clarity there are so many great resources available but the resource that we chose to build our discussion around today is a webinar by Dr. Doug Fisher and John Almarode titled, Clarity in Learning. This resource just has a wealth of knowledge in it that any educator out there can benefit from.

**Becky:** I completely agree, Sam! Educators who are just beginning their career or those who have been in the profession for a while will be able to take something away from this webinar. I know that when I watched it, I left with not only several pages of notes but also new concepts and ideas to consider focused on making the learning process clearer for students. And for any new listeners out there, Sam and I were fortunate to sit down with Doug Fisher in episode 29 to discuss student engagement.

**Sam:** Yes, this is a great episode, so if you missed it be sure to go back and check it out!

**Becky:** Also speaking of resources before we begin, the West Virginia Department of Education has created some course work on their new canvas platform that walks WV educators through many of the processes that are a part of establishing teacher clarity in the classroom.

**Sam:** Yes, this course work ties in really nicely with today's episode. Just to give you a little more information about those courses, enrollment is open on a rolling basis now through November 20, 2022. There are three self-paced courses that provide an Indepth look at the WVCCR standards and alignment of those standards with instruction. Each course is worth one-credit hour. So, teachers who complete these courses can apply for a total of 3 hours of graduate credit. We will provide a link in the show notes to any WV educators who are interested in learning more about these courses.

**Becky:** So back to teacher clarity. As a parent of two children who are still in school, I pretty much know that when I pose the question "What did you learn in school today?" I am going to get two types of responses. The first most typical response of "nothing." Or there is the other type of response which often comes after an activity or lesson that my girls were able to deeply connect with which involves them excitedly recalling what took place that day. I love the days when they come home excited and want to tell me all about what they are learning. But like I mentioned most days the response I get is "nothing."

**Sam:** And we know as educators that our kids didn't learn "nothing" and like you said Becky, it does seem that the lessons or activities our children are actively involved in seem to be the ones they share about more readily than others. My daughter is 3 so she has a little harder of a time telling me what she learned during her day, so I try to focus on using open ended questions with her like "What was the best part of you day", "Who did you play with today" etc. So, you can still have these check ins with your toddlers as well.

Circling back to our students understanding what they are learning, this is where you can really see that idea of clarity in learning come into play. So that we are all on the same page let's talk about what we mean when we say teacher clarity and why that is important. So, teacher clarity is when a teacher can clearly

communicate the lesson intentions to students and also communicate what success looks like for the intentions.

**Becky:** Thank you for defining teacher clarity Sam! I think having a clear definition of teacher clarity really helps us ensure that we all refer to the same idea and concept by the same name. Something else that I think that it critical to understand is the impact that teacher clarity has on student learning. Based on a famous metaanalysis conducted by John Hattie, a professor from the University of Auckland, New Zealand, teacher clarity has an effect size of 0.75. For any listeners who are unfamiliar with Hattie's work it is based on 20 years of research studying the typical effect of different concepts, strategies, and practices on student learning. Essentially what Hattie has done is that he has developed a way of synthesizing various influences in different meta-analyses according to their effect size. Hattie research indicates that the average effect size for these influences was a 0.40, equivalent to a year's worth of learning. With teacher clarity at a 0.75 this means that it is a high yield and has a high impact on student learning.

**Sam:** Right! We know that different concepts, strategies, and practices we implement in education work, but Hattie's research has helped educators determine what works best. And teacher clarity is definitely one of those concepts that falls toward the top of that list.

What is great about teacher clarity that I took away from this webinar was that it is easy to improve teacher clarity. And we can accomplish this through asking ourselves and our students three questions:

- What are students learning?
- Why are they learning it? (Why is it important?)
- How do students know when they have learned it?

The first two questions, what are students learning and why are they learning it, ties back to what you were talking about a few minutes ago Becky when you mentioned that your daughters often come home, and you ask what they learned today, and they reply with "nothing." Students need to be able to articulate what they are learning and understand why it is important. If they cannot articulate it or do not see the value in why they are learning it, then often what we see is students learning something to pass a test or to complete an assignment but then

almost instantaneously forgetting the concept or idea because it wasn't important to them. As educators we have to help students understand the value of the concepts and skills that we are teaching.

**Becky:** I could not agree more with how powerful articulating what you are learning and why you are learning it is so important for students. I can remember when I was in the classroom, working on math concepts with my students and I noticed that when they were unsure of the value that the skills had outside of math class the less effort, they seemed to put into truly mastering that skill. As soon as I had this revelation, I made sure that no matter what concept it was I always made connections to the math that was meaningful to them. I also created lesson objectives daily that I went over with students so that they knew what they were learning and why. And what I saw from these two adaptations to my instructional practice were students who were eager to learn more and who became confident as mathematicians. It is truly life changing for students when they see the value in what they are learning.

**Sam:** One way that I used to provide this clarity for my students when I taught first grade was the use of learning targets for our lessons. I went through the end goal of our lesson and what the students should be able to accomplish once we were finished. Even at my student centers, I had their learning target posted there (which we had gone over before they started their center work) Using that student friendly language and even pictures to help students remember that goal is also key, especially in the primary grades. For learning targets, lesson objectives, learning intentions, or whatever you call them, to be successful you have to start with really knowing and unpacking your standards.

**Becky:** Exactly! Our team has supported educators across the state with getting more familiar with their standards and one of the best ways to begin looking at standards is work within your schools to look at the vertical progression of the WV CCRS.

**Sam:** Yes, I agree, and I am so glad that you mentioned looking closely at the progression at the school level because this allows teachers to not only see what concepts and skills came prior to their grade-level but also what skills and concepts students will be learning in the next grade-level. I have been part of several professional learning sessions with a few different elementary schools in

the state of WV where we have looked closely at those foundational skills in English Language Arts and sometimes it isn't always easy for teacher to decipher which standard fits which grade level because some of the language is so similar or maybe just differs slightly. I think taking time to look at the standards vertically can really help teachers have a better understanding of where students should be at the end of the year in the grade prior, where they should be at the end of year in their current grade, and then looking ahead to the grade above and seeing how they can prepare students for that success a well.

**Becky:** Absolutely! Also, it is important to think about when we are looking at individual grade-level standards. It is crucial that we take the time to unpack them and there are two crucial parts that help us break down effectively and to really understand what our students need to know and how to assess that understanding. The first important element is to focus on the nouns within the standard. The nouns in the standards are what help us to identify the concepts and content that students need to know and learn. I know that in training we first have educators look at one standard at a time and highlight the nouns within that standard. We also provide our participants with a worksheet so that they can write down the nouns for that standard. These key pieces are tied to two of those questions that you mentioned earlier Sam. Which are, what students are learning and why are they learning it?

**Sam:** Right, and something that was new to me from this webinar is that there are different types of nouns within the standards. It is important to know these different types or categories of nouns and to identify them within the standard you are unpacking because this helps to ensure that the learning intention or the learning target matches the type of noun within the standard.

**Becky:** I found that to be an interesting idea too. Would you care to elaborate further?

**Sam:** Sure, so the webinar mentioned that the nouns within a standard follow into three categories of nouns: declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, and conditional knowledge. Declarative knowledge nouns are those that are based on factual information associated with the content area. Procedural knowledge nouns are those nouns that focus on application of information, and

then there are conditional knowledge nouns which are nouns that indicate when the information should be used.

**Becky:** I know that being conscious about the category that the nouns within the standard falls into is an important consideration. That really is the most crucial part of this first unpacking step. I think another important takeaway for me was that standards have multiple nouns found within them and that lends itself to those standards to be broken down into more than one learning intention. And to add to that it is important to know that the learning intention we create can also encompass more than one standard.

**Sam:** I think that is an important consideration! I know from my personal experience as a classroom teacher interacting with standards, some of the standards that were a part of my grade level were very complex and really needed to be broken down into different bite-size chunks in order for my students to be able to show mastery of that standard by the end of the year.

From the webinar another helpful tip for educators as they are working to unpack standards and then eventually build learning intentions that they will share with students is to use the sentence stem “I am learning \_\_\_\_\_” I think this is so smart to keep at the front of our minds as we are unpacking standards because one, it ties directly back to those questions that students need to be able to answer to ensure clarity of learning and two, it helps us be able to work smarter by beginning to think about what students need to learn based on that standard but also what they will be able to accomplish as a result.

**Becky:** Right! I think that giving yourself that reminder by thinking about that sentence stems helps to keep you focused on your overall goal when unpacking standards. So, once you have gone through a standard and identified a goal the next step is to go through and pick out all of the verbs within that standard.

**Sam:** Yes, and the important idea behind the verbs in the WV CCRS is that the verbs within our standards help to answer that third question of “how do we know when students have learned the skill or concept?”

**Becky:** Exactly! The verbs help us to determine the success criteria for mastery of the standard. It not only helps educators know what success looks like but when we add it to our learning intentions, we are able to help students understand

when they have learned something and inevitably this will help students monitor their progress and understanding and eventually become leaders of their own learning.

**Sam:** Absolutely! That is the outcome we all strive for as educators. So, if we think back to that sentence frame that I mentioned earlier we can add to that so that it becomes, “I am learning \_\_\_\_ so I can \_\_\_\_.” The I can part of that statement is the indicator for successfully understanding and mastering that skill or concept. Also, another important aspect to be aware of when it comes to the verbs within a standard are that there are different complexities of verbs. So, verbs that are very complex may need to be broken down into smaller pieces. Meaning that there is more than one success criterion involved for truly mastering that standard.

**Becky:** Thanks for bringing that up! If any of our listeners are like I was early on in my career, I thought that there was only one success criteria per standard. I didn’t realize until a few years into my career that standards can and should be broken in the way that you just mentioned.

Another kind of misconception discussed in this webinar surrounding standards and creating learning targets is misunderstanding of student-friendly language. It is often noted that when educators create “student-friendly” learning intentions that a lot of the academic language from the standard is removed; however, this is not what is meant by student-friendly language. Instead, we should include the academic language that is directly related to your learning intention and criteria for success.

**Sam:** That is a great point because we know that often our students come to school with gaps in their oral language and vocabulary and if we are leaving out those strong academic words then we are really doing a disservice to our students. And if we are successfully using/sharing learning intentions in the classroom with our students and being intentional about that, then we are doing more with them than simply stating them aloud at the start of a lesson or posting them in the room and talking about them once. What we should be doing is working with students at the on-set of a lesson to unpack the learning intention and this looks very similar to the way that we as educators are going through and

unpacking the standards. Talk about the nouns and verbs within that teacher-created learning intention, define any academic vocabulary and talk about the success criteria for the lesson is with students.

**Becky:** Yes, I think that this is often something we overlook because when we are in the classroom working with students we have this sense of urgency on us and know that our time with students is very valuable and precious but like we have mentioned throughout this episode clarity in learning all goes back to helping students see the value in what they are learning and understanding when they have learned that and that includes intentionally and deeply discussing learning intentions and success criteria with students. And I wanted to provide our audience with a few ways that we can establish success criteria in the classroom. We can do this through creating rubrics and I can statements, using student exemplars, and modeling/demonstrating for students.

**Sam:** Thanks for sharing those! I know that out of all of those one of the most complicated to create and use can be rubrics and I wanted to share an idea that Doug Fisher shared in the webinar that I feel can make our creating and work with rubrics less complicated which is single-point rubrics. So, unlike regular rubrics that allow educators to assign different levels to students' work to ultimately assign students a grade and they allow little in the way of guidance for improvement, single-point rubrics includes guidance on and descriptions of successful work. What single-point rubrics do is that they outline the standards that students will need to meet in order to complete the assignment and it leaves the categories summarizing the success or short comings open-ended.

**Becky:** Right! Single-point rubrics were something that I wished I would have known more about and been able to utilize in the classroom because I feel like it would have allowed me and my students to reflect more on the strengths and weaknesses of an assignment and allowed students the opportunity to improve their work.

The webinar that we have been discussing today "Clarity n Learning" by Dr. Doug Fisher and John Almarode shares more ideas about how we can be more intentional about ensuring that students have clarity in their own learning but for the sake of time, Sam, I think we need to begin wrapping up this episode.

**Sam:** I agree, Becky! If you have enjoyed our conversation today, we highly encourage you to check out the webinar. Again, it's right around an hour long but is so rich with information about some high instructional practices as well as thorough information about the importance of teacher clarity. We have included the link in our show notes. It is our hope that our listeners will be able to take away some great first steps ensuring successful teacher clarity in their classrooms.