## The Itsy-Bitsy Transformation of Tier I Instruction

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"The itsy-bitsy spider crawled up the water spout. Down came the rain, and washed the spider out. Out came the sun, and dried up all the rain, and the itsy bitsy spider went up the spout again."



We all know the nursery rhyme, "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider." The spider climbs up the waterspout, only to tumble back down when the rain washes him out. But did you know that this simple nursery rhyme can teach us a valuable lesson about perseverance and growth mindset in education? As the Itsy-Bitsy Spider climbs up the waterspout, he faces a huge obstacle along the way, the rain. It comes down and washes him out, but he keeps climbing. He tries again and again until he finally reaches the top. This is a great lesson for us all. Education is full of obstacles, but we should never give up trying to provide students with the best instructional experiences possible that are grounded in the science of reading. We must keep learning, climbing, and pushing ourselves to reach goals, no matter how difficult it may seem. Just like the spider, we must have a growth mindset and believe that we can learn and improve with effort and persistence.

My career in education has spanned 30+ years, and I've spent the entirety of it focused on the science of reading. When I stepped into my first principalship in 2001, the National Reading Panel's findings had just been published the year prior in the report entitled "*Teaching Children to Read*." This work guided every aspect of instruction across the entire district I was serving in. Our superintendent charged to ensure every student received explicit instruction around the 5 components of reading and that writing was also explicitly taught. After 23 years in this district and with 14 of those years as a head principal of the same school, I left to coach/mentor other principals as an administrative coach with a local consulting firm. Though the two years of coaching were absolutely rewarding, I longed to have my own school with my own staff and students.

I found my next opportunity at McLaurin Elementary School (MES) in the Rankin County School District. Upon my arrival, MES was a "C" rated school with high staff turnover and behavioral issues. They were using a teaching approach (Balanced Literacy) that wasn't yielding the desired results and were unfamiliar with the science of reading and structured literacy. It was time for me to put my many years of experience and knowledge of the science of reading to work!

The analogy of the itsy-bitsy spider can be used to illustrate the journey of MES and its success in improving student outcomes. Just like the spider who climbed up the waterspout despite being washed down, MES faced obstacles and challenges. We were labeled by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) as an Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI) school my first year there. Our special education students were performing unsatisfactorily on state assessments and had done so for the past 3 years.

As we entered year 2, we were labeled as a Literacy Support School by MDE which meant we would be assigned a state literacy coach to support our efforts toward continued improvement. This designation was due to our 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading scores not meeting the state threshold for 3 years. Our MDE Literacy Coach was very instrumental in helping us to realign instruction across content areas. At the end of this year, our kindergarten was number 1 in the district for growth on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA). We were unequivocally teaching children to read! Staff, parents, and students were elated. The sun had come out and our Itsy-Bitsy school was on the move with the science of reading and structured literacy!

During my 3rd year of leadership, despite the challenges we continued to face, we also continued to climb levels. Just as the spider climbed the waterspout, MES hit the highest school level our state offers. We made it to the "A" designation within 2 years! This was only the 2<sup>nd</sup> time in 20 years MES had performed at this level. Our 3<sup>rd</sup> grade proficiency was also improving. Staff, students, parents, and the entire community celebrated with us!

Just like the spider who climbed up the waterspout, MES continued to face challenges. COVID hit Spring 2020 putting a halt to all forward momentum. However, we persisted in our efforts to maintain and improve student

learning through distance learning. Because there was no testing that Spring, MES worked 2 more years to come from under ATSI, which it did! Before I left the school, we were also released from the designation of being a Literacy Support School. The story of MES should inspire other schools and educators to never give up and keep climbing, no matter the obstacles they face.

Midyear of my 4th year as principal of MES (during COVID) the position of Director of Elementary Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development became vacant. Because I passionately believed the science of reading and structured literacy based on the work we accomplished over 2 schools, I knew I had something to offer the district. I applied and now I share with you from this seat.

I began this new journey with 6 content specialists and 1 data specialist who only knew balanced literacy as the primary mode of instruction. I quickly realized I was now the Itsy-Bitsy Educator in the midst of what seemed to be an insurmountable transformation. The rain was falling in our department. Although the specialists were fantastic educators, they had little to no knowledge of the science of learning nor structured literacy. They knew something wasn't right and test scores were speaking loudly that a change needed to occur.

I introduced them to and began to build their background knowledge on the science of reading and structured literacy through books, research, webinars and many discussions on why shifting from balanced literacy to structured literacy was critical for the entire district. We read lots of books. We began with <a href="Shifting the Balance">Shifting the Balance</a> by Jan Miller Burkins and Kari Yates. We then moved on to books to take us deeper into science-based understanding and practices. Here is a brief list; <a href="Explicit Instruction">Explicit Instruction</a> by Anita Archer and Charles Hughes, <a href="Language at the Speed">Language at the Speed</a> of Sight by Mark Seidenberg, <a href="Reading in the Brain">Reading in the Brain</a>, by Stanislas Dehaene, <a href="Speech to Print">Speech to Print</a> by Louisa Moats, <a href="The Writing Revolution">The Writing Revolution</a> by Judith Hochman and Natalie Wexler and <a href="The Writing Reading IS Rocket Science">The Writing Reading: Defining Roulede</a> along with others. We listened to podcasts: <a href="Science of Reading: The Podcast">Science of Reading: Defining Guide</a> along with others. We listened to podcasts: <a href="Science of Reading: The Podcast">Science of Reading: Defining</a> Sold a Story, <a href="Melissa and Lori Love Literacy">Melissa and Lori Love Literacy</a> and others. We became and still are veracious readers and listeners of podcasts. As the spider continued to climb the waterspout, we persisted in reading to increase our understanding and deepen our knowledge.

Although our district is considered a highly successful district with an A rating, like the spider who faced the challenge of climbing up the waterspout during a heavy rain, our district faced a major challenge with 39% of our students not reading proficiently, and gaps in proficiency across all subgroups. We knew something had to be done quickly. As the rain was the challenge to the spider, the challenge to our district was now obvious to all. Data established the **why**. But the question became **how** do we change practice when what we currently do is all we know and have known for 20+ years? We needed to shift. Decoding needed to replace guessing and looking at the pictures. Decodable readers are needed to replace leveled readers. What was once considered balanced needed to become structured.

In my heart, I recognized the necessity of transitioning our entire district away from balanced literacy. However, the question of how to do so loomed large as the rain continued to fall. Drawing on my leadership experiences across two schools, I began by building the case for change through current data. I focused on developing the background knowledge of the district specialists. We also worked with our district administrators through our monthly Principal's Academy sessions. We defined the science of reading and structured literacy for them. We shared and deconstructed the upper and lower strands of Scarborough's Rope. We broke down the components of reading. We unpacked orthography, morphology, syllabication, semantics, and syntax. We also addressed writing with them through the Writing Revolution. We wanted to ensure our administrators had a strong basic understanding of the science of learning and structured literacy before we began to roll out other aspects of instruction.

We met with MDE's State Literacy Director, Kristen Wynn, and her leadership team to assist us with thinking through a plan to turn the tide in our district. Out of this meeting came a suggestion for our entire K-12 curriculum department to attend the *Sustaining Strong Readers: Middle School Literacy Training* for content area teachers and coaches. Our assistant superintendent, Karen Schmidt, and executive director of academics, Angy Graham, permitted us to begin a formal system-wide shift. We attended that training, and it became the catalyst for systemic change across our K-12 system.

Dr. Staci Bain, founder, and president of EDUCATE America, LLC, trained our 6th grade teachers on the science of learning using a structured (instructional) routine that was open source for our state. After participating in this training, we knew then that a structured routine would provide a clear framework for learning across all content areas in all grade levels. In a recent article, Natalie Wexler stated, "Well, obviously, decoding words is only one component of reading. At earlier grade levels, decoding ability is the primary determinant of reading scores, but comprehension becomes more important as grade levels increase and the reading passages get more complex.' This statement clearly denotes why we had to climb back up the waterspout and provide all grade levels with a comprehensive approach to teaching. A restructuring of Tier I instruction was imminent. While we were working our way through phonemic awareness and phonics instruction in the lower grades to build automaticity with decoding and to reduce the cognitive load for decoding, we realized all our teachers, K-2 and 3<sup>rd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> grade, needed even more knowledge on cognitive science, neuroscience, and linguistics to assist with developing comprehension across the grades. They needed to be taught an instructional methodology based on sound pedagogical approaches for instruction. They needed an instructional framework that provided proven components, but that was adaptable to accommodate teaching styles, content areas, and student needs all while maintaining the core structure of the framework. The routine brought of a new level of instructional stability we had not experienced over the last 20+ years! The sun was beginning to come out as we climbed the science of learning and structured literacy waterspout.

As we rolled out the routine, we noted predictable classroom environments begin to emerge. With support in planning, teachers dug deeply into vocabulary acquisition using complex, high-level (above grade level) text which was beginning to be used for conducting read alouds which facilitated discussions for the purpose of developing students' verbal reasoning and for knowledge building. Knowledge building was imperative and became part of our instructional routines across K-6. We looked at the structure of words through morphology and the structure of sentences and paragraphs through syntax and semantics to impact meaning. We knew our teachers needed a deep level understanding of the language strand of Scarborough's Rope to effectively teach. It was decided we would begin to shift not only 6<sup>th</sup> grade toward the science of learning and structured literacy, but we would work backward into 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade. I know this is not the traditional route, but we had students that were 1 -2 years behind which required our immediate attention. Strong job-embedded professional development began to dry up the rain and the sun was about to shine again!

Our next major goal was to secure formal science of reading training for our K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers and administrators. We were granted permission by Mrs. Schmidt and Mrs. Graham to secure *AIM Pathways to Proficient Reading* for professional development for teachers and *AIM Pathways to Literacy Leadership* for administrators. Like the Itsy-Bitsy spider who never gave up, we persistently followed up with the necessary parties until this training was secured. And just like how the sun came out for the spider at the end of the nursery rhyme, we were able to see the sunshine again on our district from the top of the elementary division to the bottom of it. Along with data, this provided the **why** for our shift.

Grounding our teachers in the science of reading research was huge. We also knew that we needed to provide ongoing support and coaching to ensure they were able to implement their new learning effectively. To do this, we established a coaching model that paired content specialists with teachers to provide support in the classroom. The district curriculum specialists would observe the teachers and provide feedback and support to ensure they were implementing structured literacy effectively. We also provided ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers to continue to build their knowledge and skills in structured literacy.

The results of our efforts have been nothing short of remarkable. Our students are now making gains in reading proficiency, and we are seeing the gaps in proficiency across all subgroups beginning to close. We still have much work to do, but we are moving in the right direction.

## **Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (MDE)**

2022 689, with 59% scoring 681 or above 2023 699, with 64% scoring 681 or above

## Mississippi's Literacy-Based Promotion Act (3rd Grade Gate)

2022 84% Passing 2023 87% Passing \*As a side note, you will notice the nomenclature transition from the science of reading to the science of learning. When using the SoR terminology, we found some teachers struggled to make the correlation to their subject area. Using the terminology science of learning helped us clarify that the science of learning is a multidisciplinary field that draws on research from cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and education to better understand how people learn and how to best facilitate learning. It serves as a more inclusive term for our district. Therefore, content area does not matter.

Again, the analogy of the itsy-bitsy spider can be used to explain the progress and challenges faced as we began the district-wide shift in implementing structured literacy grounded in the science of learning. Some administrators were leery of the change as were some teachers. However, there were many educators, administrators, and parents alike that were happy to see change come. There were many hard conversations and discussions, and we anticipate more to come, but like the Itsy-Bitsy spider we will continue to persevere in moving this shift forward and all our students will soon bask in the sunshine of reading successfully.

As I bring this time with you to a close, I'd like to share a few takeaways from this experience.

- When preparing to engage in a systemic shift in instruction, engage your leadership, district curriculum staff, and principals in seeing the need for the shift based on current district data.
  - Everyone needs to know why. Begin with a conversation. Build consensus. Share articles, webinars, and books to flood your district with current research. Once you share the why, people want and need to know how. This is where you share the plan including the what. What new practice will replace the old instructional practice? What is the implementation plan? How will it be supported? How will change be sustained? Develop a 3-5 year plan that demonstrates sustainability. Demonstrate grace and patience. Systemic change is not easy. Be very strategic and intentional with everything you do.
- Throughout this process, I learned the importance of building a culture of excellence and the impact it had on student achievement. You must define excellence for your district. It was not enough to simply implement the right programs and practices; you must ensure all staff members are committed to the goal of improving student outcomes and are willing to put in the hard work to make it happen.
- In addition, I learned the value of ongoing professional development and coaching to support teachers and administrators in implementing and refining new instructional practices. It is critical to provide teachers (and administrators) with the tools and resources they need to be successful and to provide them with ongoing feedback and support to help them grow and improve. Coaching is key.

Overall, my experience has taught me there are a multiplicity of layers to change that must be considered when making systemic transitions, but with the right mindset, a commitment to excellence, and a willingness to work hard, anything is possible. By focusing on structured literacy and the science of learning, we are transforming what it means to teach reading in the Rankin County School District. It is a challenging and rewarding journey, and one that I appreciate each day.

In addition, the Itsy-Bitsy Spider can also teach us about the power of community and support. In the nursery rhyme, the sun comes out and dries up the rain, allowing the spider to climb the spout again. This suggests that there are partners that can help us along our journey, such as the support of our state, other external partners, district leadership, our school administrators, and school staff.

So, the next time you hear "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider," think about the valuable lessons we learned in Rankin County as we sought to shift from balanced literacy to structured literacy grounded in the science of reading/learning. Keep climbing, persevere through obstacles, have a growth mindset, and seek support from those around you. Just like the spider, you can reach the top of your waterspout and achieve your goals. We have changed the way that we teach reading, and we have changed the trajectory of our students' lives. It is my hope that other districts will be inspired by our story and will take the steps necessary to ensure all their students can become strong readers. We will see you in the sunshine as we continue to move our district from best to elite!

<sup>&</sup>quot;...the itsy-bitsy district went up the spout again."