

My name is Kara Quinn. I am a First Grade teacher at Edmunds Elementary School in Burlington, VT.

I have a Master's Degree in Elementary Education. I have been teaching grades k-4 for 17 years.

Early on in my teaching career, I used a combination of various reading programs and basic training in guided reading from my colleagues. Most often, the kids with strong pre-reading skills did well, but those without a solid foundation stayed below the standard and got additional support outside of the classroom. Despite the fact that Literacy Instruction is an integral part of teaching in an early elementary classroom, I never felt like I had adequate training or that it was a strength of mine.

This was always quite confusing for me. If I were a high school history teacher, I would be required to take many courses to demonstrate my proficiency and expertise in the area of History. Yet, as an early elementary educator, there is no requirement that I have taken courses in a structured approach to literacy.

So, in the summer of 2018, after fumbling through literacy instruction for 15 years, I decided to take the course on structured literacy offered by the Stern Center.

The structured literacy class completely transformed my approach to teaching literacy. I was blown away with all of the information I learned and was dumbfounded as to why this had not been a required part of my initial training as a classroom teacher. I questioned how I was ever considered “qualified to teach literacy” without this level of understanding about the English language and how it works. It was honestly both embarrassing, and enlightening.

Prior to taking the structured literacy course, I had a very basic understanding of the structure of our language and how it relates to teaching literacy. I had lots of confusion and certainly didn't understand the “why” behind the patterns and rules of the English language.

After taking the structured literacy course, I began to realize that the key to literacy success is to help kids make sense of language at the smallest level—the sound level—and help kids connect what they

know—which is speech—to what they don't yet know—which is print—so they can learn how to read and then learn to love reading. We can't "teach" kids to love reading if they can't read!

The shift that occurred after I took the course and practicum on structured literacy was completely remarkable. In 2019, I started the year with 77% of my class below grade level in reading. By the end of 2019, my class had out-performed any of the 15 classes that preceded them in all areas of literacy.

There were positive results in all areas- handwriting, phonics, phonemic awareness, blending, word reading and sound, word, and sentence dictation. All of my readers exhibited consistent decoding skills that far-surpassed the skills of my previous classes and eventually my whole class was reading or "attempting to read" more complex reading passages. My students had a much larger bank of "learned words" that they could read and write. They consistently used spelling rules to write words and sentences and independent writing pieces. We all benefited from daily vocabulary expansion.

Because of the structured literacy approach, now, I am way more diagnostic in my teaching. I can look at my readers and know specifically which concepts they have and which ones they do not have. I can also educate the students' parents and explain the specific skills they have.

I know firsthand that there are many factors that contribute to a child's readiness for reading. But, I also know that a structured literacy approach is based on sounds and connecting sounds from speech to print. This, combined with its predictability, repetition and consistency makes ideal for teaching early literacy.

The structured literacy approach has completely empowered both my students and me. We all share an enthusiasm for reading and writing that I have never seen before. That enthusiasm, combined with an understanding of how the English language works is what is propelling them into success in literacy and giving them a foundation for all future learning.

