

Emina McLean on classroom breakthroughs in language and literacy

TRANSCRIPT

Emina McLean, literacy expert, teacher, researcher and leader

Andy McLean 00:00

Hello and welcome back to Moments in Mind from Pearson Clinical Assessment. Thanks for tuning in.

I'm Andy McLean and in this podcast, we meet clinicians, educators and therapists who are changing lives for the better. We talk about the landmark moments in their career - the tough moments, as well as the breakthroughs - to find out what they've learned about themselves and about others.

And so to today's guest:

When schools need to transform how they teach reading and writing, they call for Emina McLean.

For the past couple of decades, she's been immersed in literacy, teaching, research and leadership in a range of settings, so she knows what it takes to build rigorous literacy practices that last.

Today, she's here to answer the questions that matter most: How far back does literacy really begin? What should we be doing differently? And how do we help every child become a confident reader and writer?

Hi Emina, welcome to the show!

Emina McLean

Hey Andy, great to be here.

Andy McLean

Now, we do have to clear one thing up first of all, don't we?

Emina McLean

Yes!

Andy McLean

You and I are no relation. We just happen to share the same awesome surname!

Emina McLean 01:13

It's a very good name, a very strong clan name.

Andy McLean 01:16

Absolutely, so it's nice to have a member of the of the clan on the show for once. So welcome, welcome - extra welcome. Now the first question we ask all of our guests - I'm always fascinated by the answers to this one is - what's your earliest memory?

Emina McLean 01:29

I love this question. I've got so many just bizarre childhood accident memories, like riding off the end of the road and not realising it ended!

But most of my early memories are either interacting with my dad or my mum around stories or books.

One of our favourite things (my sister and I very close in age; my brother came along five or six years later) and every night, dad would do bedtime, and it would be either 'choose a book' or dad would tell 'a story out of his head', we would call it.

So it'd be like, 'Oh, Dad, please tell a story out of your head'. And we would just lay back for hours and - well, what felt like hours it was probably 10 minutes - and dad was probably like, 'Let me go!'. But yeah, just that story and imagination. And my dad's just a wonderful storyteller, so I have very fond memories of doing that with my dad and sister.

Andy McLean 02:21

Beautiful. I can relate to that. I was the story reader in our household for my two kids. And I have to say they're probably some of the moments I cherish most.

Emina McLean 02:31

Yeah, and it was sort of this joint construction, I think, too, where you'd be like, 'No, no, I'm not happy with that next, next segment or not that ending, like, Let's go again'. So it became very collaborative.

Andy McLean

Oh right, so you had an editorial input!

Emina McLean

We had some input, although we like, we developed some favourites. Yeah, it was a very special time.

Andy McLean 02:48

Well, that's great. And that actually leads us quite neatly on to literacy development. And I'm particularly interested in the phase before school starts, because we often think about literacy in terms of a six-year-old child reading a book in the classroom, perhaps. But actually it does go back right back further than that, doesn't it?

Emina McLean 03:09

Yes, how far back does it go? That's the question! Pre-conception? Conception? In utero? There's all sorts of genetic factors, environmental factors, but certainly, I think the things that we think we can have more influence over is from birth. And we know right from birth, exposure to language, exposure to text, is really essential. So I think we need to think about it right from the start,

Andy McLean 03:39

Interesting, and what can families and parents do to help during that development phase?

Emina McLean 03:46

I kind of always say, 'Talk, talk, talk, talk, read, read, read, read'.

But it's not just talking at children, either. I think what we know from the research is there's that essential reciprocity, so interactivity, commenting on and building on utterances from children. Having that time built into the day for a lot of interaction and talk.

But I think it's a societal problem that we're also just reading less and less and have less time for things. So I think we have to have even more of a focus on that in the early years, finding that time to support, language and literacy development.

Andy McLean 04:16

Interesting, because, of course, parents busier than ever with screens and all those other distractions and so much more competing for our time and attention. So we have to kind of bring ourselves down to the kids' level and talk and listen to them and give them the space and the time?

Emina McLean 04:32

Yeah, and I mean, it's exposure to volume of language. But it's also about how complex that language is. And there's a real difference between the language we use in everyday talking versus the language we would experience in rich literature. So that combination is also quite important.

Andy McLean 04:47

And what about when kids start school? If I put myself in the shoes of a teacher for a moment. I walk into a primary school kindergarten class. There's 30 children's looking back at me. By the time they get to that that big milestone in their lives, actually, the variance in vocab exposure can be quite marked among the class. So how do teachers ensure that every child makes progress?

Emina McLean 05:13

It's such a good question. I've got a very probably overly simplistic response to that, and maybe a more nuanced response.

But I think I'm very big on, as a school leader as well: all that we can really control is what we do once students come to school. And even within schools, we're limited in the factors that we can control.

So my simple answer is, well, we just start teaching.

There's huge variation in language exposure, vocab exposure, all sorts of learning opportunities, and we can't do much about that.

Having said that the gaps that students have are often more so about everyday speaking and listening skills. Yes, there might be some literacy there, but we often find that we can get really good progress teaching more academic vocabulary to all students right from the start of school. We kind of call it tier two vocabulary, the sophisticated words that they're going to need for broader academic participation and reading comprehension.

So I kind of just say, where are they at? Doesn't matter. Let's start teaching and we'll kind of provide additional opportunities for the students who need it the most where we can

Andy McLean 06:21

I love that. And if I am a teacher and I'm looking for maybe 'early markers' of where we might have a child at risk of later literacy difficulties, what might some of those be?

Emina McLean 06:34

There's a couple of things to say there. But when we think about early literacy difficulties, there's really two. In the early years, we're thinking about two kind of broad strands of literacy.

There's the literacy, where I need to learn to recognise words on a page, and the decoding element, and then there's the language element, and that's the idea those two things work in concert to give me broader reading.

So there's two kind of broad risk categories, which is how quickly and easily are they acquiring things like phonic knowledge, sound letter relationships? How many words can they read? Can they start to join that together and read fluently?

And then we know there's sort of two things that we look out there: acquisition. Is it harder for them to kind of learn the thing, or is it fluency? Is it harder for them to get better at the thing? And then I'm

always looking at things like, do they have less language than their peers? Do they have more problems following instructions than their peers? Do they have a bit more limited vocabulary than their peers? Things like that.

So you're sort of comparing as well as looking for those key markers, but two broad streams I think are useful.

Andy McLean 07:34

Okay, so I'm lucky that in my family, we have a number of people who have dyslexia. And yet they haven't been so lucky in some respects, because there's a lot of myths and misconceptions out there and stigma around dyslexia. What is it that teachers can do to help clarify those?

Emina McLean 07:50

There are a lot of myths on sort of I think each end of the spectrum. I think there's a myth that if I am struggling with learning to read and spell, I might have dyslexia. There's that automatic conclusion, whereas we know a lot of students who will struggle and do struggle and won't go on to have a diagnosis.

But then the other end of the spectrum is you've got dyslexia, therefore you're not going to learn to read or spell. We might lower the expectations where we know the research is with a lot more opportunities and scaffolding and support.

The vast majority of people with diagnoses of dyslexia and other reading related problems can become proficient. So I'd really like to see high expectations and ambition and high support for all of our students. I think that's critical.

Andy McLean 08:35

Well, thank you, Emina, let's go to a short break, after which we'll talk about some breakthrough moments that you've experienced. And I'd also like to talk about the hallmarks of strong literacy programs that are built to last. Stay tuned. We'll be right back.

Promotional message

Andy McLean 09:20

Welcome back to the show. So Emina, I'd like to talk now about some conditions like ADHD, autism that can intersect with language and learning and literacy development in various ways. My first question, I guess, is, how important is early diagnosis?

Emina McLean 09:39

Yeah, I think with autism and ADHD, I think like any learning difference, early identification and support is critical, and I think we probably still have a long way to go in school systems and education more broadly, with looking for those things early, but also having good screening practices.

Andy McLean 09:58

And how might we adapt literacy instruction for people who learn differently?

Emina McLean 10:04

Good question, I mean, we're talking specifically here about autism and ADHD. We still know, I think, with diagnoses like this, this huge variation in how students present, or the difficulties they might have.

But there are also, within that, some patterns we know students who have diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder, we often see we call them like 'super decoders'. They're really, really good at self teaching phonic knowledge, and you might have proficient decoding, sometimes even hyperlexia. 'I

can read accurately. I can read at speed, and I sound like a really good reader, but I might struggle more with the comprehension component, particularly things like inferential comprehension, making connections as I read.'

So we often see patterns like that where knowing the diagnoses or knowing the student can help us be a bit more targeted with the type of support we provide within reading instruction. You know, with that, you'd be thinking about more sort of visual scaffolds and supports for the comprehension component.

Whereas students with diagnoses like ADHD, we often know there's an overlap of - the research varies but - 30 or 40% literacy problems alongside a diagnosis like that. But a lot of issues with students with diagnoses like that are around support, with attention or executive functioning more broadly. It might be harder to learn phonics, for example, 'if I struggle to really sustain my intention within that lesson'.

So a lot of them are learning scaffolds, additional opportunities for practice and so on. Yeah, early identification is so critical. But also knowing the elements of reading that they might need more targeted support with as well and within that, what are their strengths too?

Andy McLean 11:44

Let's talk systemically, perhaps, or sort of zoom out a little bit outside of a single classroom. I'm interested in work that you've done with schools and education authorities. Can you perhaps describe a moment of breakthrough that you've had in that space?

Emina McLean 11:59

Yes. So we are in Australia having this conversation, and we are now in a time of endless breakthrough, what feels like endless breakthrough.

After years of advocacy, most state systems or territories here (and 'jurisdictions', in other countries, they would be called) have had significant shifts in policy. More so than that, I think across Australia, the biggest breakthrough that we've had across systems is understanding the central importance of word recognition as access to broader literacy.

Now, phonics is a big part of that. There's more to it than just phonics. But I think we are now saying, 'hey, there's been a lot of these children and young people locked out of literacy because they didn't build that essential access knowledge and skill'.

So I think for me, that's the thing I've really felt kind of most proud to be a part of, is to see systems going, 'let's give students the best start and the best chance of accessing broader literacy as early as possible'.

Andy McLean 13:00

So encouraging to hear, yeah, wonderful. And you've led implementation projects to build systems for literacy education, of course. So you would have a good sense of which of those are more likely to stick and last and be sustainable - and perhaps, what are the hallmarks of the ones that fade away after a few years.

So, it's not an exact science, I know (if only it were!) but what are some of the hallmarks, if you like, of those that do last?

Emina McLean 13:34

So, I mean, we have a history here in Australia of just endless back and forth with policy. I don't think we have a strong track record in Australia of building policy and then implementing that policy in sustainable ways. There are ways in which we do it that are quite successful, but they're unrelated to our teaching and learning.

So things like child safeguarding, we've got a track record of saying, 'hey, we can do this, but with teaching and learning, we are attracted to shiny things'. I kind of call us 'the Bower birds'. And so, 'oh, let's do this, and then let's do this, and let's do this'.

So why things don't work are I think they're fad driven. The long-term strategic planning is not really considered. I think we're only really starting to draw from other fields now, understanding implementation science and this idea that we need to prepare for change, stage change.

But the other core reason, I think initiatives fail is we just - within systems - say, 'well, this is how we're going to do things now', but we don't actually think about the end user, teachers and schools.

What do they actually need in order to be successful with this? And then schools cop it. Teachers cop it. But the problem is further upstream.

So sustainability, I do think, comes from deep understanding of implementation science, deep understanding of the complexity of actually running a school or running a classroom and being properly equipped. Equipping teachers with the tools to do the work that's kind of been prioritised.

Yeah, I think we're in a kind of large-scale experiment in Australia now, because most systems have new policies and new approaches, but they're taking - within that - very different approaches to implementation. How long they're going to take, how well they're going to train and equip teachers, it'll be interesting to look back. And I think in, I don't know, 10-15 years' time to see which method was the most effective for change management.

Andy McLean 15:27

Indeed. And what I love about your work and your background is that you have had experience in the classroom. You've had experience you know more in the administrative side and strategic side and the leadership side as well. And of course, you've got a background in research too.

So I'm just curious, like in terms of what the research tells us about literacy development and learning, is there any common gap that exists between: what the research tells us, and what we're seeing in classrooms?

Emina McLean 16:02

It's both pleasure and pain, I think, to wear so many different hats, but it has allowed me to be a much more nuanced practitioner. Everything that I do at an individual school level is strengthened by my research knowledge in the research space. All of my years of experience in schools adds to that, because I understand the complexities.

I think, for me, a big issue that we have had to overcome, or still need to overcome, is thinking that research-to-practice is this lovely, linear proposition. It's not. And I think a challenge is that research will tell us what to do, but not necessarily how or how much or when.

So there's this challenge of, yes, there's a research-to-practice gap. We know it's about a 20-year lag from publication to practice shift, so that that's an issue. And there's all sorts of reasons for that. But also it's the fact that, as the end user as an individual educator or a school leader, you have to say, 'Well, how am I going to make this work in my setting?'

So I think a really positive shift that we've had is: I do feel like our collective knowledge within schools is building. There's been a lot more effort over the past 10 or 20 years in Australia to build our teacher knowledge and knowledge within education systems. But that's not enough, and there's a lot of trial and error within our own context to get it right.

I think what has been missing, and why we've seen these big policy shifts is just broadly the most effective methods for teaching, sort of the most essential elements of reading. But that gap is, I think, closing. Yeah, some very positive shifts.

Andy McLean 17:40

And speaking of positivity, I wanted to ask you about what gives you optimism for the way that we're teaching children to read and write for the future?

Emina McLean 17:49

I've always been optimistic, even five or 10 or 15 years ago, before we saw significant shifts. I'm just sort of hardwired that way. I think I can find positivity in anything which is probably helpful in the policy practice space!

But I am optimistic about stability and consistency of policy and position statements across sectors and regions of Australia. I think we are collectively saying, 'Hey, we think this is really how we should teach reading or how we should teach writing'.

Although writing is quite neglected at the moment, I think we are getting better at understanding assessment and understanding the importance of early identification and screening of sort of foundational reading skills and language skills. So that's something to be really positive about.

And there's been a real emphasis on curriculum and resourcing. So we're not just saying, 'hey, the research says, "do this, do this, do this"'. We're saying, 'well, actually, the research says that these are kind of the critical aspects of literacy to really nail in the first three years of school. And here's how you teach it, and here's a curriculum to do that with, and here are the assessment tools that can help you track how students are progressing'.

So for me, it is the practical tools and planning that actually makes this stuff possible. And you know, I've got the joy of, you know, most days of the week I get to be in schools or talking to educators, and them feeling equipped and empowered to do the work is certainly what drives me and makes me pretty excited about what's possible.

Andy McLean 19:23

Well, Emina - from one word nerd to another - thank you so much for coming in today and having a chat with me. I've really enjoyed it.

Before we round up, I've got one final question for you, and that is to imagine yourself many, many years from now - many years from now - when you've retired and you're thinking back on your career, what will be the moments that you'll remember most?

Emina McLean 19:43

Maybe retirement is not that far away - I'm just feeling so tired all the time these days! But for me, the things that we spoke about breakthroughs earlier, the things that stand out to me already are when you see things coming together for either a teacher who's really tried to shift their practice, or a student who has been struggling, and then all of a sudden you see something click.

I work with a lot of struggling older readers - adolescents, often in years 7, 8, 9,10 - who might have a reading fluency problem, for example. And seeing that resolve and them having broader access to reading and building their self-concept as a reader.

I truly believe that literacy is agency, and you're setting them up to have control over how they engage within the curriculum, but also you're giving them, you know, it's this greatest gift that gives them power and choice later in life. So for me, it's always when I see struggle and then reward, whether it's a teacher or student.

Andy McLean 20:46

Yeah, I love that. I I can feel my heart lifting as you're talking!

Emina McLean 20:50

Yeah that's incredible. Literacy is freedom, and it's just such a powerful tool. But we have such a powerful responsibility as well to deliver that well.

Andy McLean 20:59

Emina, thank you for your steadfast dedication to that work and thanks for joining us today. It's been an absolute pleasure,

Emina McLean 21:06

Total pleasure for me as well. Thanks for having me.

Andy McLean 21:10

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And while you're there, please leave us a rating and a review. We'd be very grateful if you do.

And if you're interested in learning more about the 'nitty gritty' of leadership in English and literacy, check out Emina McLean's podcast called 'Heavy is the English Head'.

Until next time, thanks again for joining us, and goodbye for now.