CLARIFYING STRUCTURED LITERACY
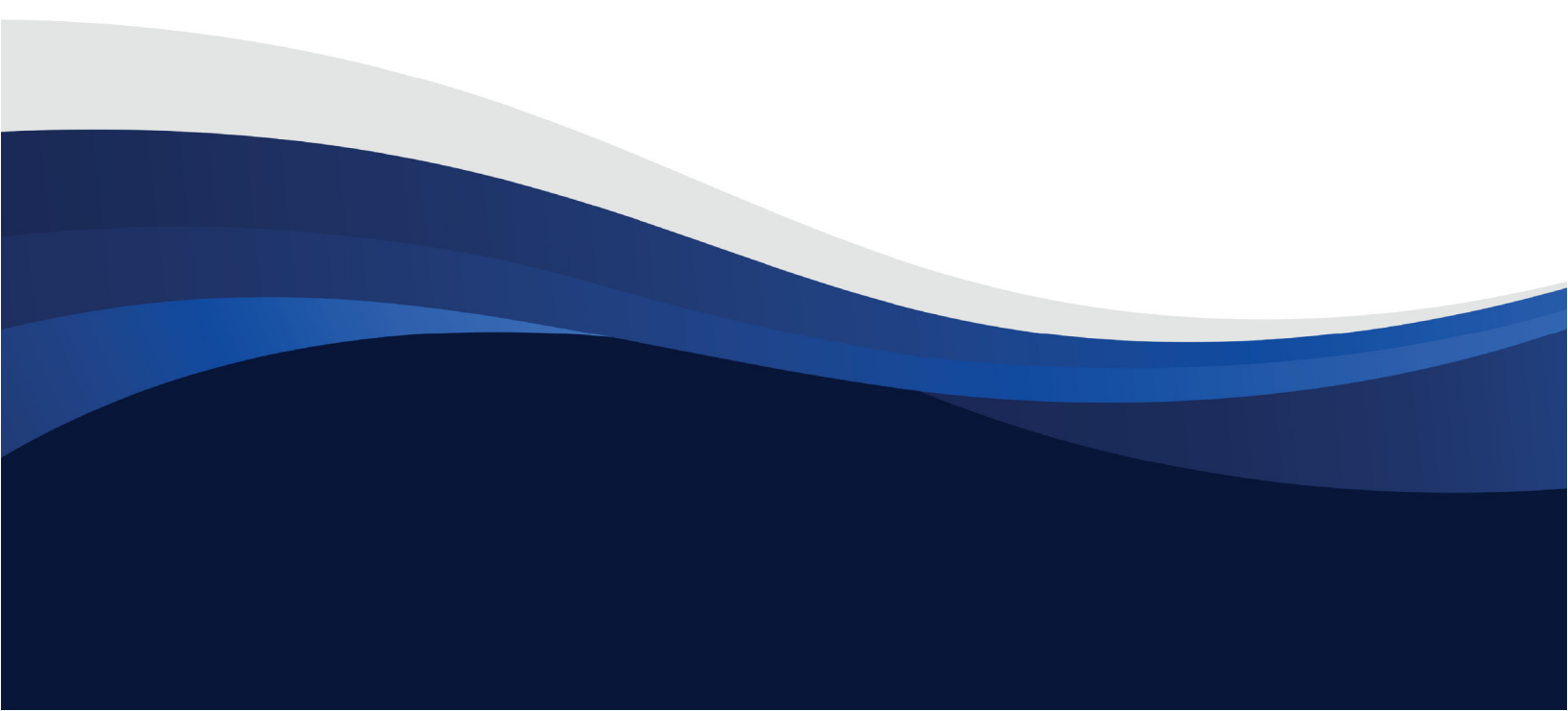
MOVING THE CONVERSATION FORWARD

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Over the past several years, terms such as the ***Science of Reading*** and ***Structured Literacy*** have moved rapidly from research and professional guidance into public discourse, policy language, and classroom implementation. This increased visibility reflects a growing commitment to grounding literacy instruction in evidence. At the same time, a familiar challenge in education has surfaced: *shared terminology is often adopted more quickly than shared understanding*.

In a recent commentary, one of us identified a central problem underlying many current debates about reading instruction—the persistent use of imprecise language and false dichotomies that obscure the complexity of learning to read and write. That commentary was intentionally diagnostic. Its purpose was to explain how unclear definitions and binary framings limit productive dialogue and contribute to confusion in both policy and practice. The present commentary represents a natural next step in that conversation. Rather than revisiting debates or advancing a corrective argument, our goal is to clarify what is meant by "Structured Literacy," to articulate its scope, and to address points of misunderstanding that have emerged as the term has gained widespread use.

We approach this task in a spirit of shared learning. Definitional confusion is not unusual when research-informed concepts are translated into educational policy, legislation, and large-scale implementation. Clarifying meaning, therefore, is not about adjudicating positions but about supporting a more stable professional understanding that can guide instruction, policy, education preparation, and practice.

WHAT IS MEANT BY STRUCTURED LITERACY

Structured Literacy refers to an approach to literacy instruction that specifies both the content of instruction and the principles by which that content is taught. It is grounded in converging evidence from the Science of Reading, but it is not itself a theory of reading development, nor is it synonymous with the Science of Reading. Rather, Structured Literacy represents a translation of that science into instructional practice by articulating what is taught and how instruction and practice are organized to support learning.

Structured Literacy is neither based in ideology nor politically motivated. Its strength lies in its scientific foundation and its openness to ongoing evaluation and revision. As new research findings emerge, refinements to its instructional content and principles are expected.

As articulated in the research literature and professional guidance, Structured Literacy encompasses language and literacy at multiple levels, including phonological awareness, sound–symbol correspondences, orthographic patterns, morphology, syntax, semantics, and discourse. Importantly, this scope extends beyond word reading alone to include spelling, reading comprehension, and written expression. Vocabulary, sentence-level language, and text structure are therefore integral to instruction developed from a Structured Literacy perspective. From its origins, Structured Literacy has addressed both reading and writing, recognizing these as reciprocal aspects of written language development.

Equally central are the instructional principles that guide how to teach this content. Structured Literacy emphasizes explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction; careful sequencing based on linguistic analysis; diagnostic teaching informed by assessment; and sufficient, structured opportunities for practice. Instruction is designed to support accuracy, efficiency, and transfer, with the goal of helping learners develop increasingly fluent and proficient use of written language.

A defining feature of Structured Literacy is its emphasis on structure informed by the inherent organization of oral and written language. Language is not arbitrary, but patterned at multiple levels, including sounds and symbols, words, sentences, and extended texts. Structured Literacy rests on the premise that learners cannot be expected to reliably infer these underlying patterns through exposure alone. For this reason, supporting proficiency in reading and written expression is most effective when the structure of language and its representation in print are made explicit and visible to learners.

In this way, the structure of language informs not only what is taught, but how instruction and practice are sequenced over time. Instruction is intentionally designed to guide students beyond isolated skill development toward meaningful application in words, sentences, passages, and connected text for both reading and writing. In Structured Literacy, structure refers fundamentally to the structure of the language being learned, not to a program, routine, or set of materials.

WHAT STRUCTURED LITERACY IS NOT

Clarifying what Structured Literacy is also requires being clear about what it is not. First, Structured Literacy is not a program. Programs may be aligned with Structured Literacy principles to varying degrees, but no single curriculum or scope-and-sequence defines Structured Literacy. Treating Structured Literacy as a branded product rather than an instructional framework risks conflating materials with principles.

Second, Structured Literacy is not limited to early phonics instruction. While explicit, systematic teaching of foundational word-reading skills is essential, it does not constitute the full scope of Structured Literacy. It is particularly important for students at risk of reading and writing difficulties. From its earliest inception, Structured Literacy has included spelling as a core component of written language instruction, along with sentence- and text-level language and writing. Narrowing the approach to phonics alone represents an incomplete understanding of the framework.

Third, Structured Literacy includes comprehension instruction, and does not reduce comprehension to background knowledge alone. Research in reading comprehension has consistently demonstrated that understanding written language depends on multiple interacting processes, including accurate word recognition, language comprehension, vocabulary, syntax, text structure, and strategic engagement with text. Importantly, these strategic and regulatory processes do not reliably develop simply as a byproduct of decoding proficiency and accumulated knowledge. Students must be supported through explicit instruction and guided practice to develop the skills and strategies necessary to monitor their understanding, make inferences, integrate information, and repair comprehension when meaning becomes unclear.

Likewise, just as reading comprehension does not naturally follow from the ability to read words and possess background knowledge, effective written expression does not automatically emerge from accurate spelling and knowledge of the topic. Students must be taught how to generate, organize, and communicate ideas in writing, including strategies for sentence construction, cohesion, and revision. When fully implemented, Structured Literacy focuses on both the receptive and expressive demands of written language, supporting students in learning not only how to access meaning in text but also how to convey meaning effectively through writing across development.

WHERE CONFUSION HAS EMERGED IN TRANSLATION

While the field has made sustained efforts to establish a clear conceptual foundation for Structured Literacy, confusion has nonetheless emerged as the framework has been adopted in policy and implemented across different contexts. We highlight three recurring areas where the scope and intent of Structured Literacy are often constrained in practice.

Limited Scope of Instructional Targets

In many current implementations, Structured Literacy is interpreted primarily as instruction in foundational phonics skills, with limited attention to other components of written language. Instruction often remains concentrated at the sublexical and lexical levels, with comparatively little emphasis on spelling, connected

text reading, or written expression. Opportunities to apply developing skills in authentic reading and writing contexts are frequently postponed or minimized.

This narrowing of scope is not inherent to Structured Literacy. On the contrary, professional guidance has consistently emphasized the integration of oral language, reading, and writing, as well as the importance of sentence- and text-level instruction. When implementation focuses narrowly on decoding alone, it risks underrepresenting the broader language competencies that Structured Literacy is intended to support.

INSUFFICIENT PRACTICE AND APPLICATION FOR PROFICIENCY

A second, related concern involves the role of practice. Even within a reduced instructional focus, students often receive limited opportunities to apply what they are learning through sustained reading and writing. Instruction may be explicit and systematic, yet insufficiently supported by the structured practice necessary for skills to become fluent and transferable.

Learning to read and write proficiently requires more than acquiring declarative knowledge about how words are built or how language is structured. It requires time, repetition, and application in meaningful contexts. Structured Literacy is designed not only to make the structure of language explicit, but also to provide learners with strategies and concepts they can use deliberately as they engage in practice. These effortful strategies support students in sustaining the amount and quality of practice needed to develop proficiency over time.

Without regular engagement with connected text—both as readers and as writers—students are unlikely to reach levels of automaticity and flexibility that support comprehension and composition. This is not a failure of explicit instruction, but a reminder that instruction, strategy use, *and* practice must work together to support durable learning.

LIMITED USE OF DATA TO DIFFERENTIATE INSTRUCTION

A third area of concern involves how student performance data are used to differentiate instruction over time. From its earliest articulations, Structured Literacy has been grounded in the use of ongoing, instructionally relevant formative assessment to guide instructional decisions. This emphasis aligns directly with a longstanding research question that has shaped the Science of Reading: *for which students are which instructional approaches most effective, in which settings, and with what degree of structure, differentiation, and duration?*

In practice, however, educators often struggle to use data in ways that allow instruction to remain responsive to these individual differences. Students vary widely in how quickly they acquire skills, the level of structure and scaffolding they require, and the amount and type of practice needed to achieve proficiency. Teaching students content they have already mastered is not merely inefficient. It can be counterproductive. At the same time, insufficient support or practice can leave other students without the instructional intensity necessary to progress.

Structured Literacy, when implemented as intended, relies on continuous assessment of student performance to inform instructional pacing, the provision and fading of scaffolds, and decisions about when students are ready to move forward. This responsiveness is critical not only at the level of skill acquisition, but also in determining how much practice students need at different levels of text granularity—from words and sentences to passages and extended texts—to develop fluent and transferable reading and writing skills.

When data are used primarily for summative purposes, or when instructional pacing is fixed rather than informed by ongoing performance, the core logic of Structured Literacy is undermined. Attending to individual differences through continuous assessment is not an optional enhancement. It is central to answering the enduring instructional question that continues to guide effective differentiated literacy instruction: *what works, for whom, and under what conditions?*

MOVING THE CONVERSATION FORWARD

Structured Literacy does not require reinvention or defense. What it requires is clarity. As the field continues to embrace evidence-informed instruction, maintaining precision about what Structured Literacy encompasses—and what it does not—becomes increasingly important. Clear definitions help prevent unnecessary polarization, support thoughtful implementation, and ensure that policy and practice remain aligned with the science that motivated this work in the first place.

Our intent in this commentary is to contribute to greater clarity by articulating the scope of Structured Literacy and identifying common points of constriction in its translation into practice. This translation has been hindered, in part, by policy-driven implementation, which can narrow how shared knowledge and instructional vision are developed within local contexts. Clarifying the scope of Structured Literacy helps reinforce a critical distinction: Structured Literacy is not the Science of Reading. The Science of Reading refers to a cumulative body of research on reading (*and writing*) development, reading (*and writing*) difficulties, and reading (*and writing*) instruction. Structured Literacy represents one translation of this research into an instructional framework.

Through this clarification, we aim to foster a shared professional understanding that acknowledges the complexity of literacy development while maintaining a focus on helping students become accurate, fluent, and proficient readers and writers through instructional practices grounded in what research has identified as most effective.