



Education Unscripted & Xplored Transcript

Episode 2: Literacy as a Wellness Predictor: How Reading Skills Shape Lifelong Outcomes

Kari Vogelgesang (00:07):

Welcome back to Education Unscripted & Xplored with Kari and Mark where we've created a space where we dig into what's working, what's unclear, and what's emerging across PK through 12 and higher education.

Mark McDermott (00:19):

Every episode we hope to pull from research practice and lived experience to make sense of this profession that we're all a part of that's evolving at a pace that sometimes our systems can barely match.

Kari Vogelgesang (00:31):

Today we're shifting into a topic that sits at the intersection of academic academics and wellness literacy as a predictor of long-term health and opportunity. And we have a wonderful guest that's with us today that I can't wait to introduce

Mark McDermott (00:48):

A very quick, but also very important reminder. As always, the views expressed here are our own, and they are not those of the University of Iowa or the College of Education.

Kari Vogelgesang (00:59):

I guess to start today's conversation, I just want to say something that I don't think we talk often enough about. Literacy is not just an academic skill. It can be a wellness indicator when a child struggles to read the consequences ripple far beyond just the classroom. You see it in school avoidance. You see it in self-confidence. You see it in how kids start to imagine or limit their future selves,

Mark McDermott (01:27):

And there's lots of research out there on this right now, reading proficiency critical, critically important in terms of a strong predictor of later academic success, high school completion, even long-term health outcomes. However, I think sometimes we talk about reading as if it's just a benchmark, when in reality it shapes whether students feel confident, connected, and capable of navigating the world at large.

Kari Vogelgesang (01:53):

One of the reasons why we're doing this today is we just really feel like this conversation has been missing publicly, not just with other educators and school administrators, but with parents and communities at large. And what I'm talking about is just seeing the human side of academic skills and preparations for them, not just as a score in the classroom, but what it means for them beyond the school walls.

Mark McDermott (02:19):

So that's where today's episode comes in. Yeah.

Again, we're very fortunate to have an expert with us who's going to help us unpack all of this, but we're going to try to look at this today, I think from the perspective of literacy, not just as a test score or as an aspect of assessment, but rather like Carrie said, what it means for long-term wellbeing for students and what that means for educators, for those of us who are involved in helping these students in the K 12 spaces, in the university spaces and elsewhere. And so looking at it both from this perspective of skill development, but also student identity and how those intersect. So we are thrilled to welcome to the podcast Dr. Leah Zimmerman from the University of Iowa and the Iowa Reading Research Center. Leah leads research and statewide initiatives focused on reading, development, intervention, and equitable access to evidence-based practices.

Kari Vogelgesang (03:13):

Leah, we're so glad you're here today. Welcome.

Leah Zimmermann (03:15):

Thank you so much for having me.

Kari Vogelgesang (03:18):

So, as we've been talking about, literacy is just such a huge topic. I mean, you can't turn on the TV hardly, and when there's a conversation about academic preparation and not here, the science of reading and where we're at in terms of our reading scores, and not just children's literacy, but adult literacy as well. So let's go ahead and just jump right into this conversation.

Mark McDermott (03:46):

Going to start with a very big idea, Leah. This is typical for me. People often say

Kari Vogelgesang (03:51):

Big idea, man over there's, do it.

Mark McDermott (03:53):

Let's try to, people will often say things like literacy is foundational, right? But we don't always take the time or maybe dive into that in terms of unpacking what do we exactly mean by that? And from your perspective, maybe starting out with what do you think that means? What are the well being implications for when a child maybe isn't as strong of a reader as we would hope they would be?

Leah Zimmermann (04:20):

Well, that is a big idea. Let's jump right into it.

Mark McDermott (04:22):

Answer that, get that

Leah Zimmermann (04:24):

Figured out, solve of those problems. Let's do it. Yeah. So when kids have reading difficulties, we know that the impact goes far beyond learning to read. So many of these students experience higher anxiety, lower self-confidence, and strong avoidance of reading tasks, especially when reading is public, when kids are asked to read out loud in a classroom over time, this repeated effort, because these kids are trying really hard, this repeated effort without success can make school feel stressful or even threatening to some students, which impacts their motivation, their behavior, as well as their mental health. The good news is though, when instruction helps reading become more automatic and less effortful, and we focus on building a student's sense of belonging and identity as a reader, we don't just see better reading. We often see improvements in their confidence, engagement, and overall wellbeing.

Kari Vogelgesang (05:25):

So one of the things that I look at a lot is attendance and school avoidance, and definitely think that for some kids they're connected. So considering what you just said and what we know about anxiety and school avoidance, I know that in this past year, school attendance has improved quite drastically, really for the state of Iowa. I'm also looking just at a few numbers here, and it looks just on the surface anyway, that our literacy scores have improved in the state of Iowa as well in this past year. So of course I start to think are they linked? And I think we need a lot more research to make that kind of come to that conclusion. Right. But I'm looking at these scores and I'm wondering if you can unpack them a little bit. Have our literacy scores and K through 12 improved...number one...and if yes, what do you think is contributing to that?

Leah Zimmermann (06:31):

Yeah, that's a great question. So reading proficiency can be measured in lots of different ways by different assessments with different texts and tasks. When we look at the statewide literacy assessment here in Iowa called the IS a S, we did see promising results last year that were definitely something to celebrate. As a state we saw ELA, so English language arts proficiency rates increasing or being maintained in all grades. And in grade four, there was an 11 point increase in ELA proficiency scores, which is really exciting. And I think we should really applaud the teachers and administrators policymakers because this is a huge celebration for our state. Of course, I think, like you said, it's difficult

to answer exactly what led to those things without a well-designed research study, but I think we have seen nationally and in the state of Iowa some changes in policy that may be shaping how reading instruction is being implemented and how students are being supported in our state. So we have seen a focus on evidence-based literacy instruction, some new legislation on teacher preparation programs, for instance. So I think it would be really interesting to dig into whether this kind of new policy environment, how it has shaped practice, and whether that has shaped literacy outcomes. I think it's a really great question that I'd love to dig into. I know lots of researchers across the state would, but regardless of the cause, let's celebrate those increases on the IF scores in our states and really applaud practitioners and policymakers

Mark McDermott (08:22):

When you talk. Okay. So I'm sitting here with two experts in literacy who have lots more background than I do. I'm a science ed guy, and so when we get to the science podcast, I'll be the one that maybe will feel a little more comfortable. But what I'm curious about, Leah, your answer to the first two questions, putting those together. So walk me through, even as someone who's a little naive to the process that's happening as students are learning to read, when are these, you talked about some of these challenges, if I'm not a proficient reader and I'm being asked to read out loud, and then I'm feeling like school's not my favorite place in the world, and when are we seeing those? At what point in the student's school progression are we seeing some of those things pop up compared to fourth grade scores are a ways along. So I'm just curious kind of chronologically maybe, or timeline wise, do we see those things pop up that are challenges for students right away, K through one, that kind of timeframe?

Leah Zimmermann (09:28):

Yeah, absolutely. Research shows that some of those difficulties that I mentioned earlier, like mental health, internalizing behaviors like anxiety, stress, low self-concept, they can begin really early, even in elementary school. We can see these in kindergarten and first grade students, but then they intensify as academic demands of school increase. So if you think about a kid progressing in school from early elementary to late elementary, there starts to be the words and texts are harder, the ideas are more complex, more abstract, the tasks that students are asked to do when reading are more difficult. And over time, then these experiences as these demands increase and the students have to put forward more and more effort, and reading is more and more important to academic success, we can see that these experiences shaping students' identity development. So they begin to see themselves as not good at school, even though the issue is reading, not ability

And these long-term persistent difficulties that develop can be linked to a higher risk for anxiety, depression, and avoidance, as Carrie mentioned earlier. But again, the hopeful takeaway that I want to put out there is that early effective reading instruction and supportive environments can change these trajectories even really early on improving those wellbeing indicators, not just reading.

Mark McDermott (10:56):

Yeah,

Kari Vogelgesang (10:57):

Perfect. I want to take a step back for those people who are listening who maybe don't know this, you were referencing earlier after you answered one of my questions about policy changes, what was the policy change?

Leah Zimmermann (11:17):

Sure. So over the past decade, we have seen nationally some shifts in science of reading related legislation, and that has included some policy changes in Iowa. So we've seen things like requirements for universal screening, for example, that students need to be screened a certain number of times a year by a reliable and valid assessment in order to identify students who are at a higher likelihood for developing reading difficulties. Further on down the line, there has been legislation related to providing personalized reading plans for students who exhibit and especially high likelihood for reading difficulties. And the criteria for those varies. Of course, across states, we've seen legislation being implemented about teacher preparation programs and content and experiences that are required and the need for them to be evidence-based, for example. So we've seen lots of different legislation that's really focused on bringing evidence-based literacy instruction to higher education and into the classroom, especially for early learners. There's been a big focus on instruction for K three students in particular.

Kari Vogelgesang (12:42):

Yeah, so I appreciate you walking us back and kind of walking us through some of the policy and legislation changes that have happened across not just the state, but nationally and how that might be impacting some of what we're seeing on assessments, but also some of what we're seeing in showing up, for example, with attendance and helping reduce some of the wellness issues that we were experiencing at the height of COVID were very, very challenging for teachers, for parents, for students. Obviously they were personally experiencing it. Along this line with some of the policy changes that have happened, you referenced professional development and really trying to give school administrators and teachers, both pre-service and service teachers the skills that they need and the understand that they need to better support students K through 12 students. So one of the things that the Iowa Reading Research Center does in the summer is a conference. Do you want to speak a little bit about that conference?

Leah Zimmermann (13:47):

Oh, yes. I would love, this is great timing, Carrie. I

Kari Vogelgesang (13:50):

Love that. I know, because I thought come across, it was one of the things, PD things that came up on my to-dos to reach out to you and to John about

Leah Zimmermann (13:58):

Yeah, absolutely. This is one of my favorite topics. So this summer in June, the Iowa Reading Research Center will host the Iowa Science of Reading Summit. It's held in Cedar Rapids at the DoubleTree Marriott, and we get so excited about this conference because it is a place where educators across Iowa and beyond can come and engage in some really high quality research-based learning about supporting students' literacy development. We have about 40 sessions that attendees can choose from to attend. We have some really great keynote and featured speakers this year. Our keynote speaker is Dr. Mark Seidenberg from the University of Wisconsin Madison. I'm an expert in cognitive science of reading. We also have Dr. Jessica Tost, who is an associate professor of special education at the University of Texas at Austin, and she's an expert in supporting multi-syllabic reading development as well as spelling development and older readers like in upper elementary students. And then finally we have Dr. Adria Druckenmiller, who's a professor of special education at the university, or excuse me, Michigan State University. And she's an expert in writing instruction. And we are really excited to have those three

featured speakers come. We are, registration is going to be opening soon, and we think that it's just a really great opportunity for teachers, coaches, administrators across the state to come and learn about evidence-based literacy instruction and how to support their students.

Mark McDermott (15:42):

Yeah, it's a great event. I always get to volunteer and work at it, but the only thing they let me do last year was man, the selfie booth. That was the only task they felt I was qualified for. It's a

Leah Zimmermann (15:56):

Job. You really excelled at that. Mark. I saw you.

Mark McDermott (15:59):

I got a lot of people to get their pictures taken. No, and that's like you said, a great event brings together researchers, brings together folks from here at the university, from the Reading Research Center, brings together the teachers across the state. There's two things you said that I really like. One very early on you said with the test scores, let's celebrate the work that our teachers are doing, that our administrators are doing, that our practitioners are doing. Obviously, anytime we can do that, I'm on board. I think that's important for us to do. And then you also mentioned that idea of this isn't inevitable, these challenges are not inevitable. There are things we can do to disrupt to support our students early so that both literacy proficiency is supported and some of these connections to wellbeing. So if you don't mind, Leah, talk a little bit about what are some of those specific things that we can do and how is that yes, teachers are involved. Yes, those of us in higher ed are involved, but how's that maybe a bigger issue than just the teacher has to do this and that's going to take care of it? How's that a systems issue? How is that a bigger picture sort of endeavor?

Leah Zimmermann (17:15):

Yeah, absolutely. I think that this is where thinking about multi-tiered systems of supports for students really can clarify the conversation. When we frame reading outcomes as a teacher issue, we miss whether the system is functioning, the school system is functioning in the way that is intended and supported by research evidence. Research shows that with really strong high quality research-based tier one instruction, early universal screening and timely well-supported intervention, students can succeed and we can support all students to the best of our abilities. So for example, if we think about a really well-functioning MTSS system, you might have a first grade teacher who has a really high quality evidence-based literacy curriculum. She has lots of knowledge about pedagogical content, knowledge about how to best implement evidence-based literacy instruction. Students in this school might be screened consistently, fall, winter, and spring throughout the year to identify those students that are at a higher likelihood of developing reading difficulties.

And if a student then after receiving that really high quality general education tier one literacy instruction shows a risk for reading difficulties, then they're supported. We can then design interventions that are aligned to their strengths, aligned to their areas that are in need of improvement. And that student can receive targeted small group intervention within weeks supported by regular progress monitoring and instructional adaptations as they progress in the intervention when those structures aren't in place because of limited staffing resources, curriculum alignment, low proficiency isn't reflecting a teacher issue. This is reflecting system level gaps in the system. So high quality MTSS structure shifts to the focus from blame to building structures that consistently support our learners and our educators as well.

Kari Vogelgesang (19:29):

That speaks true about absolutely everything that goes on in schools, not just literacy. I think this is something that we've been really through this podcast and through all of the different kinds of communication that we put out through the Baker teacher Leader center, through the teacher education program, mark, you're in charge of a lot of that through the communication we do through Scanlon Center is really focusing on systems, systems of support and how we build strong systems that help teachers do their best, be their best, that ultimately helps our students and our communities do and be their best as well. So I really appreciate that you emphasized that.

Leah Zimmermann (20:12):

Absolutely.

Kari Vogelgesang (20:13):

We can't have this conversation because I know science of reading is for some people controversial. It is almost a trigger for some people. And so I think there are going to be people who listen to this who are for sure having a conversation with themselves and saying, but what about this and what about this? And I think one of the things that keeps coming up, at least when I have conversations with people is that it doesn't look at the student holistically. It doesn't take into consideration their personal identity when we are providing instruction to them. What would you as a literacy expert say to that?

Leah Zimmermann (21:02):

Yeah, so I think first of all, when I think about the science of reading, I think it's important to clarify what it is and what it is not. So the science of reading is not just about phonics instruction. It's about building a full range of literacy skills, reading, writing, and oral language that are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. From there, I think that the conversation needs to move past silos and false dichotomies and towards using scientific evidence to determine what actually works for kids, and then figuring out how to implement and sustain those practices. Well, at its core, we know that comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading. As Dr. Marilyn Adams has long emphasized, but comprehension is a complex outcome. It requires many components that are woven together, cognitive skills like word recognition and language comprehension, self-regulatory skills like executive function, motivation, strategy use, but also the interaction between the reader, the text, and the task that they're being asked to do with that text. So what I'm saying is reading doesn't happen in a vacuum. It's also social and pragmatic. It's shaped by purpose discussion and meaning making. Louisa Mo, Dr. Louisa Motes famously said that teaching reading is rocket science. Teaching reading effectively means understanding and integrating all of these components, not choosing between them.

Mark McDermott (22:36):

Love that. Yeah. Well, and I mean, any reference to science, I enjoy. I think the idea of, I like that the way you talk about that, Leah, in the terms of it's not something that is finished. It is not something that we have done the research, it's over. We've determined for the rest of history the best way to do things. It's an ongoing process. That's what science is, that's what research is. That's what the pursuit of evidence is, is this, the nature of science nerds like myself, we'll talk about science is tentative, but durable. There's these ideas that we develop lots of evidence for. We create claims based on that evidence, but that doesn't mean we stop. We continue to gather new evidence, and as we gather that evidence, if we have to adjust our claims, we will do so because or the scientific community will do so, or the literacy community. And I like that idea of the, we've learned a lot. There's a lot of things we understand better

now than we used to, but we're continuing to learn. We're continuing to research. I mean, this is work you're doing in your faculty position in the IRC, all those things, right? Absolutely. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but that's the way I view that. Yeah, maybe.

Leah Zimmermann (24:04):

Yeah, absolutely. The science of reading isn't trademarked. It's not a curriculum. It is exactly. It's a process. It's a research process that's then translated to practice and practice translates back to research to determine what are the problems that need more evidence or need to be investigated and answered. So absolutely, I think that there are some misconceptions across people of lots of different epistemologies about what is the science of reading. But I think I like how you emphasize that as well. It is a scientific process. It's the field of reading science about reading development, reading instruction and reading assessment, and it's always evolving and changing, and we have to be okay with that.

Mark McDermott (24:53):

We've gotten epistemology and science look at that coming back every week.

Kari Vogelgesang (24:59):

We thought this wasn't about science. I think that's a really great space for us to now talk a little bit about where we hope the field goes next. So we're talking about the science of it and that this continuation, we're constantly improving. Where are you hoping in five years, six years down the road, where do you hope this all goes?

Leah Zimmermann (25:26):

Yeah. Oh, man, that's a good question. So when I think about this, I really hope that we see a focus on sustainability and collaboration. So we have this strong evidence base for effective literacy instruction. And now I think the work is really supporting schools and teachers and implementing those practices well and sustaining them over time. And I really think that this involves breaking down silos and working together. So across fields for researchers like general education, special education, speech, language pathology, cognitive science, but also in practice, right? General educators, special educators, speech language pathologists, researchers, practitioners to align our efforts around what matters most. And I think if we can really break down those silos and collaborate, we'll see that we can start to weave together all of these ideas that really matter to reading development. So the development of these cognitive literacy skills, the wellbeing factors, and also students' development of their identities and sense of belonging in the classroom as well.

Mark McDermott (26:42):

Love it.

Kari Vogelgesang (26:43):

Yeah.

Mark McDermott (26:44):

I was writing down several things. I mean, I don't know if we get to talk about what we think

Kari Vogelgesang (26:49):

Yeah, I saw you writing, hoping that you would share what you were taking note of over there.

Mark McDermott (26:55):

Mark. I'm writing to learn, I think a lot of things. One, ultimately, like Leah said, the ultimate goal is comprehension. What we want ultimately, in general, even if we go all the way back to our beginning of this conversation about these connections between literacy development and self wellbeing, identity, we want students to be able to learn. The goal here is to create an environment in which the chances that the human beings that we are interacting with will learn is greater than if they weren't in that environment. That's what we're talking about here. And there's a lot of conversation and a lot of terminology and a lot of things that get thrown around as we discuss that, and that's good. But ultimately comes down to we want students to be able to learn, and we're trying to figure out the best ways to make that happen for all of the students.

I think what I hope continues to happen is one, this sort of recognition of when we're dealing with human beings like this, there is no simple, this is the answer. I think what Leah has sort of brought up and what we've talked about is that there's so many factors that interact here, and it's never as simple in what we do as do this one thing and it'll take care of everything. We have to keep that in mind. I think the second thing is we have to keep in mind our experiences or our experience. I was thinking, I know how my kids went through the process of learning to read. I know how I think. I kind of remember how I did. That doesn't mean that that's the way it's going to work for everybody. And so we got to keep that in mind. And then the third thing is just keep learning. I kind of joke about it, but I have learned a lot in my role now working with our entire teacher ed program. I have had to learn a lot. I keep trying to impress Leah every time I meet with her by throwing out these terms that I picked up. But I mean, I have had to learn a lot over the last several years. A lot of terms, I wasn't familiar with a lot of ideas, I wasn't familiar with theories different.

And that's important I think, for all of us to sort of acknowledge that my background, my experience wasn't specifically in this area, and therefore I need to keep learning. And I think we all, that's a goal for all of us to continue to learn to, to figure out what's better and better and keep striving for that. So that's what I hope happens.

Kari Vogelgesang (29:26):

Yeah, I mean, I think you said it really, really well, Mark. Well, I mean, you too, Leah, and this is maybe even more basic what I'm going to share, but I want everybody to be able to enjoy reading and learn from reading and grow from reading, and feel like they belong to something because they're confident in their reading skills and ability. I think I do love to read, and I am constantly reading at least one book, if not multiple books, and I can tell you that as a 48-year-old woman, I learned from every book I read, even if it's not my favorite book, even if it's a book that I'm like, Ugh, I'm kind of struggling through it for whatever reasons. I'm constantly growing and changing and changing my perspective and evolving because of my ability to read. And I think I even am able to contribute to my community the different kinds of communities that I engage in richer ways with Fuller perspective because of my ability to read.

And I want that for every single person in our community, no matter your age, no matter matter who you are. I think that's an extremely important part of citizenship and of belonging and of contributing, is your ability to read, which is why it's so connected to wellness and how we show up in our communities and thrive in our communities. So how we get there, honestly, I want us to use data and research

because I think that that's the best way to manage the mass of people that we're trying to educate and to build these reading skills and reading proficiency. But I want us to do it in all honesty and in whatever way gets us to that point where the person can actually read and get a lot out of that reading ability. I dunno, maybe that's just even too, it's an oversimplification, but it's just critical to everything we do in our world to who we are. Is there any final reflections that you have before we come to a close today? Leah, do you want to leave us with some words of wisdom?

Leah Zimmermann (31:52):

Oh, man. The pressure is on the pressure. Okay. I'm going to throw epistemology out there again.

Mark McDermott (32:00):

Love it.

Leah Zimmermann (32:02):

Yeah, so I think that kind of just where I'd like to leave things is that it's all about how to support teachers and how to support students, and kind of this idea of integrating skills-based instruction in these more relational practices that support students' development of their identities. I just want to say, like I said about the science of reading, we don't have to choose, right? When we talk about the science of reading, we don't have to choose between skills-based instruction and practices that build relationships with students and help to develop their identities. We need to remember that skills-based instruction doesn't exist outside of relationships. It doesn't have to be at odds with culturally responsive teaching. We need to support teachers through professional learning, coaching, and collaboration so that they can implement explicit systematic reading instruction that allows students to experience these really high rates of success and allows them to affirm their identities as capable learners so that they can enjoy reading, so that they can learn across content areas. So for that reason, relational practices aren't an add-on to instruction. They're part of what makes evidence-based literacy instruction effective and sustainable. So I think that's really one of my key, one thing that I hope people take away from this conversation.

Kari Vogelgesang (33:37):

Yeah, I really appreciate you taking the time to come over here today, Leah, and chat with us and share all of your wisdom and knowledge on this topic. It's a really, really important one. So thanks for all that you do, and thanks for all of you who are listening today.

Mark McDermott (33:52):

Yeah, appreciate you being here, Leah, and like Kari said, appreciate everything you do for our program, for the IRRC and really across the state. We're lucky to have you here at the university. We're lucky to have you on the podcast. So thank you.

Leah Zimmermann (34:04):

Thank you. Thanks so much for having me.

Mark McDermott (34:05):

This transcript was exported on Jan 27, 2026 - view latest version [here](#).

So if this conversation resonated with those of you that are listening, we hope that you follow our podcast. We hope you share it with your colleagues and maybe send us some questions or stories. I did my best over the holidays to try to promote the podcast to all of my family members.

Kari Vogelgesang (34:23):

Did you? That was a good idea.

Mark McDermott (34:23):

Hopefully the McDermott family groupies are out there listening.

Kari Vogelgesang (34:28):

Hi McDermotts. Shout out to the McDermott family.

Mark McDermott (34:30):

I'm not sure there's a high probability of that. No. But yeah, so thanks.

Kari Vogelgesang (34:35):

Yeah, thanks everyone, and as always, we're forever cheering you on. Have a great day.