

## Bluum Together: Episode 2- Marybeth Flachbart

**Mike Caldwell:** Greetings and good day our podcast listeners. Welcome back to episode number two of *Bluum Together*. We have a special guest today, Marybeth Flachbart. Marybeth, Welcome.

**Marybeth Flachbart:** Thanks, I'm happy to be here.

**Mike Caldwell:** We are building off of yesterday's podcast with Emily Hanford on the Science of Reading. Before we jump into a deeper introduction to you, Marybeth, I always like to start with a story. So, share a story, that can kind of maybe, set the scene for today's conversation.

**Marybeth Flachbart:** Sure. Well, I'm a longtime advocate of the science of reading, probably because I experienced it in my role as a special educator. So, years ago, early on in my career, I was living and teaching in Houston, Texas, and Houston was the site of a lot of the research that later became part of the National Reading Panel. Anyway, I was teaching in an inner-city high school, and I had 15 students, ninth graders, and I think the highest reading level was fifth grade, but most of them read about a second grade. And so, I was doing this intensive, explicit, systematic, methodology for teaching them to read and between September and November, when they were assessed, about half of them made huge strides. They gained 3, 4, or 5 grade levels. So, I was like a rock star. I'm like, "all right, I got this. I know how to do it." And so, I was so excited. And then the principal investigator, my coach, Mary-Lou Slania, came, and I was sharing with the results. And she said, "Yeah, then they never should have been in your class. They're not dyslexic. They shouldn't have been there". But for a couple of days, I was the best teacher ever!

**Mike Caldwell:** That's Awesome.

**Marybeth Flachbart:** So, anyway, that's what I realized that, "Oh, well, maybe it's not me. Maybe there's something to an appropriate approach".

**Mike Caldwell:** Well, regardless, I believe you are a rock star. When I think of reading instruction in Idaho and literacy and experts, you are the top of my list, and I think I share that view with many, many others here in Idaho. Take us back a little bit of your own background, you've been at this for a for a long time. We met, I don't know, 15 plus years ago, when you were at the State Department. Your history and experience goes much deeper than that back to Maryland Howard days, and so can you talk a little bit about just your experiences and history, with teaching and teaching others how to teach reading.

**Marybeth Flachbart:** Sure. Well, so originally, I was a special Ed teacher. And what do we do for all special Ed teachers? We give them the hardest assignment in the building, and if they don't run screaming, they hang around. So, my first assignments, my first few years teaching was self-contained high school class for kids with behavior disorders. And what I found is yes, they had

very objectionable behaviors, but also none of them could read above a fourth grade reading level. So, when I get their behaviors under control and they would be mainstreamed into a classroom, a teacher would ask them to read aloud and there's such stigma attached to that, so they'd start a fight. They'd throw a chair. They would do anything, because I believe adolescents live by the motto, "I will not be embarrassed in front of my peers". So, at the time I was living in Texas, and Texas had something called a dyslexia specialist. By that time I already had my masters. But honestly, I did not know how to teach reading. And so I started to take classes, anything I could find on secondary reading, and found were a lot of things that kind of Emily referred to like, "If they only had books that were closer to who they would, an individual they could identify with", and I tried to explain that it wasn't that my students didn't want to read about say, Malcolm X. Versus George Washington but it was that they couldn't read. So I kept looking and looking. And I finally discovered this training program at Neuhaus Education Center, and I signed up for the elementary one. Because, honestly, that's where my kids were. So I went on, and became a dyslexia specialist. And then there's a kind of a weird certification called Certified Academic Language Therapist. So, like what a speech and language pathologist would do for speech, I do for issues related to reading and writing. I did all that, and then life as it does takes a left turn, landed in Idaho. But at the time, the Idaho Reading initiative had just been passed and so, when we look back historically in Idaho, Idaho has actually been employing science of reading since about 2,000. And so, I taught for Boise State for a year, and then was hired by Marilyn Howard to be the reading coordinator. Marilyn Howard was the state superintendent at the time, and talk about a visionary leader. Marilyn had done her doctoral dissertation on chronological awareness and subsequent reading achievements. So it was just a constellation of the right legislation, the right person. And we made huge progress in that time. And so it was so exciting to hear Emily, and to some extent really validating, because Idaho has been on this path for quite a long time. So yeah, so I work for Marilyn, left for a while to finish up my own doctoral program, and then came back and worked under Tom Luna, went back to Texas and was a director of a nonprofit for literacy solutions and then have been back in state since 2015. So yeah, I mean, I believe there are no experts, only expertise. The wisdom is in the room, but that's especially true in Idaho, we have some of the most knowledgeable. When I bring friends from other places around the country they're blown away by the knowledge of our teaching staff. So yeah.

**Mike Caldwell:** Well, thank you for that background. So with that, you have kind of a broader perspective of not just Idaho, and in your work around other States, can you talk a little bit about how you think Idaho is doing, or what you know, in terms of how we compare to other states across the country?

**Marybeth Flachbart:** Yeah, I know we always get the label of 50<sup>th</sup>, but actually in terms of literacy instruction and education that's not true. So, one of the assessments, kind of the gold standard is that National Assessment of Educational Progress, the NAEP. And on the last results of the 50 States, Idaho was right smack in the middle of 17<sup>th</sup>, and I always want to point out if you look at our investment in terms of our educational dollars and our results, I would argue that in terms of return on investment, Idaho is number one. What is a challenge, is that

one... is Covid did impact. We are seeing more students who had their schooling interrupted in first grade, which is a critical year. So, we're going to have to really keep our foot on the gas some extent for students who are fourth grade and above, because they missed it. And we are getting more sophisticated in identifying what students need. But, I will say that in Idaho, going back 20 years, thanks to the IRI, which is not perfect, but any child who came to school was identified as at risk for reading difficulties, starting in kindergarten since 2001. So in that, I think we're the only state that has a requirement that all students will be assessed. A lot of states have requirements that you do, but it's not the same one. So, in Idaho we can really look across the State and see what are the areas of difficulty? Are there specific grade levels? Are there specific subgroups of students who really need it. So, it allows us to have a more laser focus.

**Mike Caldwell:** I think that's important to point out. I think often times we get so caught up in what's not working or what we don't have. You know, let's build on the success where we can find it. And I think what you're pointing out is, we are doing some really good things here in Idaho. There's a long way to go, and there's always work to do. But let's not lose sight of what work has been done. As you mentioned going back to 2,000, even, with Marilyn Howard. Let's just keep building on it.

**Marybeth Flachbart:** Yes, Absolutely.

**Mike Caldwell:** And speaking of building on that. So, we talked yesterday, you know, with Emily Hanford on the science of reading. I know you were there at the event at the capital not too long ago. First of all, just interested in your take overall with *Sold a Story*, the podcast that kind of central kind of part of the conversation, and Emily built on that in her recent visit to Idaho. What's your take on that? And what would you add to it?

**Marybeth Flachbart:** What we know now, the science of reading is not new. As I mentioned, Idaho has been employing it. We didn't call it that 20 something years ago. But one of the things that Emily did mention that I think, is true with my own personal experience. If you had money you were able to have your kid learn to read. If you didn't have money, it was really, really, difficult. As a matter of fact, one of the things I always like to interject is starting in, I think, 2018, it became a Federal law that all inmates, as part of their intake process, are screened for dyslexia. And the research is showing that 50% of the inmates of those incarcerated are dyslexic. So, you think about that and it's just mind-boggling. And also in that field, because literacy is so much a human right, a civil right. The big issue is recidivism, and they have found, I guess, that if you're arrested... If you're incarcerated once there's a 70% probability you will be incarcerated again. But with receiving remediation believe it or not, that drops down to 16 or 17%. So, the correlation between the ability to read and the ability to have a productive life is so strong. So anyway, I get off on a tangent about that.

**Mike Caldwell:** No, I think it just makes the case of how important this conversation and this work is. And what we do in education in the schools, it just builds on the importance of that. It just says it right there, absolutely.

**Marybeth Flachbart:** So that's what I was thinking about is in *Sold a Story*. Can you imagine? 50% of our prison population is dyslexic. I mean, and then there are those who say, "Yeah, well, who cares?" They're humans, why wouldn't you care? It's a life. But also, if you just think about the economic impact of that, it's extraordinary. So, yeah, the research has really been there for quite a long time. I'm delighted that now there's a spotlight on it. But the truth is, we've known how to teach reading now we're much further, with things like functional MRI's that we can actually look at child's brain. We're not doing an autopsy, we're not bothering anybody. But we can see what areas of the brain light up, and we can identify specific profiles of students. But honestly, like my experience as a teacher, whether they truly have dyslexia or some other neurological issue going on that's challenging, or they simply have a lack of instruction...the treatment is the same. So I'm not saying we get fMRI's in elementary schools and start putting the kids through, because either way, they look the same. But getting the right intervention, the right intensity, at the right time, can prevent a whole lot of issues.

**Mike Caldwell:** Yeah. So building on the science of reading, you know, knowing the sciences is important. Can you talk about what's called structured literacy and what that means in terms of instruction.

**Marybeth Flachbart:** Sure. So, the science of reading is basically that we teach students chronological awareness, the awareness of sounds and how to manipulate them. Phonics, right? The decoding parts. Fluency, the ability to read accurately with sufficient rates, vocabulary, and comprehension. So, I think of that as the what. Structured literacy is the how. The structured literacy approach is explicit, meaning we don't allow for confusion. It's systematic, so that it builds on each other towards mastery. There's very specific process where it's like, I do, we do, you do. But it allows for modeling, for things like meta cognition. How to think about what they're reading, all of that. And this is the most effective way. So, we know what to teach. But we also now know how it is best taught. For example, an easy one for people to relate to is reading and spelling. They're opposite sides of the same coin. If I teach you to read the word, I teach you to spell the word. It's a more efficient way of teaching methodology. And then for kiddos because Idaho recently passed dyslexia legislation for kiddos with dyslexia. You need to add one more element, which is to make it multisensory. We want them to hear the word, we want them to see the word. And if we can, we want to make it kinesthetic. So, we bring attention to, for example, how certain sounds are even articulated like the "pah" in P, that "pah" sound. So, we have kids really unidentify. What's the place of articulation with sound. So, we're kind of making it concrete for them. And we have them move manipulatives. So sometimes you hear, "oh, science of reading, they're going to do phonics worksheets over and over again,". No. We're going to have them move, we're going to have them sky write. We're going to have them use manipulative so that we can put it in their muscle memory, because your muscle memory is perhaps your strongest memory.

**Mike Caldwell:** You know, recently, we're talking about how teachers are trained in all of this stuff, and often times that the training comes in after they've been in the classroom for so many years. That they don't automatically, you would assume, just like when we assume that we send our children to school they're being taught how to read, based on the science. I think there's

also this assumption that when teachers enter the profession to teach children, they come with that preparation on what you just described on how to teach the fundamentals of reading. That's not the case, is it?

**Marybeth Flachbart:** Not always the case. And I'm a great example. I had a Master's degree in special education and 5 years of experience. But it's also, nobody knows everything. I love this, when Emily said we have to stay humble. You have to keep trying, but reading is incredibly complicated. About a third of the students will learn to read, no matter what we do, which is good news, I mean. Priscilla Vale, who's one of my favorite researchers, used to call them linen closet kids, and she didn't mean you should put kids in linen closets. But if you did, just by looking at the tags on the towels and different cleaning products, they would figure out the code. And then for about another third of kids, they benefit from that structured literacy, you know, we give them. And then for a third of all students, reading will be the most difficult things to do. There is nothing natural about reading or writing. It's not like listening and speaking, and so part of that is understanding that we are asking students to do things that are not innate. And so, it doesn't just happen naturally. The fact that it happens so easily, or some kids really kind of mask just what a complicated neurological process it is. We add that, to then having teachers who may or may not have a deep understanding of how our language works and then we're going to have to do it in a correct sequence of order. For example, you don't want to teach short I and short E too close together, because there's going to be confusion, because the sounds are so similar. So, it's a lot to expect. A lot to expect. And then there's literacy instruction that looks really different as we were talking about in kindergarten than it does in seventh grade. And so, I think it's an ongoing study. I'm still learning things, but the wisdom is in the room. I mean, I think that's one of the things that we can do is consider or encourage collegial dialogue, because I have found that there's a teacher, and when they share they can get an idea from somebody else, or just even a thought partner. And I wish each kid came with their own instruction manual. Like, okay, this kid needs X.

**Mike Caldwell:** Right? Yeah.

**Marybeth Flachbart:** It would be nice if my own children came out. But they don't right? So...

**Mike Caldwell:** You're absolutely right. Yeah, I was a was a math teacher. So, the more I learned about reading instruction, the more I realized I'm glad I was a math teacher. This reading instruction is very complicated and not that teaching math is not. But it's yeah, I have full respect for people that are at those grade levels teaching reading because it doesn't sound, and I know it's not easy. It's not easy. You started to talk a little bit about how important it is to know your students and student profiles and the individual. Can you elaborate a little bit on that, and what's important to know? And then how maybe that would change how you would approach a particular student?

**Marybeth Flachbart:** Right. So when we look at schools and you know, we start at the big level. You know, we have those kids who are a tier one meaning, what is the core instruction? And we want that to reach as many kids as possible. But what we know from research is that there are

different types. When kids struggle with reading, there are different reasons why. The most common is that they have an issue related to decoding, that sound symbol. And that is the most common, especially in the elementary grades. So, people with dyslexia, by the way, dyslexia can be remediated, it can't be cured. But people with dyslexia, which is the most common reading struggle, about 20% of the population, have an issue with sound. It's not that they make reversals, it's that they don't associate the sound. They have a hard time pulling that apart. And so they have a hard time with the letters. So that would be one profile. So that would be a profile of students who have specific issues with decoding and they need one type of remediation. Their vocabulary is fine. If you read aloud to them, they understand everything. So oftentimes, and, by the way, reading disabilities are not related to intelligence. You can be really dyslexic and super smart like Albert Einstein. Who else, Madame Curie. Stephen Hawkins, all dyslexic. Leonardo da Vinci, dyslexia. So it's not related to intelligence, but it's a different neural signature that they have a hard time with it. That's the most common. Then we have another group of students who can decode anything. They can figure out what the code is and decipher it. For them the issue is language comprehension. They have a hard time with vocabulary, or there are those people that don't make pictures when they read. So their issue is language comprehension which impacts the reading comprehension. And then we have a third group of students where it's mix. It's both low decoding and low language. And those students are often identified in special education because they need a very specific and intensive reading program. But when you think about it, just sort of like, how could teachers know this? Now they have to know how to interpret assessment results to identify which type of learner profile, and then we need to differentiate. Because if you have an issue with vocabulary, and I'm teaching you phonics all day long, that is not going to improve your reading comprehension. Or if you need phonics, and I just keep teaching you more vocabulary. So, not only it's really now our issue in Idaho I would think, less about adopting the science of reading and more about bringing it to scale. How do we make it happen for every child in every classroom? And that is really a challenge.

**Mike Caldwell:** Right. You know, and that gets to having the right resources, right? Because if you are one teacher in a classroom full of 25, 35, whatever number of kids, that seems like an impossible task on what you just talked about, right? And that's where we talk about schools needing more resources, you know, having, like I mentioned before, if we went live. My wife works in the kindergarten class as a kindergarten aide, and how important that is for that kindergarten teacher to have someone else in their room to be available to help in those areas where you're trying to provide that individual instruction. The assessments that have to take place to identify those students. There's a lot going on there. And so, when people wonder like you know, "why do schools need more resources or money?" It's those types of things so they can really get at, you know, the individual students what they need? I don't know, would you elaborate on that? I mean, do you feel like we need more in that area? Particularly in these younger grades, K-3?

**Marybeth Flachbart:** Sure. Well, there's a quote, I think, Smoker, but it says, "if you put a good teacher up against a weak system, the system wins every time." So we really need help with that systemic piece which is not to say we don't have gifted administrators and caring

superintendents and boards and all that. But it takes time, for example. So you need time to administer these assessments. You can identify them early. And then, you know, this IRI is just a screener. So you scored low, now I need time to give you an assessment. You have to know what assessment it is. And you have 25 kids. So you need to do that with each of the 25 students. And now you need time to plan instruction accordingly. So you need the resources. You need the master schedule to reflect, when are you going to do the intervention? Who's going to do the intervention? How are you going to measure progress? How often are you going to do it? So, really going back to math, it really becomes an arithmetic problem of how many minutes in the day are available to do this work.

**Mike Caldwell:** And that's just for reading, by the way.

**Marybeth Flachbart:** That's just for reading, right? Exactly. I stay in my lane.

**Mike Caldwell:** You know, there's math and science and everything else that has to be fit into the week or the day as well. So, it's complicated. There's a lot there. And we do put a lot on our teachers, especially at those grade levels, to perform miracles.

**Marybeth Flachbart:** One of the things that I, and when I work with districts, for example, where students exit. So there are things we can do to speed it up. Where students at exit in the spring summer. They're unlikely to make progress over this, so we can start setting up classes then, and we can have a plan and be intentional. So, if anything, we just need a little bit longer runway, so that when the students get there, we are not having to do some of this, we can start interventions right away. And then we can think about extending time. Time takes time. And you mentioned kindergarten, there's more variability in kindergarten than any other grade. You have kids that are coming reading, and kids who have never even seen a book, and they all end up in the same kindergarten class. Right?

**Mike Caldwell:** So that kind of leads us to, you know, we talked about structured literacy. Identifying, and the importance of knowing your students. What are your suggestions and kind of what should be done? What should we really be laser focused on here in our own state to realize further success and build on what we've been doing as a state.

**Marybeth Flachbart:** Well, that's a tough one. So, if I had my magic wand... I think our investment in educators, as I've mentioned by where we are, has paid off, and we keep doing it. And the truth is that, ideally according to research, we know that we can probably teach 95% of all children to read. We haven't gotten there yet, but Idaho is doing a great job, and I think one of the things is just to be able to like, let's look at what we've done successfully. Build on it. And then maybe let's look at what hasn't worked and talk about that, too. Obviously, one of the big thing is early childhood. Our kindergarten teachers are doing an amazing job. But I was talking to a building administrator yesterday. Only 17% of her kindergarten students came ready to read.

**Mike Caldwell:** Wow.

**Marybeth Flachbart:** So. Yes, but just think, if 30% of them came, right? So we really need to look at what are the other pressures on the system, such as input. How are the kids coming to us? Support. And then we need to encourage more people to enter the profession. I mean, teaching reading is rocket science. And nothing is as precious, or as fleeting as those first few years in school. We have 570 days to make a reader.

**Mike Caldwell:** Yeah. Well said. I love what you are talking about in terms of “lets focus on what is working well.” One of my favorite books is the book Switch, where you take big, complicated, problems and instead of trying to figure out how to solve this really big problem, it’s like what are those examples of where there is success and what is working. And as part of this podcast series focused on reading, we are going to go out and talk to those schools that have those pockets of excellence, and try to figure out what are they doing? And what can be replicated in other schools? And there’s a lot of pockets of success in our own state that we need to pay attention to and shine a light on. So, I’m excited that this is leading in that direction and I’m looking forward to having those discussions really soon.

**Marybeth Flachbart:** Well, delightful.

**Mike Caldwell:** Well with that, Marybeth, thank you so much for being a part of our reading series here at Bluum Together. Thank you very much. Listeners, thanks for joining us today and we will see you shortly as we continue this focus on reading.

**Marybeth Flachbart:** Thanks, Mike.