

00:00:00:00 - 00:00:10:08

Emily Grunt

Hello and welcome to Collaborative Classroom.

00:00:10:08 - 00:00:12:03

Emily Grunt

My name is Emily Grunt.

00:00:12:03 - 00:00:26:06

Emily Grunt

I am blessed to have come into the collaborative classroom space as a Director of Field Support and Early Learning. I'm so happy to be here today and I'm happy to be joined by my friend Alicia Simba.

00:00:26:06 - 00:00:56:12

Emily Grunt

Alicia is a transitional kindergarten teacher working and living in Oakland, California. Her writing has been published in teen Vogue, slate, Education Week, and runs a weekly Substack titled An Education. She is a 20 2425 Teach Plus Senior Writing Fellow. Alicia is a graduate of Barnard College and Stanford University, and I'm going to give a little background about what transitional kindergarten is for our friends from around the nation and Mexico.

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Emily Grunt

Transitional kindergarten mandates that every school district offering kindergarten must also provide a TK program for all four year old children. TK, often referred to as you TC, ensures that every child whose fourth birthday occurs by September 1st will have access to a quality learning experience the year before entering kindergarten. Educators now face the critical task of ensuring that early learning experiences are coordinated, intentional, and focus on laying a strong literacy foundation for every child in transition from pre-K to kindergarten is a critical period in a child's development, and it is essential that we engage early educators in this conversation.

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Emily Grunt

By aligning literacy efforts from pre-K through kindergarten, we ensure all children enter kindergarten with a foundational skills needed for future academic success. This collaborative effort between early childhood educators, TK teachers, and kindergarten educators is key to setting up children for a strong start in their educational journey. The national Early Literacy Panel identified foundational skills that predict later literacy outcomes.

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Emily Grunt

The NLP was a group of researchers who work together to synthesize existing research on early literacy, and identify those key factors that strongly predict success in later reading and writing skills. From their work, they found 11 early literacy related skills that consistently predicted later literacy outcomes, and these included phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge rapid automatic naming, writing, spelling skills, oral language development, the development of listening and speaking, including vocabulary, grammar, and narrative skills.

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Emily Grunt

Alicia I know that you think a lot about this, about being intentional, about supporting your classroom and really innovative and unique ways. Can you tell us how did you come to this work?

00:02:55:06 - 00:03:19:13

Alicia Simba

This is my fifth year in the classroom. Before this, I started working in daycares and preschools as a college student in New York City. I worked at a daycare that was on a college campus. I went to the Barnard Toddler Center. I did a student teaching at a head start, and so my background was all sort of around norms, not even one through five.

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Alicia Simba

A lot of it was birthed through three. And when I moved to California for grad school, I went to the Stanford Teacher Education program, and I got my master's in elementary education. And so that was a very fun shift to sort of see the other side of the sort of elementary ladder when a teacher position opened up that really was able to bring sort of these two passions of mine and like areas of growth that I wanted to continue to see myself grow in, like how do I continue working with very young students and their families and build on that child development aspect and build in these pedagogical practices, building these early foundational academic skills.

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Alicia Simba

And so TC just was the perfect fit and is still the perfect fit today.

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Emily Grunt

Thank you Lisa. It sounds like you have a unique position in this conversation around understanding the pre-K space as well as the elementary space. And so as you think about early childhood educators, you're able to see the lens of us going into kindergarten. How can other early childhood educators think about that literacy development? And still keeping those play based classrooms that we know our pre-K and TK children need?

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Alicia Simba

I think reminding everyone that our students have only been on the planet for 4 to 5 years. And so as educators reminding us that things will require a lot of practice, things will require a lot of repetition, and we need to and should want to make these things fun and engaging for students, right. So I think looking for ways to approach this work through songs and dance and games and movement and sports is the way that I think about it, knowing that when we think about what we know about the brain, about, you know, total physical response is a really sure fire way to help cement object concepts for students.

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Alicia Simba

So when we want to teach, you know, segmentation, having kids clap things out, having kids jump things out, having kids like shake things out actually is going to help cement that knowledge for them. Thinking of ways that we can add art into the work that we do. I think writing is one of the things that we know is a strong indicator of successful readers, instead of, on the first day having, you know, handing kids a pencil and are like, okay, write your name.

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Alicia Simba

Getting them to use a paintbrush so that they get to that practice of that fine motor skills, getting them to, you know, write things using their fingers. So again, that real physical kinesthetic learning that to them they're like, oh, this is fun. I get to have paint on my fingers. And to myself as an educator, I'm like, yes, this is like getting the kids fine motor skills ready so we can build up to those other great skills.

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Alicia Simba

You know, I've had peers who maybe they aren't used to students being engaged in self-directed play. So it can kind of feel a little bit like, what do I do? Like, I know I can have moments where I then start to go and like, okay, I'll use this opportunity to, like, send them emails or organize this, or I'll go do that.

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Alicia Simba

And like, actually, we can use play as an opportunity to extend learning. There's ways to add opportunities for literacy if you have play centers, right. One thing that we've added recently in the classroom is different clipboards and pencils and pretty much all the all the choice time areas. And what happens is that before students would, you know, be building things out of blocks, now they are drawing what they're doing and then building it up.

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Alicia Simba

And, you know, it all aligns with things that we do in whole class. So we had done a unit on architecture. So the kids already know about drawing things before we build them, having that same set up in dramatic play. So where students are cooking, you know, I can go sit and be like, hey, could you take my order?

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Alicia Simba

And then they realize, oh, wait, I've got a pencil and paper and I'm just going to start scribbling down. Especially at this age. You know, you have students who already know their letters. You know, you have students who don't even know that letters exist. And so when students are engaged in place, the ones that I know actually might be able to get a bit of a push, I can start to tell them, hey, like, could I have some pizza?

00:07:54:03 - 00:08:11:03

Alicia Simba

And if they ask like, oh, how do I spell pizza? I can be like, what do you think? And for the ones who are like, no clue, I can write it down and have them trace it on top. And so again, ways that it's placed first and then sneaking that literacy in at the same time. Yeah.

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Emily Grunt

I've heard people use the term infer into their play, and so they have choice around the room. And I've had the great pleasure of visit Classroom Alicia, and you have the activities in each of the play centers at their level. And when I was in there, I was walking and talking and getting low with kids, and I was kind of just being near.

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Emily Grunt

And one kid was asking me what my favorite fruit was, and they were in this area and another child were they were, doing a restaurant. And I said to you later, I said, like, what's the theme right now? Like, I was starting to get the sense that it was somehow food related. And you said grocery store, right?

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Emily Grunt

And I didn't know what it was, but I could clearly see by entering into their play, listening.

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Alicia Simba

Yeah.

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Emily Grunt

Well, watch, wait and listen to see what they were going to bring to me. Or ask me, you also, as you said, you have to read and write in your centers. And I saw the clipboards, and that was really kind of the development of skills through doing.

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Alicia Simba

Right now we are on getting ready for kindergarten. So that's going to look like putting books about kids at school, which you can still do thematically. Right. Like in the lock section, we might put a spec architect, that combines both getting kids ready to think about, like being an older kid and getting kids still engaged in play.

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Alicia Simba

And we've done grocery stores. We start the year off with percussion instruments. And so, you know, you'll have the kids realizing, like, oh, if I shake some of the like, if I shake the shifters in the sand at the sand table, like that makes a similar sound to when I shake the egg shaker and it's like, oh, like maybe those things contain the same sort of particles or materials.

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Alicia Simba

And I've had the pleasure of working in OSD for the last five years. It's been great. And I have the most phenomenal coach. Tanesha and she's really been pushing me around, sort of keeping what we're learning about whole group sort of on theme throughout the year. Right. And I think I've definitely had times where I think about instructional time in one mental bucket and play time and another

mental bucket and being like, no, these two things are things that we want to have feed into each other.

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Alicia Simba

Again, knowing that especially young students brains are formed through experience and through getting to do the same things over and over again in small group. Today, what we would doing is working on an activity called stick letters and so students have little wood pieces and we're making letters in groups of like five. Those letters also exist in our writing section, right where those wood pieces exist now, right in section, but also in our toys and game section or in our math section.

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Alicia Simba

We also have geo boards. So even in the math section, right, you'll still see the kids, both self-directed or like Teacher Ezra, my assistant teacher, and I, we might go in and sort of just casually sit in the math section using the geo boards to make the letter M, and so having us even engage in the same activities, whether it's small group, whether it's whole group, whether it's play time.

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Alicia Simba

So it's just giving the kids practice more and more and more, especially knowing that we want students to be fluent learners by third grade. The students have limited experience to letters, phonological awareness, these core literacy concepts. We have such an opportunity in early childhood education to get this work started early.

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Emily Grunt

I like to bring up an example. You talked about the concussion in the instrument unit at the beginning. I think about that as like starting off with environmental sounds for our phonological awareness. Yeah, we're we're teaching the children to notice the two different shakers. One has sand, one has wrapped around a little bit different. Right. And they're really tuning in to recognize sound.

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Emily Grunt

Then they're going to begin to manipulate sounds. And so I'd like to hear a video where you started them out with environmental sounds, building up their awareness to manipulate sounds in spoken language and to recognize sounds. And then this was just a couple months or a couple weeks ago, I was in your

classroom and you were reading large group the read aloud of the day, and in this read aloud, two rhyming words came up.

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Emily Grunt

And then this is what happened when the when the rhyming words came up.

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Alicia Simba

Into I believe that. Do they rhyme? Yeah. Can we said they do recognize they got into.

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Emily Grunt

Up.

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Alicia Simba

Adelita. I believe that these two rhyme needs do not seem to me to rhyme. Deep down. I think that these two run into. I don't like these two rhyme. They sound the same. Good job.

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Emily Grunt

I love that video, Alicia. And I like thinking about the organic nature of hearing the to rhyme, the rhyme in words, and then the song coming in with it, which is a seed routine. Yeah, yeah, little bit about the read aloud and how you brought in also that phonological awareness as part of an embedded activity during that time.

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Alicia Simba

Yeah, definitely. And so I think one of the things that was just such a great foundational skill for me was getting to do so many great seeds training. And one of the things that you guys really introduced me to is ways to use songs and chant as transitional tools. I might be setting up my laptop was trying to set up the projector, or I might be needing to move the chairs and any moment where the kids are, like, left to their own devices.

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Alicia Simba

I find, especially with this age, anything can start to pop off. And so giving kids a song is always a great way to get them engaged, and especially a song that is

rhyming or works on phonological awareness. Like one song we'll have the kids do when we're lining up. You know, we will be doing Wiggly Waggle, where Marley and Elephant sat on Emily, and so that's great.

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Alicia Simba

There you go. Exactly. And that gets them, especially at the beginning of the year. I mean, we have some students who immediately get it, and then you have a couple of other students who again, they're still learning. Oh, instead of just hearing Emily as one word, they're like, oh, that is a different sound. At the beginning of Emily on.

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Alicia Simba

Oh, actually, what she's done is manipulate that sound by adding a word at the beginning, and now it's become Emily. And so I think doing songs, especially at the beginning of the year. And so these two rhyme like, we've been doing it pretty much every day from the beginning of the year and at the beginning of the year can sound pretty rough because, you know, a lot of them have no idea what a rhyme is, just continuing to be consistent with the routine so that all the students, you know, get to it.

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Alicia Simba

And so even with with the read aloud, I'm pretty sure I was one of the kids who was the one who noticed caliber start and add a little rhyme. And so thinking about ways to integrate literacy in the classroom and have it be very child directed. And so it was a student who was like, oh, those to rhyme.

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Alicia Simba

And that gives me an opportunity for students interested in rhyme. I can actually pause this, read aloud and follow that interest. And it re engages all the kids that read aloud was also really fun, just around being able to do stories that are in English and in Spanish. And when we think about our students who are English language learners, songs, chance games are also opportunities for them to be building these early literacy skills in ways that that lower the barrier for entry, because that song, because those games, because art and movement really can transcend language.

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Alicia Simba



And so I find, you know, a lot of my English language learners, if I ask them, okay, I like which two words rhyme. They might look at me with a blank face, but the more and more that they see, oh, like dog Log dog song, even if they don't necessarily know what the words are, that phonological awareness is still building.

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Alicia Simba

And so that builds alongside with the vocabulary as well. So I just think songs and games and play are a real facilitator of equity students with disabilities as well, who, you know, might have, whether it's speech delays, whether it's cognitive things going on, whether it's, you know, anxiety, charity songs, games, movement really get everyone to take a deep breath, have fun with it.

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Alicia Simba

I mean, get students engaged.

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Emily Grunt

What do you say when people might say, oh, you're already teaching rhyming, you're already doing these skills. And what might you say about how we need to start early?

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Alicia Simba

I think I would think about it in two ways. I think the core session is not only valid, but necessary. Right? I think in a climate like ours today, it can be very easy to feel anxious around all of the really real crises that's happening around literacy and reading scores and I think I try to be mindful about not letting those anxieties bleed into the classroom.

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Alicia Simba

Right. I again remind myself they are going to get it. And what I'm wanting to do right now is get students exposed. And so I think we have such an opportunity, especially as we see early childhood expanding, not just in California, but nationwide and even internationally. You know, I'm Tanzanian, and so I've been seeing like around the world, families, communities all over seeing like, hey, like one through five, the brain is developing so rapidly.

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Alicia Simba

What would it look like to really take advantage of that? And not in a way that's driven by like fear and anxiety of trying to like race to the top, but rather like, what an opportunity we have to have kids experience literacy in a way that's fun, away from high stakes testing, away from worksheets and flashcards and curricula, all of which are important.

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Alicia Simba

But getting them, getting that first exposure to letters B through paint, B through chalk, I just think that's a really vital thing in terms of having kids learn to love literacy, because that's what we want them to do as well.

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Emily Grunt

So at least I'm wondering what what should an early educator and we have admin district leaders look for in professional learning and professional development, because you seem to have a wealth of understanding about the literacy foundations being developmentally appropriate, providing opportunities that are exposing and giving our children the time to develop these skills through doing. How do we get this information so that we know that each step we're taking each day is the one that's opening up doors and providing opportunities for our young learners.

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Alicia Simba

That one thing that I love about my district is that I've been able to get one on one coaching, pretty much every week, if not every other week. Even as a fifth year teacher, I still feel like a first year teacher most of the time. So I think having opportunities for teachers number one, to get that one on, one coaching, to get another set of eyes to come look and say, hey, here's what I'm noticing.

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Alicia Simba

Here's what you could try next. And not just for the teachers. I've been very blessed to have one fantastic teacher assistant in the class, and also we've been really lucky to have volunteers come in as well. They need teaching too. When you think about professional development, thinking beyond just classroom teachers, but also thinking about, you know, classroom assistants, volunteers, and also outside sort of the formal K through 12 system daycare providers, home run childcare centers.

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Alicia Simba

Right. Like making opportunities available not just for people who work in formal districts. I think conferences have been something that I have really taken advantage of. I have a great administrator who is always more than happy for me to go and learn and bring back what I'm learning. So again, like having district leaders who encourage and support teachers to take the time to go and do PD, and I would also say really promoting curricula that build in the play and all of this and bringing different practices to meet kids where they're at.

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Alicia Simba

And I think the last really important thing I would say about professional development is making sure that all of these opportunities are paid for, both having them be either free or someone else pays for them, and also having teachers be paid and compensated for their time. I think, especially as early childhood educators, we often find ourselves at the complete bottom.

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Alicia Simba

The pay scale. And on top of that, I think because we don't do this work for the money at the same time, doesn't mean we shouldn't get money for doing what we do. So I would say making sure that we compensate teachers and instructional aides and anyone else who's willing to come and live on our kids and teach them, and making sure they're feeling compensated and valued for their time.

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Emily Grunt

You mentioned that you've been in the classroom for TC for five years, but then you also work with some teachers, and I've been doing this for 20 years, 30 years. How do you align that kind of pre k to k? Thinking with your colleagues?

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Alicia Simba

First of all, something that I usually say, but I've forgotten to say so far, every thing that I've shared that I do in my classroom, none of it is original. So none of what I've done in the classroom is something that I like. Woke up one night and was like, oh, this is what I should do tomorrow. All of it is learning that I've been able to sort of glean from my coaches, and I spoke about professional development for teachers and sort of folks who work with children.

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Alicia Simba

I think that's a huge piece of professional development that should be made available to administrators as well. District leaders, policymakers. You know, I will speak to admin, and a lot of the time, you have principals and district leaders who taught fifth grade, who taught middle school, high school, and are leading preschools. And then, you know, their hearts are, I find, always in the good place, but they truly have no idea a lot of the time what we're talking about.

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Alicia Simba

And again, as we're saying, what we know about the brain today is different than what we knew about the brain 20 years ago, 30 years ago. So making sure that leaders as well have this experience and have this exposure so that they also can create the systems and opportunities for us to do our best work. I think as early childhood educators were often really isolated.

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Alicia Simba

So looking for ways that we can build a community throughout the country, throughout the world, I think spaces like this, we just need more and more of.

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Emily Grunt

Yeah. And and thinking about that alignment work that you're talking about. And for the admin and, coaches on this call, how are you giving opportunities for the pre-K teacher, the kindergarten teacher and the tech teacher to come together?

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Alicia Simba

And I think that pre-K through three alignment piece is so important. I think, again, wanting students to be strong readers by third grade, we need to loop in early childhood educators so that we can know what are the things that you want them to be able to do by third grade. I know I've been doing a lot of stuff around fine motor skill because I kept on hearing in PDS from the, you know, second grade, third grade, fifth grade teachers like, oh, the students get really tired when we ask them to do a writing assignment.

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Alicia Simba

Like physically they get tired because they're not used to holding a pen or pencil or because they're not used to typing. And so being like, great. Like, let me get the kids used to spending ten, 20, 30 minutes, you know, moving those fingers so that when they get to third grade and they've got to write the state test, they're more agile and adept at doing all of this movement.

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Alicia Simba

So again, it's making sure that we're making, preschool teachers a part of that conversation.

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Emily Grunt

But it makes me think of that word you said. You can feel so siloed as an early childhood teacher, but what I'm hearing loud and clear right now is that these are all of our kids, right? Like, all of these are ours, and they are going to be in a third grade classroom. They're going to be in a fifth grade classroom, and they're still going to be your child.

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Emily Grunt

Right? Like, I'm sure you think about your first class. I think about my first class. I just went to one of my students college graduation. She's still my first kindergartner. Right. Like into these are some things that I think about is that we don't have to be siloed, but we can think about the arc of alignment and ensuring the intentional activities that build on one another.

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Emily Grunt

So it's not siloed. So it's an arc for the children as well as for the teachers to come together.

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Alicia Simba

What I'm hoping to do more of is sort of promote and encourage students who get these strong foundational literacy skills and get this foundational love of literacy at the same time. Yes, because we want them to succeed in all the ways that are important, but also because reading and literacy and song and movies and books are incredibly fun, and we want kids to be able to appreciate that.

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Emily Grunt

And I think of this as a call to action, Alicia, of all of us pausing and closing our eyes and remembering the time that we might have fallen in love with reading. Why are we educators? For many of us, it might be that that memory of sitting on the carpet with a teacher love that read out loud to us and then, yeah, make art about that book and then that person and these opportunities that fill many of us up and educators jobs are so hard.

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Emily Grunt

And so when you are thinking about, oh, well, intentional literacy practice for reading through play and aligning with and beyond all of this work, come back to this call of action. Like what brought you to this work?

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Emily Grunt

And sometimes when we're tired, or the state of the nation or the state of our test scores can bring us down, like, let's all come back to

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Emily Grunt

that state.

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Emily Grunt

Alicia, we are so happy that you joined today. Thank you for being here.

00:27:08:08 - 00:27:28:09

Emily Grunt

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