**Why a skeptical balanced literacy teacher embraced the science of reading**

Triple R Teaching Podcast #186

Hello, this is Anna Geiger from the Measured Mom, and in today's episode, I'm continuing my four-part series with educators from the school district of Cudahy, Wisconsin. In this episode, I'm speaking to Jolene Rosploch, who was a balance literacy teacher initially, and gradually began to embrace the science of reading. She is now a reading specialist, supporting teachers as they implement what we've learned from the science of reading. Here we go!

**Anna Geiger:**

Welcome, Jolene!

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Hello!

**Anna Geiger:**

Thank you so much for being here. I got to meet you in person when I visited your school district to talk about the changes that have been made. We're going to talk through that today, but first, could you introduce yourself and let us know what's brought you to where you are now?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Sure, absolutely. As you know, my name's Jolene Rosploch. I've been teaching for about 20 years, all done in Cudahy School District. My journey started as a first grade teacher. I taught that for about seven years, all balanced literacy. Then I had my twin boys and I did a job share, so I taught a classroom in first grade, then moved up to third grade, and then I did fourth grade.

When we connected with Schools Cubed as our reading consultant firm a couple of years ago, it really sparked my curiosity for the science of reading. I knew something was wrong with reading, but wasn't sure exactly what was going on.

Since then, I have become a reading specialist, and I went through a completely science of reading aligned program through CESA 9 with the wonderful Amy McGovern.

I was getting this knowledge from Schools Cubed, and then I was getting this knowledge through my science of reading coursework, and that's when just things exploded for me.

**Anna Geiger:**

I didn't realize that the reading specialist position was new for you. How many years has that been?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Right, so last year was my second year, and this will be my third year now.

**Anna Geiger:**

All right. Mainly your experience has been as a classroom teacher, so can you bring us back in time and tell us what you remember about how you taught reading in those different grades?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Sure. When I was first grade teacher, it was Guided Reading, Fountas & Pinnell all the way. Does it look right? Does it sound right? Does it make sense? Let's look at our picture to help us. I remember telling parents with struggling readers, "Oh, they've just got to read more. They just have to read more. Have them read more to you, you read more to them, and it'll click. It'll click."

There was some phonics infused in it. I remember doing word families and things like that. We had this plaid phonics book, and it had a puppy on it or something, so every day there was kind of this phonics portion, but it wasn't integrated. It wasn't a huge focus.

Then when I went up into third grade, it was more of your Guided Reading chapter book things, not really any word study or anything like that.

As I started moving up in grade levels, I just saw that the spelling was atrocious, and it was just very basic sentences that the kids were writing.

I wasn't understanding what was going on, because when I was a first grade teacher, I was like, "Oh, most of my kids are at a Level I, or whatever it was supposed to be, so what's going on in those upper grades? Those teachers must not be engaging those kids," and things like that.

**Anna Geiger:**

Yeah. Well, that sounds familiar.

When you were teaching those younger grades how to read that way, was that how you had been taught, or just what you did because of the materials you had?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

I remember being taught... The little bit I remember from being taught how to read, I remember learning about CVC. I remember CVC and CVCE in first grade. I know that there were certain book levels you went through. My assumption is that I was taught to read more phonetically.

**Anna Geiger:**

I also was taught with a phonics approach, and I wasn't anti-phonics, and I'm sure you wouldn't have considered yourself that either, but I thought that focusing too much on phonics was going to take away from engagement, and...

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Oh, the love of reading, right?

**Anna Geiger:**

Exactly, and it was going to be that you could overdo it. Maybe there might be a little bit of phonics over here, like you talked about with the workbooks, but that wasn't going to be a main part of our reading, because reading was about learning to love reading, and you learn to love reading by doing it. Like what you said, that's what I told parents, "They just need to read more." Of course, what was I giving them? Leveled books.

When you were doing it, did you ever question it, or notice that it wasn't reaching particular kids?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Well, I feel like I had those struggling readers, but they probably started to memorize the books is what was happening. Then I was feeling successful like, "Oh, they've got it. They've got it!"

When I was kind of thinking about this interview and reflecting about my time as a teacher, I was thinking about those... You know you come to memorize all these books that you're doing with the kids, and I remember there was this book, it was called "Cam, Nat, and Tam." It was very phonetic. It was a totally decodable book. I remember skipping it, being like, "Oh, I hate this one," because the kids get so confused if it's Cam or Nat or Tam, which should have been this huge red flag that they're not decoding appropriately.

Instead, I'm giving them a book of, "I like the butterfly. I like the monkeys," this predictable text.

I don't know if it was just a lack of knowledge, I'm sure, and I want those children to feel successful, so I'm trying to give them books that they're feeling successful in, but doing the wrong thing, inadvertently doing the wrong thing.

**Anna Geiger:**

Yeah, I think about that as teaching them to look like skilled readers without giving them the skills to be a skilled reader. It looks, when they're reciting those books... They sound so fluent, so you think, "Oh, I'm doing a good job."

What I wasn't connecting, and it sounds like you weren't either, is that when they get to those middle grades, all those cues we've been supporting them with fall away, because you can't use them in those books.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

100%. You get into those chapter books, and those pictures aren't there. You have these multisyllabic words coming at them, and they just do not know what to do with that.

**Anna Geiger:**

Yeah, and as a teacher, I didn't have the tools to teach them. I didn't know strategies for teaching multisyllable words. Did you feel that way?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

I didn't even know how to say the word multisyllabic. I always say multisyllabic when I first was introduced to the word. I never heard about six syllable types! That was completely new to me a couple of years ago.

Now, I think, that's the other thing with science of reading, you learn it and you're so invested in it, you can't imagine doing it differently.

You become this expert, like, "Oh, my gosh, you don't know six syllable types?" Even though I just learned it three years ago, but you all of a sudden become this expert at it.

Yeah, definitely the science of reading gave me all of those strategies. I feel like I have this prescription. When I have a struggling reader, I know the prescription now. I know what to do. Before, it was just trying all these things in the toolbox, or just keep going to different blogs, and printing off resources from Teachers Pay Teachers.

**Anna Geiger:**

No over the top plan, no understanding of the big picture and how to take steps to get there, which we're going to talk about that.

Before we do, when Schools Cubed came to your school to help your school basically overhaul how you were teaching reading, were you still in your balanced literacy world? If so, or if not, what was your reaction to all these changes?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Yeah, so I'm the perfect person to talk to, because I was a classroom teacher and I am that classroom teacher who is a devil's advocate. I will question everything you're asking me to do, and if I am not in, I'm not in. If I'm in, I'm 100% in.

Schools Cubed came in, Pati Montgomery came in, that first back to school time, and was showing us our test scores in our face, like, "What you're doing is not working."

I'm sitting back, I'm feeling it. I'm hearing this information. They're telling us these new instructional strategies to do, and I'm on board so far. What is this? I'm feeling it out.

I was not fond of the idea of somebody coming in observing me constantly. I felt I was being micromanaged, so I was kind of not totally receptive, but still keeping an open mind.

I was still balanced literacy, and then they were just showing us a few things to infuse, like focus on these comprehensions, focus on daily vocabulary. That was a big shift. We weren't teaching explicit vocabulary, so that was probably my biggest shift.

We used a direct instruction program called Spelling Mastery. I learned what a morphograph was for the first time through that program. I really learned explicit instruction through that program. That was a big shift for me. It was difficult because we were... Am I allowed to say textbook companies?

**Anna Geiger:**

Oh, yeah. Say whatever you want.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Okay. We were using Benchmark at the time, and Benchmark was just, it was like this poster you started with. The kids never really had text in front of them. The leveled readers were loaded with this knowledge, where the kids didn't even have enough background to get through these texts. It was just kind of a disheveled mess. We were always told, "As long as you're teaching to the standards, you're good."

I took that as, "Okay, great. I'm going to supplement and do my own thing." I was printing off task cards, and it was just like this constant mix of skill and strategy work. That first year, it was kind of like a hodgepodge, but the one thing that I did dig into was decodable books, because I was third grade at that time.

Julie, who you've spoken to already, was my reading specialist at the time.

**Anna Geiger:**

Okay.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

I remember her walking me through how to do this decodable, six-step lesson plan where you're hitting phonemic awareness, phonics, you're doing decoding sentences, and they're encoding.

I was like, "You've got to be kidding me! If you think I'm going to develop a lesson plan for four different groups every single day." They had these arrays, where we'd be practicing these four sounds repeatedly, and you'd be switching them around.

But I saw it working, and then I also made it work for me.

Julie's a very type A teacher. I'm as type B as you can be. I'll try to plan the best I can, but it just doesn't work for me. Just knowing, "Oh, I don't have to print off 13 pages, I just need to make sure I'm hitting phonemic awareness, phonics..." Then I found a way to make it work for myself. "I'll just use this box of cards, and the ones they're struggling with, I'll put in the front."

Going into my groups knowing that I had a plan, but it didn't have to be this exuberant, printed out, five page lesson plan, that worked for me.

I did see the success with those kids in my decoding groups. I was like, "Holy cow! They're clicking. They're getting it. They're feeling successful."

**Anna Geiger:**

What do you attribute that to, exactly? Was it the practice? Was it the structure? Was it being able to pinpoint what they needed?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

I do not think they were explicitly taught the code. I was teaching them the code. I was teaching them, "This is how consonants work. This is how vowels..."

Most of my kids, or if you came in and asked them, "What are the vowels?" They couldn't have told you what the vowels were.

**Anna Geiger:**

Yeah.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

There just was zero level of understanding of, "This is what a vowel is, and the vowel can make this sound, or it can make this sound."

Luckily that first year, I did have a majority of the kids who, I don't know the statistic, but they say there's a certain percent of kids who will learn to read any way that you teach them. I had a small group that year, 16 kids or something like that, and a majority of them probably fell in that realm of kids who learned through the sight words, through the little bit of phonics.

The growth I saw in those kids that were struggling to decode is amazing. Even some of the Forward exam scores were released for individuals, and I was able to see that yesterday, and I was tracking those students. I was their teacher in third grade and they now were fifth graders, and I'm like, "Yes! They're proficient! They've done it. They know it. They learned the code, and now they're on their way."

**Anna Geiger:**

Speaking about those particular kids who had not benefited from a lack of explicit instruction, which we know is a significant percentage of kids, what did you see in terms of their feelings about reading, and just their willingness to try? Did you see any kind of differences as they were explicitly taught and starting to get it?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Yeah, they were wanting to read those decodable books that I looked at and was like, "Are you kidding me? These look unengaging and so boring." They were flying through them, they were loving them. They wanted to go on to the next section of them.

I should also mention with the success that we saw with these kids, they were also in an intervention program too. They were in the SIPPS Intervention program, so they were getting a really structured intervention, and then I was kind of double dosing whatever patterns they were working on. That attributed to the success.

Yeah, they were just so excited. They were excited to read those decodable books. They were excited to be able to write the sentences.

**Anna Geiger:**

So they really weren't getting their needs met until about third grade when things were starting to change, and you were starting to understand the importance of this. Now you're saying that they're fifth graders now and they're doing really well.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Absolutely. When I've tracked some of those kids who started in their intervention, they're not in intervention anymore.

**Anna Geiger:**

That's great.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

They're flying.

**Anna Geiger:**

That's what we want to hear.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

It's really exciting to see.

That's what's cool about being the reading specialist now is I can follow their journey. I work with 3-6, so I can see them coming through, and it's exciting to see the progress that they're making.

**Anna Geiger:**

You were seeing some changes with your kids who were struggling. They were starting to get it.

What were some other things that pulled you away from balanced literacy as you were learning with Schools Cubed there and the other things?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Julie led a book club, it's called "Shifting the Balance," I believe, and I will 100% be honest, that was something I did to get more money from the school district. Don't think that this was like, "Oh, all these teachers just joined this book club out of their own free will." No, I was literally doing it to get compensation, but it turned out to be this huge aha moment, because it did a really good job of showing, "Okay, this is this practice you're probably doing." I'm reading it, like, "Yeah, I'm doing that. I am whatever, Mr. Martin, the third grade teacher they're referencing." \

Then they showed you, "Well, this is what the science shows behind it." That was huge for me. I had no idea that all of the science existed behind reading.

Then starting to do some of those changes, and just starting to see how... When I taught kids these morphographs, now because they know this, they can read this, this, and this word. Because they learned this prefix or suffix, now they're familiar with what this word means. That morphology was huge to me. Huge.

**Anna Geiger:**

Did you teach morphology through that spelling program you mentioned? What was the name of that again?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Spelling Mastery.

**Anna Geiger:**

Okay. That teaches morphemes and morphographs. See, I learned the word morphograph when I was at your school and saw it on the wall. I've not actually used that word, but maybe morpheme is the sound of the "pre," but the morphograph is the written version, P-R-E? Is that the difference?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

I can repeat this verbatim, because it's this direct instruction. At one point, you tell the kids, "All morphographs have meaning. All morphographs have what?" Then you tap, "All morphographs have meaning." It's any part of the word that has meaning. Even just adding an S to the word cats, that S is a morphograph that holds meaning, it means plural.

**Anna Geiger:**

Oh. I'm guessing that these materials were teaching you, right?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Oh, absolutely!

**Anna Geiger:**

While you were teaching the kids?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Yeah.

**Anna Geiger:**

I would've said, as a balanced literacy teacher, I did not want any kind of scripted program, or any kind of that explicit instruction stuff. That was going to be boring. Maybe you felt that way too, but I think you see things differently now. Can you talk to that a little bit?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Yeah, sure. My close friend, my teaching partner, Jamie and I, we did Spelling Mastery the first couple of weeks and we were like, "What the heck is this?"

I remember in my student teaching field experience seeing a direct instruction math program being taught, and thought it was like this Pavlonian response of a dog salivating. Like I'm hitting a bell and making children respond. I was so turned off by it.

Even when we started that program, I'm like, "What is this? This is so boring."

Then my principal came in and observed me, because that's the whole other thing is principals having that knowledge of this is a game changer. They're coming in to evaluate you and now they know what they're talking about. That was a game changer.

Anyway, he came in and did an observation. He's like, "That was phenomenal!"

I'm like, "What? I just read a script!"

He's like, "Do you realize there was 100% engagement? All the kids were participating, they were working, they were producing results."

I think I felt I needed to do so much preparing in my teaching, that having this scripted program for me to follow felt like I was cheating.

**Anna Geiger:**

Yes, yeah.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Does that make sense?

**Anna Geiger:**

I would have exactly have felt that way. I was going to say that word for you, exactly, cheating.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

It almost feels like, "No, that's my job. I'm supposed to create these dynamic, engaging lessons."

That to me was huge freedom, like, "Whoa, wait, I can spend my time instead of going on blogs and reading what to try, I can spend my time doing a program like Spelling Mastery, and analyzing my student errors, and then reteaching in small group. That's where my time should be spent." That was a big shift.

**Anna Geiger:**

I appreciate you saying that last part, because I think a concern a teacher might have about a scripted program is, "Well, then I'm not teaching to the students in front of me. I'm just reading the script." You're saying the script and the routines are helpful for the teacher and the students. For one thing, it saves time, it also saves prep time, and then it does increase engagement.

When I was at the school, I was able to see different classes doing this kind of thing. It's true, 100% of the kids were participating. If there were a few kids who weren't answering, the teacher called them out, did it again, and repeated it. Everybody was participating. It's that quick pace of the lessons that helps and keeps everybody going.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

The "perky pace," that's the lingo.

**Anna Geiger:**

Yep, Anita Archer. Yep.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Yeah, absolutely. That was a big shift too, seeing how much you really could teach in a day. When they went to our 120-minute literacy blocks and they were like, "You're going to do vocabulary, you're going to do spelling, you're going to do small group, and you're going to do whole group."

I was like, "How are we going to fit this all in?" Literally by the end of the reading block, my friend Jamie and I would be like, "I'm ready for a nap."

**Anna Geiger:**

I ran a marathon.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

It was exhausting, but the kids could do it. You see a decrease in behaviors because the kids know the expectation. They know the routine. Yeah. It was a big shift, and I saw the benefits from it for sure.

Now, from the lens of a literacy coach, when I go in, I can see no time is wasted. There is this sense of urgency. We don't have time to waste.

**Anna Geiger:**

Right. Just to repeat again, it's not just that whole group quick instruction. It's also the teacher being thoughtful and figuring out how to support kids who need extra help. Maybe that might be in small groups afterward.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Right. I feel like I've listened to a billion podcasts on small group instruction, because that was the bane of my existence last year. Once you've got those kids in decodables, what does that small group instruction look like?

I feel like my brain, as well as other teachers' brains, are stuck on this, "I need to see this group for 20 minutes, and these kids for 20 minutes, and these kids for 20 minutes, and the groups are pretty much staying the same."

Instead of using this data analysis quickly every single day and saying, "Okay, they were struggling in this, I might need to just do a quick six minute lesson on whatever, whatever they were struggling with in Spelling Mastery. Then my next small group can be the kids that maybe struggled a little bit with our comprehension story, or maybe now I need to do a little scaffolding of some of the vocabulary that's going to come in with my anchor text." We're in Wonders now, so it's called an anchor text.

Just being a lot more flexible with your groups and what you're teaching, and responding to the data, like, "What am I seeing informally from my kids?" instead of, "Here's my lesson plan for the week, this is my 20-minute chunk. Here's my Leveled Reader we're going to read."

That's a hard shift for teachers to have. That's a hard shift for me to come in and coach with, but I think it's a necessary shift that has to start happening.

**Anna Geiger:**

I think one thing that's good to acknowledge is that leveling. I know we wouldn't say leveling kids, but that's basically what it was. Leveling kids by using running records, and then putting them in groups, and going through a Guided Reading format was actually easier than figuring out what specific support do these kids need?

I think it's okay to acknowledge that, that that was easier, but part of it was easier because I didn't know what I didn't know.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

100%.

**Anna Geiger:**

Once you know what you didn't know, you realize, "This doesn't get to what kids actually need to learn. I need to figure that out."

When you look at your journey with introducing practices based on the science of reading to your school, what would you say have been the biggest game changers, just in general?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

I think that explicit instruction, really knowing what you're teaching and why you're teaching it. Do the kids know what they're learning and why they're learning it, especially for those upper grades, when you start to see that motivation dip, kids not caring, things like that.

I think just constantly looking at the data, being data-driven, seeing what the kids are doing. Many times, my conversations with teachers will be like, "Well, I think the student's doing this," or, "I think," and we can take that word think out. We can see through diagnostic testing exactly what's going on there.

In the upper grades, it's a little more... My biggest challenge is we have those constrained and unconstrained skills. Once you learn DGE in the younger grades, you've learned it. Then in the upper grades, you're battling vocabulary, which of course, never has that ceiling. You're dealing with comprehension that's ever evolving, background knowledge that they're always learning.

There are these other pieces that come into play in the upper grades so I'm always like, "Julie, you have it easier in the younger grades, because you just need the code." I tease her with that, and that struggle is real in the upper grades when they just don't have the vocabulary and that background knowledge.

I think the science of reading really is teaching me with those teachers to get those kids thinking about the vocabulary, having that word consciousness, connecting to what they've read, discussing it, having more of those Turn and Talks.

That was a big thing that our shift with science of reading was, that dialogue. I think before, kids would just, they thought reading was just reading the words on the page and getting to the end.

**Anna Geiger:**

Yes, that is so true!

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Now, reading is connecting to it, and changing your thinking about something, or asking questions, and monitoring your understanding. That was a big shift with the science of reading.

**Anna Geiger:**

Yeah. Thanks for sharing all that too, because I know that some people think the science of reading is only about phonics, and we talk about it a lot, because we had to make so many corrections there, but yes, it is so much more. I did get to see that when I was at your school to see the comprehension instruction that was happening.

I do hear from a lot of people who say, "I want to make some of these changes, but nobody at my school's on board," or, "They're entrenched in balanced literacy," or, "My admin doesn't want to hear it."

You were on the other side for a little while, in that this was not something you were looking for. Do you have any advice for someone who's trying to reach out to staff or administrators who just aren't interested?

**Jolene Rosploch:**

I'm going to go back to my friend Jamie, who actually ended up leaving our school district and went over to a different school district, and brought over her science of reading aligned practices. The amount of overwhelming awe that the administrators had when they went into her classroom spoke for itself. They had classrooms going in to visit her, just seeing that kids were engaged, seeing how they were doing a Turn and Talk.

I think any teacher who's starting to do these practices, I think that an administrator would see the difference right away, and then eventually, the data would support what that teacher's doing, and other teachers will start to follow.

All teachers want to do what's best for their kids. That's what they want to do. Every teacher's doing what they think is best for kids right now, but when you have a little more proof in your face of, "Look at, this is what I'm doing, this is what's happening."

I think to me, the biggest frustration I had in starting this journey was people were telling me, "Teach vocabulary every day," and nobody was showing me what to do.

I learn by seeing, so the first time I watched Anita Archer do a vocabulary lesson, I was like, "Oh, that's what it's supposed to look like," just seeing it in action, or just seeing a demonstration done. I don't know, there's just so many resources out there, so just being able to have a video to see, "This is what it looks like, this is what a perky pace is, this is what Turn and Talks look like for kids." That's really beneficial, just watching those clips.

**Anna Geiger:**

Thanks for coming on, and I look forward to hearing more about your school and the changes that you're making.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Absolutely. I had one more quick story I wanted to share with you, just about the importance of how the knowledge of principals really helps too, because that was kind of Pati Montgomery's mission is to change the leadership, that the principal should be the literacy leader of the school.

Mike Moore is our principal. He and I had had many conversations about this, and I remember I was running an intervention one day, and it was a SIPPS intervention, and you're repeating sound cards, and it was NG. This was never introduced when I started the lesson, so this was a review sound. He was walking past and I was going, "Okay, everybody ready?"

We were going, "/NG/, /NG/, /NG/!"

He walked by, and he came in the room and he was like, "What? Can you say that for me again?"

I was like, "Sure! /NG/, /NG/."

He was like, "Look at the picture of the sound card," and it's a picture of somebody singing. He was like, say, "Sing."

I'm like, "Sing."

He's like, "It's not two separate sounds," because he had done Top 10 Tools.

**Anna Geiger:**

Yes.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

I was like, "What are you talking about?" Then I was like, "Holy cow. He knows something!" Sometimes principals have kind of like a, sometimes their feedback isn't as explicit as that. I was just like, "Wow, game changer! You knew that over me." That's kind of my aha where the feedback he has now holds a lot more importance too.

**Anna Geiger:**

That's also so great, because then you're all in this together versus everybody on their own, trying to figure this out when you're pulling your knowledge together.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Right, and that speaks volumes to having the same intervention program. You can go watch somebody else, you can kind of audit each other to make sure you're doing it right, so the kids are always hearing that same message from everybody.

**Anna Geiger:**

Well, thanks again. It was such a joy talking to you.

**Jolene Rosploch:**

Yeah, absolutely! Thank you so much. Anything to spread the science of reading, anything.

**Anna Geiger:**

Thank you so much for listening. You can find the show notes for today's episode at themeasuredmom.com/episode186. Talk to you next time!