



Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here from The Measured Mom. Welcome back!

Last week I shared an older episode, an episode about my reaction to Emily Hanford's article, "At a Loss for Words." For me, it was what finally helped me see that some things I had been doing with balanced literacy were not the right way to teach reading. I began to learn more about the research, and that's brought me to where I am today.

Well today we get to hear from Dr. Heidi Beverine-Curry, and we learn what it was for her that helped her see that what she was doing wasn't quite right. For her, it was actually in her doctoral program when she realized that balanced literacy and three-cueing were not backed by research. She's very entertaining and fun to listen to. I think you're really going to enjoy this week's episode. You'll also learn how The Reading League can help you make a difference in your classroom and school.

Anna Geiger: Today we welcome Dr. Heidi Beverine-Curry to the podcast. Welcome!

Heidi Beverine-Curry: Thank you so much, Anna! It's really great to be here with you today.

Anna Geiger: So I found Heidi through a YouTube video from September 2019 where she was sharing a presentation about the three-cueing systems and related myths. It was very interesting and also very funny. So I knew that you would love to hear from her to hear how she got into education, the misunderstandings that she had that many of us have had, and what brought her to where she is today.

Can you start by talking to us about how you got into education?

Heidi Beverine-Curry: I started out in TV, radio, and film.

Anna Geiger: Wow.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: That was my first choice of career, but once I started studying TV, radio, and film, I wasn't really satisfied with it, and I felt kind of a calling toward education. I wanted to do elementary education. When I came out of it I realized, as I was teaching, that I didn't really know how to teach a child to read from the ground up. Did I really have the knowledge and skills I needed to take a little one and turn them into a reader? And no, no, I didn't.

Anna Geiger: That's so interesting because when I graduated from college, I think we're in a pretty similar era, I graduated in the late '90s, and my first position was actually a multi-grade classroom of middle grades, so third, fourth, and fifth grade. I was really, at that time, not interested at all in primary grades because I said, "I just really don't know how to teach kids to read. That's a huge responsibility."

Heidi Beverine-Curry: I remember one assignment that we had where we had to read fifty pieces of children's literature and get a little recipe card box and fill out index cards about the major themes in the book, about what grade level we thought it would be appropriate for, and some activities that might go along with it. Any sort of response activity or an art project or something. But really it was nothing about, "Okay, here's how kids learn to read. Here's what the brain does when it reads." It was a lot about children's literature and a lot about running records.

I have taught children's literature courses at the graduate level many times, and I enjoy it. I love it! But being an expert in children's literature does not prepare you to prepare teachers to teach children to read. These are two very different things. There's a split between the faculty who work in schools of ed who prepare teachers and the disciplines, the multiple scientific disciplines that study reading in an empirical way.

So when you look at cognitive psychology, neuroscience, communication sciences, even linguistics, you can find really rich findings and bodies of knowledge that can inform the teaching of reading. And historically, there has been a gap.

At The Reading League, we used to say that we wanted to clear the pipeline between the scientific research and practice, but the more we got in there, the more we realized there was never a pipeline. It's not like there was one that was all gunked up. It just hadn't been built. So that's really what we're aiming to do.

Anna Geiger: And a lot of people talk about them as silos, like they're all individual. I think that a lot of the rhetoric around balanced literacy contributed to this because I know in your presentation you talked about Regie Routman's books, "Invitations" and "Transitions." I loved those, I had them all marked up. They were actually my undergrad colleges' bookstore at the time.

She talks a lot about how YOU'RE the expert, YOU'RE the teacher, YOU know what's best. When you really get that hammered in enough times, it's hard to consider that someone in this seemingly completely unrelated field who is not a classroom teacher really could tell you something particularly useful. So for me, that was a barrier for a long time.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: I've seen active sort of boundaries. You study your brains over here. I work with children.

Anna Geiger: Did you teach then before you started getting your master's degree?

Heidi Beverine-Curry: I did, yeah. So my first job was a self-contained special education class, which was a really interesting job to take after coming out of a dual major inclusive ed program. The descriptor was "profound disabilities." I had 12-year-old boys, I had four boys, and they were all non-verbal and had lots of personal care issues. I was completely unprepared for that job. I loved the children very much, but I did not feel particularly prepared to teach them.

Fortunately, I had a ton of teaching assistants, occupational therapists, speech therapists, and physical therapists that taught me how to do the job over the course of the year. But again, that was just something else that I was not prepared for. I knew how to write an IEP, and I knew how to play cooperative games, and I knew how to build a circle of friends, and invite gen ed in, and build relationships, and all of this, but I didn't know how to... Well, there was a LOT that I didn't know how to do, but I learned a lot of that on the job.

Then I taught for another eight years in a different school district. In that school district, I worked exclusively with fourth graders, but I worked in different capacities. It was always in an inclusive environment. So sometimes I started out as the gen ed teacher, sometimes I was positioned as the special ed teacher, sometimes I was positioned as a reading specialist. But, in general, I worked with fourth graders for eight years.

Every year it seemed to me that kids just weren't where I would expect fourth graders

to be when they show up at the beginning of the year in terms of their ability to read. I would ask around to the... they weren't called instructional coaches, they were called curriculum consultants at the time, but they were like instructional coaches. I would ask them, "Hey, what can I do about this? What can I do about that?"

Again, it's not their fault, it's just the system is broken. We do the best with what we have, and I would get things from them like, "Well, if they haven't learned how to get the words off the page by now, if they can't decode, then you're going to need to teach them compensatory strategies." Or "Do you have them at their instructional level?"

And I'd be thinking, "Well if we stick at their instructional level, how do they get better? And what even does that really mean?"

I think a lot of teaching at that point, before the science of reading, before that term got thrown into the zeitgeist, and now it's kind of a no-shame zone. And you see all these teachers going, "Yes, I want to learn!" Blah, blah, blah.

At that time in the mid '90s, the term "science of reading" wasn't out there, and I think you had a lot of people kind of trying to fake it till they make it. It's not a great idea to be a new, young, untenured teacher in a building and stand on top of your desk and say, "Hey, everybody! I don't know how to teach reading! Anybody got this figured out? Can you help me?"

You just kind of pretended that you knew, and as you can tell that kind of behavior is hard for me. I'm a little more direct than that.

So I did do a lot of asking, and I think it annoyed people. I'd hear, "Well, just give it to them on tape. They just need access."

I heard all sorts of things that were not, "HERE'S how we make them better readers." It was, "Here's how we get them around not reading so well."

Over the years, it really started to frustrate me. I thought, I'll get my master's in reading education because I feel like that's what I need, but I just got a lot more of the same. That's when we really dug in heavy to the three-cueing systems, guided reading, a lot of Fountas and Pinnell. They were really becoming super popular at that time. A lot of the A to Z text gradient stuff. A lot more running records, a lot more miscue analysis.

So I came out of there with a third New York State teaching certificate that said I was a reading specialist K through 12, and I still really didn't know the technical knowledge that I felt like I needed to make a kid into a reader.

Anna Geiger: That's so interesting, because I know it was the same thing for me when I got my master's degree. So I finished it in 2005, it took me a lot of years because I was doing it while I was teaching. When I graduated with a focus on reading, I was certified to be a reading specialist. I didn't end up using that, but I was supposedly ready to do that. At the time, I probably thought that I could, but I just didn't know what I didn't know, which was SO many things!

I was very connected to three-cueing. When I ended up teaching first and second grade, they had leveled books. I definitely did not want to use many decodables at all. I felt like that was stifling fluency and comprehension, and we needed to teach them all these ways to arrive at a word so that we would put comprehension first. I was very confident that this was the right thing to do.

Then years later when I had my own children, I started teaching them to read. I did do some phonics with them, of course, because I did believe phonics was important, but mostly it was leveled books. Because they come from a background with strong literacy and language and just naturally they were able to learn that way, but I know they could have learned better if I'd been more explicit in some things.

I remember my oldest, so she's 16 now, but when she was first learning to read, she would read the Calvin and Hobbes comic books. Do you know those? She was a good reader. I mean, she knew what she was reading, but she called them Calvin and Hoobs, which is not phonetic at all, but it's just because I hadn't given her enough instruction.

And then I wrote a blog post about three-cueing. I had the whole graphic, like you had in your presentation, about how the three areas worked together. And way back in 2014, so just a year after I started my business, someone commented, "You know that this is not supported by research."

And I was like, "What? I just graduated from grad school a few years ago, and we were all into this." Honestly, I didn't really know what to say.

At the time I had four little kids and it wasn't something I wanted to dive into, but I was just sure she was wrong. I was sure she had to be wrong. So unfortunately, it took me a number of years after that before I finally started looking into it.

Can you talk to us about your moment that you talked about in the webinar, which was so funny, where you talked about three-cueing and realized you were missing something big time?

Heidi Beverine-Curry: Yeah. Not my best moment. I mean, to give a little context to it, I did everything I could with this Fountas and Pinnell stuff. I went and saw them talk. If I was in my office right now, I'd pull them out, I have books behind my desk that are autographed. I would go see them speak. The covers are falling off. There's notes all over. Things are highlighted. There's sticky notes hanging out of everywhere, because I just thought I wasn't doing it right.

So I just kept pouring over it, pouring over it, trying to do it better. And finally I was like, "I just don't think this works. I don't know. I don't know. I must be doing something wrong."

But I didn't question the three-cueing systems. I was questioning Fountas and Pinnell. I was questioning guided reading. I was questioning the A to Z text gradient. My thinking wasn't so sophisticated where I was thinking of the big picture. And also I wasn't thinking, "Oh, I really need the science of reading," because I didn't know what that was either.

I just knew there had to be something better than giving up on kids when they were nine or ten and saying, "Well, just give it to them on tape."

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: So I had my son, and I taught one more year, and I thought, "I'm going to leave. I'm going to leave the classroom. I'm going to get a PhD. That's probably my best bet in getting some of these answers that I know must be out there."

Fortunately, I did find those answers, even though I didn't really know what I was looking for. But the only reason that I found those answers, the only reason that I stumbled upon the science of reading, is because I had to choose an elective that fit

with my childcare schedule.

Anna Geiger: Oh, interesting.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: ...because there was no science of reading coursework required in my doc program. That elective was The Cognitive Psychology of Reading with Dr. Benita Blackman.

So the first night of class I walk in, I don't know what the cognitive psychology of reading is, I have no idea what I'm getting myself into. This is my first doc seminar. We sat around a U-shaped table, I think. Do I tell this story in the video?

The person next to me was Maria Murray, the first time I met her. (She's the founder and CEO of the Reading League.) And that was 2006. And on and on, there were maybe a dozen people around this U-shaped table that had already had some coursework with Benita, and knew a little bit about the science of reading. I had no idea what I was getting myself into.

Benita went around the horn and wanted to know our understandings of how reading works, she said, "Tell us how reading works."

She started with me, which I thought was really mean! I'm the new kid, and all I knew was the three-cueing systems and I felt pretty confident. Like you said, I felt pretty confident.

I looked her dead in the eye... And I've come to start talking about this with a Harry Potter sort of bend. Are you a Harry Potter person, Anna?

Anna Geiger: I've read all the books.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: Okay, so when Benita asked me what my understanding of reading was, I ended up having this Dolores Umbridge moment. So Harry Potter folks will know, and if you don't, ask somebody, but Benita smiled and said, "Heidi, how do you understand reading to work?"

I looked her dead in the eye and gave her a lecture on the three-cueing systems. "You see, there's the semantic, the syntactic, the graphophonic. You can't over rely on one or the other. You do this one as a last resort. Reading is about making meaning. Then you can give these tests called running records and do miscue analysis and find out where kids are relying. And then, I don't know, teach them to rely on something else."

Anna Geiger: Nobody really knows what to do afterwards.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: Right. And I think I outlined that in the video as well, but to me, she was Dolores Umbridge. I mean, she's looking at me, and she's going, "Mm-hmm. Yes. Yes. Oh. Really?" in just did this drippy, sticky, sweet, smiley way, but I could tell there were evil thoughts going on behind those eyes.

I'm like, "I know I'm saying all the right things, but I am clearly not saying any of the right things." It was a very uncomfortable experience for me, and then I kind of scuttled out.

She's like, "Oh, okay, thanks," and then went to Maria and said, "Maria, can you..."

Now, Maria had been her research assistant for a number of years at this point.

Anna Geiger: Oh, wow.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: "So Maria, how do you understand reading to work?"

And Maria says, "Well, the connectionist model tells us blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."

I did not have the reaction I should have had, which was, "Wow! That's fascinating! I could really learn from her!" Because that's not what we do when we're feeling insecure, right?

Anna Geiger: Mm-hmm.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: So I was just kind of just like, "Note to self, don't sit next to Maria next time."

So the next person was Kris Munger, who went on to become the associate dean, and she was like, "Well, dual-route theory posits blah, blah, blah..."

And I'm like, "Ach!"

So at that point I realized the problem is me, and I must have turned a million shades of red and wanted to just hide under the table.

I don't know that I really heard or processed much of what happened in the rest of that class that night. I just know that I kept it together long enough to get home and walk in the door. I made eye contact with my husband and I was just instantly ugly crying. And I'm like, "I want a do over! I'm not smart enough! I don't know what I've gotten myself into! I'm over my head here!"

He was great. He was like, "I see you. I hear you. I feel you. But it sure would be great because we really made a lot of sacrifices for you to do this thing that you said you needed to do. So how about you just buck on up and get back in there?"

I was like, "Okay, okay!"

But that 12 weeks, 16 weeks, however long a semester is, was world changing for me. Life changing for me.

I will say that Benita went from being my Dolores Umbridge to my Professor Dumbledore. That was just my impression the first time. But I realized that by signing up for that course, I had inadvertently stumbled through platform nine and three quarters, and that this whole world of reading research was like Hogwarts. It was this whole academy, this whole parallel universe, this whole body of knowledge that had always been there, had always existed, but I just didn't have access.

Somewhere deep inside, I knew I was missing something. Something else had to be out there. I was lucky enough to find it.

But that semester was brutal. I mean, I went through serious emotional roller coasters. There was a whole grieving process of having to throw out everything that I thought I knew, plus the idea of having had to pay thousands of dollars to learn this stuff, and then nine years of teaching kids with this as my centerpiece, it didn't feel good. It didn't feel good. I still see, there are two particular names and faces that I see, that those kids are going to be in their thirties now, and I hope somebody taught them to read because I sure didn't.

Anna Geiger: I know we all have those. I definitely have kids like that, both when I taught the middle grades and then when I taught primary. They were really sweet, bright kids, but obviously what I was doing was not helping. I just encouraged them to practice more or for their parents to read to them more. It did not occur to me that I need to be giving a specific kind of assessment and nailing down where the holes were. I did not understand the value of phonemic awareness or systematic explicit phonics.

It's hard. It's hard. And the grieving is real. It is REAL. And that's why I think when some people join the big Facebook groups, they're a great place to be, but when you first join, it can be very overwhelming. I literally felt sick to my stomach the first month or two just because, like you said, to realize that so much of what I thought was true was actually not. It was very alarming.

What year about was this when you were taking that course?

Heidi Beverine-Curry: It was 2006. It was the fall of 2006.

Anna Geiger: Which is very interesting because that's a long time ago. Many of us are just finding out about the science of reading right now, and it's obviously been around for decades, for as long as research has been done. But a lot of the modern understandings are not brand new.

What was next for you after you learned the science of reading?

Heidi Beverine-Curry: I spent a year collecting data for my dissertation. I studied how one school took the RTI legislation and made it into a thing that happened. It was a qualitative study about how schools made use of quantitative research evidence.

But then it took me years to write the dissertation while I still had to work full-time, and I decided to go back into public schools as a literacy coach and be the person that I wish I had when I was looking for support and answers. So I did that for another nine years.

My colleague, Stephanie Finn, and I, through a perfect storm of resources and lovely people and supportive administrators, were very supported in our attempt to turn a very whole language balanced literacy district into one that follows the science of reading. It took us a while. I mean, it took us a good four years to really see a full change in the achievement data that resembled what's possible when you use the science as your guide versus something else as your guide.

A number of folks that I went through the doc program with, Maria in particular, we kept in touch, but we were all working in our own little places trying to get traction. It's hard to be that one person that's trying to make change. It's hard if you're even one of three or four or five people trying to make change in a huge system. We could make change in one little system, but it didn't really get anywhere.

Maria has her story too. She became despondent and was ready to quit education entirely and become an alpaca farmer.

Anna Geiger: Oh, I have heard her say that.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: That is true! But Maria was different than most of us because she never learned...

Anna Geiger: Balanced literacy.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: Balanced literacy, whole language, Marie Clay, Fountas and Pinnell, Calkins, the Goodmans. She didn't learn that stuff. She only knew the science. And then when she finished her doc work and went to be a professor at a university, she encountered things that were really disheartening to her. I mean, she spent years

working on these multimillion dollar National Institutes of Health funded research. She knew what worked and didn't realize how few people didn't know what worked. She hadn't been part of that culture.

She would assign tasks to her students like do this phonological awareness assessment, and then write a reflection about it. She would get feedback from her students and sometimes from the cooperating teachers and sometimes even from the administrators saying, "We really don't do this phonemic awareness stuff. You need to teach them how to do a running record and find instructional levels and do miscue analysis. We don't really teach phonics here. You really need to teach them how to do guided reading groups."

She was like, "What even is this? What is going on?" And then that prompted her to look into it and was like, "Hey, there's no research base here." It was depressing. There were a lot of us who had been banging that drum and being very frustrated for a long time trying to make change.

Maria, one day in the midst of her depression and alpaca fantasies had this idea. We can't all just be spread out trying to do this. We need to work together. We're not going to change it from in these structures. We're not going to be able to change it from the inside of school districts. We're not going to be able to change it from inside higher ed. We need to be our own thing and then partner with organizations to help transform and restructure and reeducate. So that's how The Reading League was born.

Anna Geiger: I would guess that many people listening to this are familiar with The Reading League. I've talked about them before and about how I highly recommend their journal. But maybe you could talk to us a little bit more about how it got started, where it's based, it's conferences, how it's spreading into states, and how it can help just the everyday classroom teacher.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: Sure. Great. Thanks for asking! We are in Syracuse, New York, right in the middle of the state, upstate New York. When The Reading League started, we were strictly a volunteer organization. It was 2015-ish when the idea was conceived. It was 2016 when our 501(c)(3) became official and we were a nonprofit organization.

How we started out was the only service we provided was having a free professional development session on the second Thursday of every other month. So it was kind of like putting on a wedding every month. Maria's 90-year-old Italian mother would make cookies so people would have a snack. That's just kind of how we rolled.

Our first few sessions were at a fire hall, bingo hall, and then another one was in a public library. It was standing room only. People were seated, people were lined up along the walls in the back, we had folks sitting on the floor. We were exceeding fire code capacity. So that was a problem.

Simply because of space we would have a school district say, "Yes, you can use our auditorium as long as all our teachers can come."

And we said, "Yes, of course all your teachers can come, but also anybody else can come too."

We would travel around. Different schools would invite us in, but with the understanding that all local teachers were welcome.

There were usually around 200-300 people at each session, and we were like, "Holy cow. We've really tapped into something."

But these teachers were working all day on a Thursday and then maybe going home real quick to their families and making some dinner or something. And then 6:00 to 8:30 PM hanging out for two and a half hours of really intensive professional development.

Anna Geiger: Just to learn. Not to get credit, but just to learn.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: Yeah. They got no credit. They got no money. They just wanted to learn.

We had some investors in the nonprofit world that really wanted to help us achieve our mission. In 2018, we were able to really begin our expansion plan. And then in January of 2019, I left my full-time job to be full-time with The Reading League.

Anna Geiger: So what does your daily work look like now?

Heidi Beverine-Curry: I'm the chief academic officer, so mostly what I oversee is the professional development department. So we have different things. It's The Reading League: we have the journal, we have a TV show that you can watch on YouTube called Reading Buddies, we have an annual conference. We just had our first West Coast summit in Las Vegas for emergent English learners, emergent bilinguals. And then we also have a really robust professional development department.

So in the professional development department, we have basically two pathways. So if you are a lone wolf and you're in Vermont and you're in a school... (And I'm not picking on Vermont, I'm just picking Vermont.) Say you're in Vermont and you are a teacher in your school and you're the only one who's really interested in the science of reading, then our online academy is for you. You can sign up, and then when you show up for online academy, we cap it at 25 so that we can keep it more intimate.

But we also have our school-based professional development partnerships. What happens is the first step is to schedule an administrator introduction day, and we spend a full five-hour day with the administrative team in a school district, and we talk about what the science of reading is, and what it isn't. We look at some data from some schools that we've worked with to show what's possible when we build our knowledge and then act upon it. We also talk about how important a role the administration plays.

So when we work with school districts, we're different in three major ways than most PD. The first is that we have those admins for a full day before we work with teachers. We let the admins know that we expect them to be at the PD and be present and not be in the back on their computers and not take phone calls, and to put themselves front and center and say, "I've got stuff to learn too. Let's do this together." That seems to yield the best results.

Another way that we're different is that we're not training folks on a product that they've bought. A lot of PD is you buy a thing and then they send somebody to show you how to use it. We're not doing that. What we're doing is building knowledge, and yes, some practical skills, of course, but what we're doing is building a teacher and an administrator's internal store of knowledge. So when they make those hundreds of decisions that they make every day about language and literacy instruction, they're making it from a store of knowledge versus what they think might be more fun or what they find on teachers pay teachers, or what the school down the street is doing, or who has the flashiest ad campaign that month in their teacher magazine.

Anna Geiger: So you're teaching them to be wise consumers?

Heidi Beverine-Curry: Yes. We're helping them to make better decisions. I get phone calls, text messages, direct messages on Twitter all the time. Can you just give us a list of programs that are aligned...

Anna Geiger: Oh, I know, everybody wants that.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: Everybody wants that.

Anna Geiger: Everybody does.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: And we say, we could, but it wouldn't really be helpful. It wouldn't be helpful because A: there's no such thing as a perfect program. And even if there was, if you put it in the hands of teachers who don't have a strong knowledge base about evidence-aligned practice, and it's supervised by administrators who don't have a strong knowledge base of evidence-aligned practice, that perfect program, that phantom perfect program is not going to be implemented in ways that get you the results that you should expect.

Then the third thing is we have a data manager at The Reading League, and we want to make sure that the work that we are doing in these partnerships is yielding achievement results.

Anna Geiger: Well, that is super interesting. I did not know about that last part about how you guys work with schools to do all of this. That's incredible. I don't know of anybody else that's doing something like that because it's always about... Like you said, it's always about a particular program.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: Right now we support 68 school districts. 67 of them are in the US and one is in Hong Kong.

Anna Geiger: Oh, wow! That's very cool.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: Isn't that kind of neat? Yeah.

Anna Geiger: So do you know how many states off the top of your head have a Reading League chapter now?

Heidi Beverine-Curry: I believe 26. I think we just pulled in number 26, give or take, but I'm pretty sure it's 26.

Anna Geiger: So if a teacher is listening to this and their state doesn't have a Reading League chapter yet, what could they do?

Heidi Beverine-Curry: Well, they could email Andrea Setmeyer. It's Andrea, andrea@thereadingleague.org. She is our chapter director, and she will give you all things necessary for setting up a state chapter of The Reading League.

Anna Geiger: Awesome. Well, that's incredible. Thank you so much for taking time to tell your story and share all of this. We could probably talk a lot longer, but I try not to keep my episodes too long. Thank you for all the work you continue to do.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: Thank you so much for having me, Anna! I appreciate it.

And thank you so much for being that teacher that wants to learn more and that has opened your mind and your heart to new ways of thinking about reading. Because even though it can hurt us, and it's a painful process to grieve all of those things that we believe to be true, we come out of it on the other side feeling better about our teaching.

Anna Geiger: Yes.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: We're seeing those results and our kids deserve it. So we can go through a little pain for that, I think.

Anna Geiger: That's right. It's all worth it.

Heidi Beverine-Curry: Yep.

Anna Geiger: You can find the show notes for today's episode at themeasuredmom.com/126. Talk to you next time!