Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here from The Measured Mom, and today I'm sharing a really fun interview with Dr. Nathaniel Swain. He's a teacher, instructional coach, researcher, writer, speech language pathologist, he's a young dad, and he's from Australia. I found him when I listened to a really interesting and entertaining webinar he gave about what we need to change when we move forward from balanced literacy, and it was just so interesting. I knew that you would love to hear from him, so he very kindly agreed to be on the podcast. We had a great conversation. I think you're going to really get a lot out of today's episode.

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Dr. Swain!

Nathaniel Swain: Thank you for having me, Anna. It's such a pleasure to be here.

Anna Geiger: I really, really enjoyed the presentation I saw on your website about what we have backwards with balanced literacy, and I resonated with so much of it because I was a balanced literacy teacher during the heyday of balanced literacy, really when it really became a thing. You're quite a bit younger than I am, so you maybe have different experiences with it.

Can you talk to us about how you got into education, and how you learned about balanced literacy and all that?

Nathaniel Swain: Sure. I think I'm a product of balanced literacy in my own schooling. The schooling that I had in the '90s was very much informed by whole language. There was a big focus on student-led learning, and grammar and things weren't taught. I don't ever remember being taught how to read. I think I was probably one of those lucky students that came and was probably reading before I started school.

So I actually didn't come to teaching pretty directly. My mom always said that I should be a teacher, but I resisted it for a really long time. I initially went and studied linguistics. I was really interested in language and learning a second language. I was fascinated by how language works, and it actually made me reflect on my own

language in a way that explicit teaching and grammar back in the early years would've actually sparked that interest earlier.

After studying linguistics, I was thinking, "What do I do with this degree?" I actually looked to speech language pathology, and I studied that first as my masters and started working with young people with language and literacy difficulties in mainstream primary schools and secondary schools, but also in youth justice.

The kids in juvenile detention was the big group that I was working with. I got to see what educational disengagement looks like and what reading failure and writing failure looks like. That was a big eye-opener for me. I think I didn't realize just how much work there was for people who are passionate about language and literacy to try and turn things around because when you see kids who've had a really tough experience in their schooling, and can't do basic things like read at a first grade or a second grade level, and they're young adults working with you, it's pretty eye-opening.

That really piqued my interest, and through that process, even after finishing my PhD, I went back and trained as a teacher. Now my sole passion is working as a teacher and working with teachers to optimize the classroom environment to make it as beneficial for the teacher, managing their workload and their well-being, but also getting the most out of opportunities to work with students.

So my passion is now literacy, and it's also classroom practice in general, so what that looks like in numeracy, but also in the other elements of the curriculum like science and history. I'm trying to support teachers to make that transition from what we've got now, which is a whole-language-balanced-literacy status quo, into what we hope we might get to in the future where everyone gets an education that is aligning with the best knowledge that we have from the science of learning and the science of reading.

Anna Geiger: So would you say that overall Australia is still very balanced literacy and whole language?

Nathaniel Swain: Yeah, it is definitely. I think it's the water that we're swimming in. People don't even realize that balanced literacy is a thing, but then you start talking about what it looks like and people reflect on their own pre-service training as teachers and they think, "Oh yeah, that's what I got." And in general, if you go into any run-of-the-mill, regular mainstream or private sort of school in Australia, you're going to see balanced literacy activities and structures and resources as well. So anything that goes against the grain with that in terms of the explicit teaching of phonemic awareness or phonics or vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, that's going to be quite unfamiliar for a lot of people. It's quite similar to the states in that way.

Anna Geiger: So in your workshop you talked about how we started with whole language and then it switched to balanced literacy. And I don't remember if it was you or someone who said, "I didn't notice a whole lot of a difference. It just kind of got a new name."

Can you talk a little bit about how those two things are related?

Nathaniel Swain: Yeah, so whole language I think grew out of the work of Ken Goodman and Frank Smith in the US, it also aligned with a lot of the work that Marie Clay was doing in New Zealand, which then was brought over to the US in the Reading Recovery program. It tapped into this whole progressive education movement where the teacher was taking a step back from holding the space in the classroom and really trying to put a love of literacy and a love of learning at the very forefront. The explicit teaching of things probably was really unfashionable at the time. It was all about getting kids excited about reading and getting them interested and motivated.

Balanced literacy sort of came in after the National Reading Panel in the US and similar reports in the UK and Australia which basically said that you really need to teach phonics, and you need to teach phonemic awareness, and the other elements of the Big Five.

I think it was an accidental sort of attempt by one of the phonics people who said, "Well, we do value literature and we do value all these other parts as well. It's not just about phonics, and so why don't we have more of a balance?" That was really picked up by the probably people more on the whole language side of things and packaged into this whole approach, and that's where Fountas and Pinnell became really big. People like Lucy Calkins sort of became really prominent as well.

So the pure whole language stuff disappeared in many ways. It sort of still exists in some forms, but the balanced literacy approach where it's a bit of a mix of lots of different things and a bit of phonics sprinkled in there is definitely the status quo at the moment.

Anna Geiger: So I remember when I first became a teacher, I read a lot of Regie Routman's stuff. Unfortunately I got rid of those books because I wish I could refer to them. So I got one from the library today, Invitations, and that was a very whole language book.

Nathaniel Swain: Yes.

Anna Geiger: So I think I started a little bit from whole language, but I also knew that that was bad because, I mean, pure whole language doesn't even teach letters! I was reading a book by Frank Smith and he said it was useless to know the alphabet!

Nathaniel Swain: He's really against it. Yeah.

Anna Geiger: I think we felt good about what we were doing because we had this great new name for it, balanced literacy.

Nathaniel Swain: And it's got the bits and pieces that you like and that works, but it's still really child-centered and it's really all about teaching them at their right level and everything like that. So it did feel good, and I think that's why it really took off in the early 2000's

Anna Geiger: In the book that Regie Routman wrote, she has the graphic for the three cues that we assumed that kids were using to read. And I know that they really haven't been able to nail down where that came from exactly, but it's been floating around for a long time.

Nathaniel Swain: I think the three-cueing approach is really a way to explain how it is that students manage to become fluent readers and to recognize words when, from the outside looking in, it doesn't look like they're actually reading letter by letter. They make guesses at words or students will attempt to sort of guess what the rest of the word might be if they look at the first letter. So those cues of, what is the sentence context and the syntax? What is the meaning that could be there? What's something that makes sense to put in that sentence, that the word might be? And then the last resort being the sound-letter correspondence, or the graphophonic, as they call it in the model.

It does have an intuitive appeal. It's like, oh yeah, students can sort of guess their way through things. And the wording from Goodman is that they sample elements of the letters and words, but they don't actually read each letter and each word.

And that's what they thought in the 70s and 80s when this was in its prime, and unfortunately it is appealing and it hasn't gone away because it's an easy thing that you can teach.

If you believe that three-queuing works, all you have to do is do those lessons where teachers are encouraged to cover words up with post-it notes and talk through these different strategies, picture power and things like that. It's an easy thing for teachers to implement because they have to give those three cues of does it look right, does it sound right, does it make sense? Those three ones, and you don't actually then have to know anything about the word and how it's structured, its etymology, where it's come from in terms of morphemes, and whether it's got any tricky spelling patterns in there. You don't really need to know that because you just answer those three questions.

So I think it's not going away because there hasn't been enough opportunity for teachers to learn that there's an alternative because it has that intuitive appeal. The actual teaching of the structure of English is actually a lot harder and requires a bigger effort from the teacher, but also from the school district and being able to give high quality resources that help teachers understand what they're teaching, really knowing what it's about and why they're explaining it that way.

I hope that sort of hints at that a little bit. But yeah, the million dollar question is why won't this thing go away?

Anna Geiger: Yeah. I think part of it is because most of us that are using it are primary teachers using leveled books that were written for kids to be able to use the cues to solve the words.

I know when I taught with balanced literacy, people would tell me it doesn't work, but I was like, well, my kids are reading. I thought they were reading. I didn't understand the Simple View of Reading then. To me, it looked liked they were arriving at the words, they were getting what the text meant, and that was reading. And I thought that all of them would, through this little separate phonics that I was teaching, both embedded and also a little bit separately, I thought they were just gradually going to put it all together and some of them did.

But I think a lot of us don't follow them up to see, well, how are you doing in third or fourth grade when you're reading these harder books? Have I equipped you to solve those big words or read those big words?

Then also I think like you said, I did not know all the phonics patterns. I mean, I learned to read with phonics, but I hadn't thought much about it. I didn't really know much about-

Nathaniel Swain: It's a lot to get your head around. Yeah.

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

Nathaniel Swain: I'm very lucky that I'm at La Trobe University in Melbourne in Australia where the whole undergrad and master's course has been revamped to put the science of reading at the forefront. We're very excited to be bringing our first cohort through now. Part of that work is with the SOLAR Lab, which is a group of researchers with Pamela Snow and Tanya Serry at La Trobe Uni. We are very excited to prepare teachers in this new way, and to help them connect with the research around how reading used to be taught, and what is balanced literacy because that's the schools that they're going to go out into and they're going to see that.

Then also how can we use the science of reading to improve that practice? And as I talk about in my article to sort of flip it around that what we need to emphasize early is emphasized really well, and then what we can embed more contextually can be contextualized later.

Anna Geiger: So what would you say to somebody who said, "Well, I'm a balanced literacy teacher because meaning is most important and that's what I'm focusing on. When you start with phonics, you basically produce word callers and kids who don't really understand what they're reading."

Nathaniel Swain: So look, it's that critique of phonics being like barking at print, and that's the thing that Frank Smith and Marie Clay and Ken Goodman really had a big problem with. They don't want kids sitting there and looking like they're being drilled in sounds and letters.

I think the selling point for me in terms of seeing it work is that for some kids, this opportunity to learn how the speech system maps with the orthography or the spelling system of English is the only way that they're going to become fluent readers.

Other kids, maybe the top 50% or top 40%, will learn either way and they're going to be

fine. They're not going to read any less well, they're actually potentially going to read better, but also have a more explicit awareness of how words fit together, and their spelling is going to improve as a result.

They might have always been a great reader, but we've got a whole generation of kids that aren't great spellers because they've taken to reading like water, but they haven't had that explicit awareness of how words are structured and the morphology and the parts of words and how they fit together and all the spelling rules that you can really go into. In grade one and grade two, it really becomes important to not just understand the sounds but also the way that the words fit together in terms of spelling.

So the selling point is that for the bottom 60%, this is make or break! If you don't teach the early phonics piece and phonemic awareness piece really well, and give them opportunities to practice those skills in decodable text, which is accessible and which does target those sound-letter patterns that they've learned, then some of them won't actually become fluent readers at all.

They'll become like the teenagers that I've worked with who are using those three-queuing strategies still at age 16 and 17, and not realizing that they're guessing at words and substituting and leaving words out, and they don't even know that there's another way that they could read. They think that reading is a guessing game. As Emily Hanford highlighted so well in her podcast, Sold a Story, it's really exhausting to read in that way.

A lot of adults who have been taught in this way and would've benefited from more explicit instruction, they find reading really hard. It's this horrible process of trying to make it work, and trying to guess what it might be, and trying and you feel like to get through a paragraph is so tiresome.

Whereas fluent reading, when it's done really well, when you teach phonics and phonemic awareness in a really clear and sequential way, and in a way that's responsive to what your students need from you, it actually makes reading really fluent and easy.

The whole point of the Simple View of Reading is that you get the decoding working really well so that you can focus on comprehension. The whole point is that it opens up this whole world of text for students because by the time they get to year two and year three, you're wanting them to be very fluent so that you're basically not thinking about decoding much anymore, except for really complicated multisyllabic words where you might attack them using your morpheme knowledge, based on how the word's structured. So basic decoding shouldn't really be a thing if you're doing this really well

once you get to those middle years.

Anna Geiger: I've told this story in the podcast before, but with my youngest, that's when I learned about structured literacy and the science of reading, and I like to teach my kids to read before they go to school because I think I should get to do it.

Nathaniel Swain: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: So I did that with him and I had just learned about all this and I thought, okay, I get it. I need to be using decodables, but I wasn't quite ready to let go of my leveled books. So the first day I did both, and right away it was like the light bulb, finally all these years later, went off. This is so inefficient for me to try to say, "Well, what would make sense? Well, oh, now you can't sound this book out, but let's look at the picture." Then whereas with the other book, I mean it was very hard to watch him have to slow down and sound out every single word. It was a little bit painful. I was used to my kids just breezing through these patterned books, but he picked it up pretty quickly and once he did, everything was unlocked.

Nathaniel Swain: He cracked the code. Exactly. And that's the hard work that the whole language and balanced literacy hard line researchers have said, "Well, we don't want kids to be put through that struggle phase of figuring it out sound by sound."

It looks painful and it looks annoying, but that's the work of cracking the code. English isn't a simple one-to-one relationship, there's going to be tricky words in there, but when you break it down and you give them text that is at their level of what they can decode, then you see kids being able to focus on the mainstay of what decoding should be about in the early stages, which is identifying the correct letter sound for that particular pattern and then blending it together.

That process of blending can take six months for some kids, so they need that specific practice again and again and again until they actually get what blending is about and how it works.

Then it's like it goes off by itself and the self-teaching hypothesis, which is David Share's theory, takes over. They start teaching themselves new patterns because their brain is cued into knowing that words can be broken down into their sounds and into bigger chunks like morphemes, and then you can't stop them from figuring out new words. I think that's the sweet spot that you get to once you put in the hard yards. But initially for some kids it can be really hard going.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, and we expect a lot of our kindergarten and first grade teachers to really be the ones to do this hard work, but once kids realize that they're the ones doing it, that's where all the excitement comes from and then they start to really enjoy reading.

Nathaniel Swain: I think so. Exactly.

Anna Geiger: Some people in the science of reading community really talk about balanced literacy with a lot of vitriol. They just really, really hate it, I think, because they've seen how some kids reacted to it, but I know that there are still things worth keeping. Can you talk to us about the good of balanced literacy and maybe some things that were good that we can twist a little bit to meet our goals?

Nathaniel Swain: Certainly! I think even from the first year of school, there should be opportunities for students to hear and to enjoy rich literature. I think that the emphasis doesn't have to be on students independently reading those books because to get rich literature at their decodable level is going to be very tricky. That's where the importance of read alouds, and acting out stories, and students hearing stories read to them by adults and by older peers is really valuable.

Having a classroom that has that mix of text that is for the purpose of learning how to read, and text that's for the purpose of reading to learn, I think is really important. That can start right from the beginning of school, so teachers reading texts to them, whether they're nursery rhymes, or fairy tales, or folk tales, or picture books of various kinds, it should be a part of every single day. I think that's something that balanced literacy has done a good job of, saying that literature should be at the heart of what we're doing.

Where it's gone wrong is on it's emphasis that you expect students to be able to read that literature by themselves to begin with Even if that book isn't formatted in the right way, or if it doesn't have a really captivating story, it can still serve a purpose. Don't get me wrong, some decodable books are written really well now. There's some really great stories out there and great illustrations that make those books really fantastic.

But initially, the goal isn't to make the best book in the world, the goal is to have a text that's there for an instructional purpose, and until they become proficient or at a certain intermediate level of decoding, some of the books are going to be less rich than we want them to be.

But then that's where the teacher comes in, and the parents at home as well, if they can, where they read great books to them and that should never stop. Giving them opportunities to hear literature, and to hear stories, and to hear informational texts about interesting topics, and to see fantastic illustrations, and all of those things. I think that's probably the biggest thing that we can learn from the movement in the last forty years is that we should always give students access to rich meanings and texts.

That's where they build their oral language as well, not just from conversation and from play, but also from hearing and engaging in shared book reading. That starts right from birth, but definitely in the early years of age three and four and then the start of school as well.

Anna Geiger: I think when you talk about shared book reading, are you referring to the teacher reading aloud to the students? Is that what you mean by that?

Nathaniel Swain: Yeah, exactly. Especially in those early stages of their reading development where the students can't independently read. It's teachers reading to students, but parents reading at home as well, other family members, older peers, reading to younger peers I think is really helpful as well. In my classroom, in the first year of school, we also have a big focus on paired reading as well. That's reading decodable books to each other at a similar level so that we've got a similar level of proficiency in their decoding skills, of where they're up to in the phonics sequence, and they get to hear fluent text read by a peer and have an opportunity to jump in and provide feedback and also enjoy the text together. Because as they progress through, as they're halfway through the decodable sort of scheme, the books start becoming much more interesting.

It's not just about getting the words right, even though the focus is on decoding. It's also about the fluency and the prosody and also the meanings that you're learning along the way as well. Because the meaning that we get from text is ultimately what we are wanting students to do. That's the whole point of teaching them how to decode is so that they get to reading comprehension.

For many students in the way that it's been taught in the last forty years, there's been a barrier for them ever being able to access that meaning independently. They might be able to do it in really predictable texts where the words can be guessed, but as soon as those pictures disappear, or as soon as the sentence structures become more complicated and less predictable, then you see those students fall down, and ultimately they never get to the meanings of those rich texts because they don't have the decoding skills that unlocks that door.

Anna Geiger: Back to shared reading a little bit. So I know when I read Christopher Such's book, The Art and Science of Teaching Primary Reading, he also described shared reading as a read aloud, but for a lot of us that came from balanced literacy, shared reading was the big text that you read with your students.

Nathaniel Swain: Yes.

Anna Geiger: When I did that, I think that was how we thought we were teaching them to read because they were getting access to all these high frequency words and they would see the words enough. But I know that many people are talking about shared reading in a proper context, in a science of reading based classroom, where the text you read together may be more complex. So it's more like a knowledge building and it helps them feel what oral language or what fluency sounds like. I think that all makes sense. I'm still trying to figure it out in my head because I think well, fluency is automaticity, so can you really call it fluency? Is it just knowledge building? What would you say about that?

Nathaniel Swain: I think it depends on what the purpose of that sort of shared reading is. If you have set it up so that the text is deliberately more complicated than the students could decode by themselves or read fluently by themselves, then the purpose should be about building vocabulary, and knowledge, and richness of story, and character, and things like that, and that's a really valid use of that opportunity to read together.

I think in years two and three, there's a bigger role for reading texts together, whether it's in things like choral reading or the modeled reading by the teacher and students tracking along, where there's a dual benefit for fluency and hearing fluent reading and being an opportunity to practice that fluent reading as well. At the same time, you might be learning vocabulary and elements of narrative or informational texts and knowledge as well.

So I think depending on the year level, what that shared reading looks like and the benefits you would get from it are a little bit different. But I think certainly moving away from that pure balanced literacy approach of saying this is modeled reading, versus shared reading, versus guided reading, and independent reading. I think there's a bit of a misconception in the way that's structured saying that the only thing that's going to improve students' fluency is hearing fluent reading.

In fact, what might improve their fluency the most in the early years is actually getting

good at recognizing and figuring out words, their word-attack skills. That's going to be their phonics knowledge, their phonemic awareness skills, tapping into that orthographic sort of learning about how words are structured and how they pull together, and then also that fluency practice.

So when I said paired fluency reading before, it's really about two peers reading together on a decodable text and giving them an opportunity to practice fluent reading and hear fluent reading from a peer. There's some meaning making and some vocabulary building going on because you can't stop the brain from doing that. So much of that is natural to the brain to make sense of text, and it's good to cue students into the text. But in that fluency exercise of maybe ten minutes a day, it's an opportunity really to build that prosody and that ability to read words in the context of a whole sentence or a whole text. So there's those multiple purposes there.

If you feel in a balanced literacy classroom that the only way to give them opportunities to learn how to decode words, or to read words in general, is to see shared reading in context, that's where we get caught up because it's impossible to give students the kinds of exposure to the various words and how they're structured and the sound-letter patterns if we're always looking for just the right book to show that.

Sometimes you just need to have those single words up there and read them together on cards, or on paper, or on the screen, and giving them opportunities to decode as a group and also in small groups as well. Those individual, single word reading opportunities strip away all of the complexity and allow them to focus on that skill that they're building. It might be to get double consonant blends before the vowel, those TR and SL sort of words. That might be the thing that they're struggling with because they're constantly leaving out one of those consonants while they're reading.

So, depending on what the goal is, those single words that you put up or that you read together will have that really strong purpose and it's an orthographic or a phonological purpose, and you are basically getting that ready so that when they attack words like that in their decodable books and they're practicing for fluency, they've got those tools in their toolkit. They're not having to guess the word because they know what to do when they approach a word like this. They have to sound out each consonant, then the vowel and any other consonants afterwards and then blend it back together. That's going to be hard for some because it's five sounds they have to blend into one syllable, but that's the skill that we are building.

Once they have some fluency with the basic CVC words, that's the real work that happens. Then there's long vowels and then there's multisyllabic words and suffixes and things like that. And all of that might be a potential bump in the road for some students, which is where having a structured scope and sequence allows those gaps to be filled before the gap sort of widens in students that get it versus students that don't

get it independently.

Anna Geiger: Why do you think it is that so many balanced literacy experts are afraid of encouraging us to do anything out of context? Because I know that was something I didn't want to do, and you just touched on that just now quite a bit. But why are so many teachers afraid of that?

Nathaniel Swain: I think because it's a reaction. The whole language movement was a reaction to what was seen as contextualized and potentially boring looking drills where teachers say, "This is A. Everyone, say, /ă/, /ă/, /ă/. And then this is B and say /b/, /b/, /b/." And sort of forcing them to do these drills that back in the 60s and 50s might have been quite boring, and it might have been quite repetitive, and might not have made the connections that we know now between being able to recognize sounds and also blend them and put them into words and spell those words themselves. From the last thirty years of scientific research, we've known that it's important to actually get those sounds into words and help students to both read them and spell them and have that reciprocal process.

I think whole language and balanced literacy was a push away from all of that and saying, I've seen kids learn to read without all of that so it mustn't be necessary. When Marie Clay and Ken Goodman did their work observing student reading and student errors, they made the assumption that it wasn't just sounding out that was going on, there were other cues that the students were using.

As you said, if they were reading a predictable book, they may well have been using other cues because that was maybe the only way they could have predicted what that word might be. A student can't independently read the word photosynthesis in a book about butterflies when their decoding is at a year one level. They don't know those sound-letter patterns. They don't know how to attack a multisyllabic word sound by sound. So if they've got some background knowledge and they've heard that word before, then they could accurately predict what that word might be. But is it decoding? Not necessarily.

That's where, for some students, that lack of practice on actual word attack skills doesn't set them up for success later on when the words get really hard and they've never heard them before in their oral language.

So to go back to your point, I really think it was an honest attempt by whole language and balanced literacy advocates to say, "Well, there's more to reading than just sitting there and drilling," and it doesn't feel as nice as sitting in a circle and reading a book together and making meaning. That's something really important to feel like you have

that time with your students, but in terms of getting some opportunities for sound-letter and phonics and the teaching of phonemic awareness back in there, not necessarily wrapped up in a book, is that it gives the students the number of exposures that they're going to need sometimes to make these representations.

Some students beginning school with low-level literacy or who are at risk for things like dyslexia, they might need two hundred exposures to get a particular sound-letter pattern in their head of this is a letter and it makes this sound. Two hundred exposures of that particular pattern is really hard to get if you haven't got a structured sequence that allows them to practice it over and over and over and allow mastery to occur. Because maybe they've only encountered that /b/ sound in the letter of the week back in the first week of term or something like that where that there's a whole lot of books with B in it, and they might have remembered it, but they're still making errors between B and P or E and I. You see a lot with the /ĕ/ and /ĭ/ sound where the students just can't get the difference between those two sounds.

Wrapping it up in a book sometimes is lovely, but it doesn't allow for the number of practices and number of exposures that actually builds the fluency which, ironically, they need in order to read those lovely books later down the track. And there's nothing stopping them enjoying those books now with the teacher reading it for them.

Anna Geiger: So we've talked a lot about how foundational skills teaching is going to look different. Can you talk a little bit about comprehension? I know in balanced literacy we thought we had that down because we were all about the book. I know I've talked a lot about how comprehension strategies have their place, but they should be in service of the book and not driving the book choice, right?

Nathaniel Swain: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: Can you talk a little bit about that and any other comprehension things?

Nathaniel Swain: I think so. In terms of the role of comprehension strategies, they were really one of the shining lights of the balanced literacy movement. Comprehension strategies weren't a thing in whole language. It wasn't as explicit and clear about that. But in the early 2000s, there was this growing body of research about these comprehension strategies like summarizing, finding the main idea, inferring, visualizing, and things like that. As it was in the National Reading Panel report, there was a bit of a remit for people to build a whole curriculum around that, and Fountas and Pinnell did just that, and so did Lucy Calkins, and other reading schemes made it all about choosing a comprehension strategy of the week, or you might work it on for a few weeks.

I think what was the misinterpretation of how that was implemented was that comprehension strategies as a thing in terms of cueing students into the fact that you can summarize, and that you can make inferences, and that you can visualize while you're reading. There is some benefit for that, but most of the studies don't last any longer than six weeks. So as far as the actual intervention benefits of doing conversations and cueing students into those things, there isn't much benefit after doing it once or twice a week for six weeks, and they haven't actually established it, let alone six years, of comprehensive strategies day in day out.

I think the other thing that you had mentioned there is that there was a misinterpretation of the role of comprehension strategies in building meaning, by working on a generic strategy like summarizing, and not being conscious of what the topic is and what the texts are about. Say you've got a mini lesson, as F&P like to do, and you've got everyone together and they're talking about summarizing and how it works, and you model it, and you show how it works in a particular mentor text, and then students go off and they practice summarizing in their own leveled text.

The topic potentially has no consistency between students or between the teacher and what the students are reading. Everyone could be reading about completely different things. The thing that in the balanced literacy classroom that holds it together is that strategy of summarizing, and it's based on that belief that this is what good readers do, they know how to summarize. So if we just get them summarizing, then they'll be able to do that with any book.

Unfortunately, comprehension is so tied to knowledge and to vocabulary, that you can't actually build comprehension strategies without a background knowledge about the text. You might be the best summarizer in the world, but if I give you a journal article on rheumatoid arthritis and you are not a rheumatologist, you're going to really struggle to summarize that text in any sort of fruitful or meaningful way.

It's the same for other students. If they've seen some summarizing, and then if they go off and practice summarizing with another text on a different topic, there's not going to be that continuity that you want in students when they're making meaning from text to actually build up their schemas and build up their knowledge of how different information fits together.

So the way that you would flip it and make it work in a classroom that's informed by the science of reading, is that the comprehension strategies would sit there in the background and be things that you draw upon as you model how to read text and share text together, and when you go off and you see how students are reading texts

independently or in small groups, but really the focus is what is this text about and what's the knowledge that we need in order to understand the text?

We want to be really trying to model how you build up an understanding of the whole text and how it fits together. Cueing students into key vocabulary they might not be familiar with, or linking this text with previous texts that they've looked at before, whether it's narrative or informational or otherwise. That's really the thing that's been missing in the balanced literacy classroom in that we can build knowledge at the same time that we build comprehension skills because those two things can't really be separated.

They're still going to summarize, they're still going to find the main idea, but like I said, you only need a little bit of exposure into those strategies to then start using them.

What they really need is practice making meaning from text, and not just texts that they're already familiar with, texts on topics that they're actually learning about for the first time. So that's that reading to learn piece, which I think is really missing in the balanced literacy classroom.

For me, it's about bringing the text to life and the comprehension strategies are always going to be there, but they don't have to be the focus so much. They can sit in the background and put the text and the knowledge that sits behind the text at the foreground. I think that's one of the main messages of that piece that I put together.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. Well, we could just talk forever. I could talk forever about this, but this has been wonderful. And I know you mentioned, Questioning the Author. I think Isabel Beck just put out a book, a revised book of that.

Nathaniel Swain: Yes. Yeah, 15 Years Smarter, the second edition is really, really good. I'd definitely recommend that.

Anna Geiger: Anything else? Any other books or references that you can recommend to people that are trying to get into this, especially the comprehension piece? I know Nancy Hennessy has written a book and Oakhill and Cane, I think those are both tough.

Nathaniel Swain: Yeah, they're quite dense actually.

Anna Geiger: I do recommend them, but they're hard.

Nathaniel Swain: But they are very good. I think something that really made this issue of comprehension and knowledge click for me is Natalie Wexler's, The Knowledge Gap.

Anna Geiger: Yes. Yeah.

Nathaniel Swain: You might have talked about that on your show already. I think even if you just read the first chapter, because the first chapter is basically an introduction to the entire premise of the book, and then the different chapters go into the history and how it's gotten to this situation. Once you're hooked, you sort of keep going. Even as basis of trying to question why we have this focus on comprehension strategies, I think she really does it really well.

As a therapist and as a teacher, I was prey to thinking that comprehension strategies were the focus as well. It's only in the last five years that I've started to understand the true picture of how complex comprehension is and how it's not about just drilling strategies, it's really about cueing students into the meanings behind text and helping them to uncover and unlock the meanings that are locked inside.

Obviously they need proficient decoding skills to do that, but once you've got some fluency, the focus really needs to shift on to what is this text about and what's this exciting topic? It's that knowledge piece that's really been missing for so long.

I'd also recommend, in terms of instructional routines, I think Christopher Such's book that you've talked about, it's a nice introduction. It's a really accessible way to think about how could I make this work in my classroom? How could I structure my literacy block differently? Because it's not going to look like Reader's Workshop and Writer's Workshop. It's going to have a pretty different feel.

I'd also recommend there's some great webinars out there that show examples of practice. The Reading League is a great resource in Australia. We've got a charity called Think Forward Educators, which I started a few years ago, and we've got experts coming on and talking about how they do this in their classroom, and really practical examples that teachers can use. There's freely available content on there that people can engage with.

I think the other thing is to lean on your colleagues that are doing this and just ask to go and visit. I think there's nothing like going and seeing how people are doing it in their own classroom, especially if they're a year or two down the road or more of doing it.

I know that when people came and saw my own school last year, or other schools around my part of Melbourne, seeing is believing and you're like, "Oh, I never knew I could get kids doing that. You fit so much into your sixty minutes of the literacy skills part of the block. I can't believe now you've got all this time that you can go into comprehension, you can do rich texts and you can do a whole writing lesson essentially." So seeing is believing in that way and trying to source those pieces of information to make it work for you in your classroom.

Anna Geiger: Wonderful. Well, thank you so much. You're going to make editing really easy because you just had all these great things to say. I won't have to cut anything out.

Nathaniel Swain: Fantastic.

Anna Geiger: Is there anything else you want to add before we sign off?

Nathaniel Swain: I would say that another resource that people should look into in terms of their knowledge-rich curriculum is the Core Knowledge Foundation. They've got incredible resources that build knowledge and have really rich text for you to use in your read alouds and also in your geography and history lessons. There's a fantastic set of resources there.

We've got a project in Australia where we've been combining aspects of the Core Knowledge curriculum with explicit teaching and building lessons into things like PowerPoint to make it really easy for teachers to pick it up because it is quite dense to get your head around. That project is called Read to Learn, and we're really passionate about making that available to as many people as possible. We're lucky that Core Knowledge makes their work free to adapt and use for non-commercial purposes.

It's an attempt to bring those resources alive in a way that we've tried to do at our school, and we've done all this work behind the scenes, we might as well share it with

as many teachers as possible.

The feedback we've gotten from that is that some schools that haven't done anything on science of reading have started with some of these knowledge-rich units and taught comprehension in this way, and they've suddenly got an energized group of teachers who are saying, "Why was I not teaching in this way? My kids are suddenly loving reading, and they're loving learning about these fascinating topics," and it's an entry point to seeing reading not just as an opportunity to practice skills, but as a way to open up the world to students. I think that's what's really powerful about the knowledge-rich curriculum and looking at literature in a really rich way as well.

Anna Geiger: Wonderful. I will provide links to all these things in the show notes, and thank you so much for taking time out of your day to talk to me.

Nathaniel Swain: It's my absolute pleasure, Anna. Thank you for having me.

Anna Geiger: I hope you enjoyed that conversation as much as I did. I really encourage you to head to the show notes today. There's a lot of great links there, including a link to a free primary word, reading, spelling, and learning curriculum, plus all the other things that Dr. Swain mentioned. You can find the show notes at themeasuredmom.com/episode114. Talk to you next time!