Triple R Teaching

Hello! This is Anna Geiger from The Measured Mom, and in this episode I had the privilege of interviewing Dr. Pam Snow. She's a professor of cognitive psychology in the School of Education at La Trobe University. I became familiar with Dr. Snow through some of her work as well as her blog, The Snow Report, which has very interesting articles about how to teach reading, and also quite a few clear criticisms of balanced literacy.

In our conversation today, we talk about why it might be that higher education professors are often reluctant to let go of balanced literacy. We tried to work through why that might be. I can't tell you that we came up with any big solutions, but I think that understanding the problem is the first step. And she certainly offers encouragement at the end of the episode for people who are trying to change things in higher education to reach out to her, because they've made some big changes at their university.

Normally I trim my episodes so they're not quite this long, but I really didn't want to take out any of the things we discussed. I think there are a lot of interesting things that Dr. Snow shares that are worth thinking about.

I also apologize that I did not click my proper microphone, so I'm a little fuzzy, but Dr. Snow is the main speaker in this episode. I hope you enjoy it!

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Dr. Snow!

Pam Snow: Welcome to you too, Anna! Thank you for having me.

Anna Geiger: It's such an honor to have you on the podcast. I've been reading your Snow Report for a number of years now, although it was a little hard for me at first because I was coming out of balanced literacy, and you're pretty hard on balanced literacy. You have a great place in a university to educate people about the science of reading, and so I wanted to talk to you today about why it's so hard to get this out of our higher education systems, and maybe steps that can be taken to get there.

I'd like to start by you telling us about yourself and what brought you to what you're doing now.

Pam Snow: Okay. Well, when you're my age, there's always a bit of a long story there, Anna. I don't want to take up all of our time, but it seems to me that a lot of academics in particular land in certain places for a variety of reasons, and that's certainly the case for me.

By background, I'm a speech-language pathologist. I'm also a registered psychologist. My PhD a very long time ago was in the field of acquired brain injury, which meant that I learned a lot about neuropsychology, which has stood me in good stead in various different ways in my career.

After I finished my PhD, I deliberately wanted to go wide and widen my knowledge and skills, and I worked for three years as a research fellow in a role that was essentially an adolescent mental health well-being and health promotion kind of role. It had a focus on drugs and alcohol, but really it was about adolescent mental health and well-being.

That really got me thinking about factors that drive adolescent mental health and who flourishes in adolescence. I couldn't take off my speech language pathology hat in that work that I was doing, and I was reading more and more about risk and protective factors in adolescents and thinking more and more about the role of academic achievement as a protective factor.

It was a kind of a metaphorical peeling of the onion, I suppose. Who succeeds academically, and what are the factors that contribute to academic success? Of course, that got me thinking about reading as a driver of academic success and therefore as a mental health protective factor.

Now, protective factors collude with each other as do risk factors. So one protective factor on its own is not going to do all the work that we need done for children and adolescents to promote their well-being. But we know that succeeding academically is an important protective factor, and we know that struggling academically is an important risk factor when it comes to children and adolescents' well-being.

That led me then to do research kind of metaphorically down the bottom of the cliff and

look at language in particular, but also the literacy skills of young people in the youth justice system, young people in out-of-home care, and in the child protection system.

Then more recently, I looked at young people in what we in Australia call flexible or alternative education systems. These are young people who are not managing the demands of mainstream schooling, but everybody wants them to stay connected to school in some way. I'm sure you have similar kind of settings in the United States to what we call flexible education settings.

Of course, that research that I did over a couple of decades showed me just how vulnerable children and adolescents are with respect to language and literacy. But it really got me thinking in public health terms about the role that schools can play as an intervention, as something that can, if we get it right, be a protective factor and can contribute to better trajectories, particularly for children who are coming from behind in some ways.

They might be coming from behind because they come from a very chaotic and sometimes, frankly, dysfunctional home environment. They might live in crime-prone, socioeconomically-disadvantaged communities. They might be plagued by that awful soft bigotry of low expectations that everybody has for them.

So what is it that school can do to actually alter the life trajectories of those young people? To my mind, it can't do very much if it doesn't get reading instruction right.

That's how I really became engaged with the importance of reading instruction as a public health intervention. It's something that we have to get right for all children, but particularly for those who don't have a raft of other protective factors around them, like affluent, well-educated parents who are doing a lot at home with respect to language and literacy, who can pay for tutors, and who take their kids to libraries.

As I said, risk and protective factors hang around together, and this is a protective factor that we are in a position, the grown-ups are in a position, to actually do something about.

Anna Geiger: So about what decade was it that you started getting interested in and started paying attention to what was happening with teaching reading?

Pam Snow: In the early 2000s. I've always been interested in reading, and my own children, who are now in their mid-thirties, went to primary school and elementary school in the early 1990s, and so they were exposed to...

I wasn't playing in this space then, but I remember them bringing home predictable texts. I think they were getting some reasonably-okay phonics instruction, decoding instruction, but they were bringing home predictable texts.

I can remember as a parent thinking, "This is just silly," and feeling like I was breaking the rules by actually teaching them phoneme-grapheme correspondences and teaching them how to decode through the word.

I did that really just using the logic that applied in my mind from my speech pathology and psychology background. These were skills that my kids needed, and I was going to teach them those skills.

But as a researcher, it was really in the early 2000s.

Anna Geiger: So balanced literacy kind of took hold in the United States in the late '90s, early 2000s, and whole language was a couple decades before that. Did you follow the same kind of path in Australia?

Pam Snow: Unfortunately we have. When you have a bad idea, we say, "Oh, can we have that too? Send it our way!"

We have been inclined to adopt big ideas, I think, in a very uncritical way, like the big idea of whole language, and the whole zeitgeist that that was part of really. Even going back a bit earlier to the 1970s and the social upheaval, that in many ways needed to happen and was positive and important when we think of feminism and protests about Australia and America's involvement in the war in Vietnam. There were a lot of entrenched ways of thinking that needed to be challenged.

But of course, what was happening in schools got caught up in that slipstream, including ideas about how we teach children how to read.

There were ideas that had good face appeal, and if they were correct, would've made everybody's life easier. It would be easier for teachers if whole language and balanced literacy worked. It would make a teacher's job easier. It would make policymakers' jobs easier. Everybody's life would be easier if it worked.

Unfortunately, the grown-ups managed to create and buy into a big illusion or delusion, probably more of a delusion, that this was a good thing to do.

But once you deconstruct how learning happens in schools, which we've shown can be done relatively quickly, it's very difficult then to rebuild that knowledge. Because now we've got a generation of teachers who themselves are products of whole-language, balanced-literacy classrooms, who have an implicit knowledge of how language works, but no explicit mastery of spelling or rules of grammar, so they can't articulate a rule. They can see that a sentence is not grammatically correct, but they can't articulate that this is not a sentence because it doesn't have a subject and a predicate, and a predicate has to contain a verb. That's perhaps an obvious example of the kind of knowledge.

Once that knowledge is taken out, it's not just a matter of a policymaker flicking a switch one day and saying, "Okay, as of next week, next year, we're going to teach this stuff again," because teachers can't teach what they don't know.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, that's very interesting. I hadn't really thought about that so much, that it's not just people who've been teaching for decades who don't want to change, but it's new people who don't even know the difference.

I was reading one of your posts and you were quoting someone. I don't remember exactly what it was, but how they were complaining about how learning to read with phonics was very boring, and they wanted to do something different.

Your point was, "Yeah, but you learned to read."

It's funny because I used to say that too! I remember that I loved to read, but reading class was very boring. That's probably because there wasn't really differentiation, but I did very well with reading, and spelling, and all of that, so obviously the instruction worked. And we can certainly throw in things about the art of teaching that can improve the delivery, but that's just interesting to think about.

I know Margaret Goldberg, when she talks about the teaching that she does, she's a bit younger than me, but she was in California. I learned phonics out East, but she was a whole language baby. For her, she really didn't know, like what you said, she really didn't know how English works. That really puts people in a tough position.

Why do we have so many people in colleges that are... I would guess many of them learned the phonics way, they learned how to decode using phonics, so why do we have so many of them that really jumped on balanced literacy and don't want to let go?

Pam Snow: It's such an important and interesting question. As with all big, complex questions, I don't think there's one simple answer. But I think it's partly a paradigm issue that schools and faculties of education in colleges and universities - and I'm going to make a generalization here, but I think it's a generalization that holds up - are more influenced by sociology than they are by cognitive psychology.

There have been decades of research going on in cognitive psychology, in the field of cognitive psychology, in psychology buildings that might be on the campus adjacent to the education building. This is on everybody that there hasn't been enough knowledge translation. Perhaps the cognitive psychologists have assumed that by putting this research out there in the peer-reviewed literature, that education academics would seize upon it and say, "This is really interesting and useful," but they haven't.

The education academics have been very much swimming in sociological water and seeing the world through different lenses, and I think have bought into the - I'm going to say it, but people won't necessarily like this - but bought into the fantasy of whole language and balanced literacy.

Because as I said earlier, if that were right, everybody's life would be much easier. Universities wouldn't need to have people on faculty who have a detailed knowledge of the structure of the English language linguistically. We wouldn't have to expect our students to learn that information.

Now we've got a whole lot of food chain issues here, and I can probably speak for Australia - I can't speak with any authority for America. But in Australia, it's not that difficult to get into an education degree. For a school leaver, how we accept students into university courses is basically an issue of supply and demand. It's very difficult to get into a medical degree, because there are a lot of students who want to do medicine and a smaller number of places. Not all universities offer medical degrees, so the supply and demand curve favors academically very high-achieving students. They have to satisfy other criteria as well to get into medicine, but you've got to be an

academically very strong student.

Now in Australia, you don't have to be academically very strong. There've been some changes in recent years that have meant that, in theory at least, universities need to be only accepting students from the top 30% of school leavers, but there are some workarounds to that.

So then if we are going to move away from balanced literacy, we've got to deal with the fact that we're going to be teaching some conceptually really quite complex information to students who in some cases may not have adequate levels of prior knowledge and preparation in terms of their own language skills, their own mastery of how the English writing system works.

I see this in my own work in the School of Education with students coming in as first year students. Bear in mind that in Australia, school leavers can go straight into a four-year university degree. We don't have the tiered college system that you have, that I don't completely understand.

We, and when I say we I mean Australian universities, take in students who have, in many cases, very weak language and literacy skills. That's not their fault.

I wrote a blog post about this a while ago called "This is Not a Sentence," reflecting on my frustrations in marking the first year essays of those students. Actually, one of our PhD students in the SOLAR Lab, Emina McLean, is doing her research with academics across the board, their perception of the writing skills, in particular of university students. She's not looking just in education, but in law, in social sciences, in health sciences, everything, and the data is very depressing.

So going back to your original question of why is it so difficult to shift balanced literacy, I think it's the level of disruption that truly shifting it is going to create. There are signs in Australia that our federal government is up for that level of disruption, but they may not fully appreciate what it's going to mean in terms of bringing the whole house of cards down because we're going to need academics who actually have knowledge of reading, not of literacy, of multiple literacies, of digital literacies. Which - I think, again, people won't like me saying this - in some cases, I think they're really fluffy concepts. If a child can read, then they're digitally literate. All this business about multiple literacies and viewing texts, don't get me started on us asking children to view texts.

So I think the status quo is very appealing because of the level of disruption and

upheaval that is going to be created at a number of levels in the system if we are serious about moving away from balanced literacy. As a fantasy, it's served us well. As a reading instruction approach, it served us very poorly.

Anna Geiger: That's a great quote. I'll have to remember that one.

I like what you said about how if balanced literacy worked, it would make everyone's lives easier, because it was so appealing. That's why so many of us did it.

I was recently giving a new webinar to people that follow me, and it was about using data to form small groups and give differentiated instruction. It was a lot of time and study to put that together compared to the one I gave four or five years ago about using running records to form guided reading groups. That was so simple. You just listen to them read and figure out their level, and then put them in groups and follow this lesson plan. But now we know that there's nothing to be said for text leveling like that in research and a lot of other things. But it was simple. It just was so beautifully simple, four simple steps.

With the webinar I just gave, I thought, "Oh boy, I hope I don't end up confusing people because this is deep. There are so many things to think about in terms of screening data and diagnostic data." People were up for it, but like you said, it's a challenge.

Another thing you said too about the literacies, that was interesting to hear because when I was in grad school, I thought I was learning all the right stuff. This is what I was doing. But there was a lot of that, and I never really understood it. I remember taking a class about learning disabilities, and I did not get a thing out of it. I don't know what we talked about every class, but it was very fluffy. I don't think she mentioned dyslexia at all. There was nothing practical. I don't even know what we talked about! But even as I was in it, I was thinking, "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to learn from this."

Pam Snow: Yeah, and people are paying for higher degrees that, in many cases, are not fit for purpose. In Australia, a number of education academics have really railed against the most recent federal government-auspiced review of initial teacher education, so not just reading instruction, but initial teacher education.

The basis of the protest is, "Well, is the federal government going to turn on medicine or engineering next? Are they the next ones who are going to be told that their initial university programs are not good enough?"

My answer to that is, well no, because those professions have really managed themselves very well, and they've managed the trust that has been placed in them by government, by the community. We are not having inquiries into nurse education, or medical education, or engineering education, because the community and government are not anxious about the content of those courses. But we have had, by some estimates, more than one hundred inquiries into initial teacher education in recent years, and where there's smoke, there's fire.

Anna Geiger: I was in a Facebook group earlier today, and often, if you're in a really big group and everybody's on a different page, someone had a question about... I don't remember... It was something about balanced literacy versus science of reading practices. One person chimed in to say, "This is just another pendulum swing. They did balanced literacy because it was backed by research, but now we've learned more research, and now I do this."

I wondered, does anyone in the higher education sector, do they think that balanced literacy is backed by research? Do they really believe that, or do they just not think about it?

Pam Snow: Well, as I said in a presentation that I gave recently at a conference, if there's a research study somewhere that says that balanced literacy is a preferable, optimal, superior way of teaching children how to read at scale, then I will read that study tonight. I will cancel all of my plans because I'm not aware of any studies that say that balanced literacy at scale is preferable to teaching in a structured, explicit way with a scope and sequence, and ensuring that teaching is delivered by very knowledgeable teachers.

Balanced literacy doesn't ask us to be creating a knowledgeable teaching workforce, and I think that is really pernicious for teacher professionalism, because that's the other kind of angle here, of course, that teachers are professionals so we should leave them alone. They know what's right for the children in their classroom. You've heard this kind of reasoning.

But as I also point out when I give presentations, the professions in my society, and I think in yours too, Anna, that we hold in high esteem are the ones who actually have low levels of professional autonomy.

Airline pilots don't get to make their own decisions about how they take off and how they land airplanes. They don't get to create their own safety checklists. They use

safety checklists that are provided by the airline industry, and they're expected to adhere to those safety checklists.

For medical practitioners, the example that I often use is of your local emergency department. If you arrive there with chest pain, the nurse or the doctor who is going to triage you is not going to just kind of put their finger in the air and see which way the wind's blowing. They're going to follow a care pathway that says you're going to get an ECG and you'll get some bloods done. There's a set of narrow parameters to be followed.

So if we're going to talk about professionalism, we have to have this conversation about accountability, and about professionalism not meaning choose your own adventure. It actually means that we need teachers to have some specialized knowledge and skills that other people don't have. We know that about pilots, we know that about engineers and doctors. They know stuff that we don't know. Well, I want teachers to know stuff that other people don't know. I want them to have that really, deeply specialized knowledge. Now I'm only talking about literacy, but of course it has to apply numeracy and other areas as well.

Then we have to expect that teachers apply that in the same accountable way that we ask members of other professions to apply their knowledge, because members of other professions are actually held to account. We make notifications to regulatory authorities when a nurse or a doctor makes an error, a medication error, or they behave inappropriately, or they don't order a test that should have been ordered. This can have really serious consequences for people.

But in our system at least, people aren't held to account. Teachers aren't held to account if they don't teach someone how to read. That gets explained away as being, "Well, the parents didn't read to them enough," or "Some kids don't like reading," or "We haven't found something that they like reading yet." It's never the instruction. It's always externalized, and I think that's very bad for teaching as a profession.

Anna Geiger: That is so interesting. I'd never thought about that before about how the more respected professions have criteria and all that stuff that they have to follow. That's really interesting.

I agree with you that this idea of teacher autonomy is a big barrier to teachers being willing to learn more.

I think another one too is the idea that for some people... I think I put something on my

Facebook page about, "Teaching reading is rocket science," quoting Louisa Moats.

Someone responded like, "No, it isn't. I taught my child to read."

The thing is, for plenty of kids, it doesn't seem like rocket science. But it becomes rocket science when you're trying to help kids who don't learn through balanced literacy or whole language, which as we've found is quite a large percent.

So that's maybe another barrier is for people that have an easy experience doing it, or at least they think they do, to realize there's more to it.

Pam Snow: That's part of the problem with balanced literacy, that it works, or it works well enough, for a significant proportion of students. Nancy Young's Ladder of Reading & Writing is a good way of demonstrating that.

But then my question for balanced literacy proponents is, "Well, is it okay to build an entire education system around the proclivities and advantages of maybe 60% of students?" It's not unusual to go into a school where 40% of students are needing some kind of intervention.

At a public health level, we wouldn't be accepting measles, mumps, and rubella vaccines that work for 60% of babies. We want as close to 100% coverage as we can. In fact, RtI, Response to Intervention, as you know, is really fundamentally a public health framework. It's a public health way of preventing difficulties.

Just because something works for some children, and probably the children who, going back to the early part of our conversation, have more of an aggregation of protective factors - not always, because there are children from advantaged families who struggle. But again, at a population level, there's more of an aggregation of protective factors, so they're the ones who are going to get across that metaphorical bridge in the first three years of school, and other children are not going to.

How is that okay? How have education academics who cast themselves, in many cases, as social justice warriors, how have they been able to sleep at night knowing that balanced literacy is leaving so many children behind?

Anna Geiger: Yeah, that's a really good question.

When we think about, like you said, the academics, the people who are teaching future teachers... You mentioned in one of your blog posts about how we want to teach our students to be excited about learning new things, and yet for some reason, there's a barrier to learning new things about the science of reading in many in higher education.

Then also, I don't know if the autonomy goes over to them too. In higher education, do professors get a lot of freedom in general about what they get to teach, or is it more oversight?

Pam Snow: It's a good question. There is this thing called academic freedom that does bestow a high level of autonomy on what people teach and how they teach it, except in the case of vocational courses like teaching allied health professions like physiotherapy, speech-language pathology, or you say physical therapy, medicine, where there is a professional body that's accrediting courses. That's a kind of gatekeeping mechanism, so there are accreditation requirements that have to be met.

But this is where things - I'll use that word fluffy again - can get fluffy, because there can be some box ticking in saying, "Yes, we do that. Yes, we do that, and this is where we do that," but the actual detail of how we do that...

Phonics is a good example of where there may, for argument's sake, be a requirement in accreditation documents that pre-service teachers learn about phonics instruction. Well they could learn about phonics instruction in the context of balanced literacy, being very low-touch and incidental, and probably something that's not really favored or preferred, or they could learn about phonics instruction in the context of a structured, explicit approach to reading instruction that's built on a deep knowledge of the English writing system.

Now, both of those things will earn you a tick in the box to say, "We teach about phonics," but this isn't a binary thing. It's a dimensional thing.

What we've done at La Trobe University in the last couple of years is really said, "We are not teaching balanced literacy." We've been the first mover in this space, and we've gone down the path of structured explicit teaching really privileging teacher knowledge. We've been building up the knowledge of our pre-service teachers about the nature of the English writing system, historical factors that give us the spelling conventions that

we have, obviously sentence structure and figurative language, the whole Reading Rope if you like.

BUT we will meet accreditation requirements just as much as another university that's doing full-blown balanced literacy will meet accreditation requirements. There's not been enough attention to detail. That may change, if the recommendations of this most recent review are actually implemented and become real.

For structural, political reasons, it's difficult in Australia for a federal education minister... It's probably similar to you in the United States because we've got eight states and territories, and education is predominantly managed at a state level, and we obviously don't have as many states as you do. It is difficult to pull the right levers to get things penetrating down into individual universities.

Anna Geiger: So back to universities and not wanting to learn new things - that's not how they would see it - about the science of reading. I think one issue probably is the same issue that a lot of classroom teachers have faced, that I did this wrong. Nobody wants to have to say that, and maybe for them, the stakes are higher because if they really publicly say that, that's saying that we've mistrained teachers. Do you think that's a lot of it?

Pam Snow: Absolutely. I think human nature is such that it's difficult to acknowledge when you've been on the wrong tram and been on the wrong tram for a long time. It means letting go of your affiliations. Sometimes those affiliations with colleagues are deeply personal as well as professional.

We've known for decades that one of the barriers to people giving up smoking was having to let go of friendships. In workplaces, Australia's very, very well down the track on anti-smoking policies, but it certainly used to be the case that the smokers would go outside in morning tea breaks and afternoon tea breaks, and hang out together. So if you decided to stop smoking, then you kind of were betraying your little smoking network.

I think human nature is such that it is difficult to say, "I think we got this wrong, and I'm going to now join this other group."

The debate has been fierce. I don't see any other option to that, because it matters. We're not talking about whether we like pink or purple more. We're talking about whether children learn to read and what that means for their entire life trajectories, so

the debate needs to be quite forceful. Any attempts at kind of meeting in the middle have given us balanced literacy, and the fallacy is in it's name, that when there's two opposing ideas you just meet in the middle and everything will be all right.

I think human nature is our biggest barrier in this respect. That's probably going to be the focus of my next blog post, actually, the one that's sort of writing itself in my head at the moment, because it IS hard.

BUT teachers are doing it and school leaders are doing it, and kudos to them. We need education academics to step up and have the mea culpa, I was wrong, conversation that teachers at scale are starting to have, and school leaders at scale are starting to have. If it's good enough for them, why is it not good enough for education academics?

Anna Geiger: Do you have any thoughts about how that change can happen, or have you seen a positive change among professors where they've shown an interest in learning about the science of reading and turned their backs on balanced literacy? Sometimes it feels like you're just hitting a wall.

Pam Snow: Yeah. I would say that the silence is fairly deafening in Australia when it comes to change.

La Trobe University has definitely broken away from the pack and is not teaching balanced literacy. We're teaching ABOUT balanced literacy, because we think it's really important that our students understand the broader context, and understand that reading instruction is a contested space. Also they may be going on to placements in schools where balanced literacy is the favored pedagogical approach, so they need to be prepared for that and know how to manage that potentially challenging situation.

There are another couple of universities that I won't name here, because it's not my place to name them, where I think there are positive indications. But I think the majority of Australian universities are going to try and dig in and build the fortress even higher around balanced literacy for a range of reasons because they don't want to acknowledge that the way that they have been positioning reading... In many cases, reading itself is not even a word that turns up very much in...

Anna Geiger: Yeah, interesting.

Pam Snow: It's all about literacy, and as I said earlier, multiple literacies, digital literacies. Talking about reading is somehow dry and boring, and very teacher focused.

So no, I think unless our federal government can find meaningful carrots and sticks, and it needs to be the right combination of both, then we're not going to see a lot of change, and we're going to continue to lag behind on global indicators of reading proficiency or continue to fall further behind.

Anna Geiger: Talk to me about La Trobe University. Was your university ever teaching balanced literacy?

Pam Snow: Absolutely! Absolutely. La Trobe University is a relatively new university in Australia in the sense that it was established in 1970, and it was established in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, which didn't at that stage... Unless you count Melbourne University, which is just slightly on the north of the Yarra River in Melbourne, but Melbourne University is one of our sandstone universities. It's a prestigious university.

La Trobe was created really to serve a growth corridor in the 1970s, and has a very strong social justice imperative in everything about its establishment, but it was like every other faculty of education in Australia, very much a balanced literacy school of education.

In late 2019, my colleague Tanya Serry and I were appointed to the School of Education by the then newly appointed dean, Professor Joanna Barbousas, who I really need to give a big shout-out to here, because she has been a very strong advocate of explicit teaching in general. She sees the importance of positioning the science of reading within a broader science of learning context.

Tanya and I were appointed from different positions in the university, so we were in different... In fact, we were and are still on different campuses. I work at the Bendigo Campus, which is about 170 kilometers away. What's that in miles? Maybe about 130 miles north of Melbourne. Tanya works at the Melbourne Campus.

We came across to the School of Education in January 2020, which, as you know, was a very interesting time to be doing anything in this world. We were really charged with responsibility for overhauling reading instruction in the School of Education at La Trobe, which of course was not popular with everybody.

Joanna has supported us all the way. We said we wanted to create a specific platform for our work in the school, hence the SOLAR Lab, the Science of Language and Reading Lab, which is just a virtual entity that supports our research, our teaching, our PhD supervision, and consultancies that we do with various departments of education. Then we've been fortunate more recently to appoint Dr. Nathaniel Swain, who you know, and Dr. Tessa Weadman.

So we've got a strong team that is working on a complete refresh, which we've already obviously started. We're not just working on it, we're already delivering that, in our initial teacher education programs and in our master's level programs.

Some people become teachers through a master's entry program if they have an existing degree. We have a master's of education for practicing teachers, and other professionals can do that too. That now has a language and literacy specialization.

Then we've also designed and delivered three online short courses that we've had over 10,000 participants complete in three years. Overwhelmingly it's been teachers from all around Australia. We've had some people from other nations as well, but predominantly Australian teachers, so we know there's a big appetite for this knowledge.

And teachers are angry. As you would know, there's a lot of emotion in the realization that there have been a lot of children in my career who I could have taught to read. Teachers remember names and faces; it's not just a general sense of all those kids. It's that little kid called Rebecca, or that little kid called Kai, or whoever. They still feel very strong emotions about the fact that the knowledge that they have now would've worked with those children. The feedback on our short courses has been very powerful actually.

Anna Geiger: So you're doing what a lot of universities need to do, which is switch over. But obviously, like you said, that's going to be really hard.

I know in a lot of American schools, they train their whole elementary school, or the whole staff, primary teachers maybe, with LETRS with Louisa Moats. Is something like that needed for a staff of a university? How do you even get started with people who are pushing back?

Pam Snow: Well, you can lead a horse to water, I guess, and making it drink is very

difficult.

There was some work done, a report done. I don't know whether you're familiar with the Five From Five website, but your listeners would be interested in that. Jennifer Buckingham did a desktop audit back in roughly 2018 I'm thinking, of the publicly accessible curricula for initial teacher education programs in Australia at that time. She looked at what they said about reading instruction and what the prescribed texts were, because that's often a very strong indicator of the orientation of the teaching. She looked at the qualifications of the people who are actually delivering that subject content, and sometimes, those people had no discernible background in language and linguistics at all. They could have been drama teachers, art teachers, or have physical education backgrounds.

I think this is a genuine challenge for universities. I don't think it's the one that they are happy to talk about. I think they want to position the debate around academic freedom, around, "No, we've got this. We're doing this. It's all fine. You are overstating the extent of reading difficulties. You're just kind of drumming up a moral crisis by saying that there are children who aren't being taught to read. And if there are children who aren't being taught to read, it's because schools aren't being given enough money," because we have an inequitable funding system for schools in Australia, which is probably a fair argument.

But we know that there are many schools in low socioeconomic status communities who've overhauled their instructional model and are doing amazing things, and getting amazing results without getting any extra money. So you can't just keep playing the money card and say give schools more money, because it's what schools do with the money that matters. If they just keep spending it on sets of leveled readers, low-impact teaching practices, and low-impact teacher professional learning, then they're not going to see any changes. They're going to keep blaming the parents, the children, the color of the walls, I don't know, anything but the instruction.

Anna Geiger: So do you have any advice for professors who are seeing the light, and they want to make changes, but they're on a staff with people who aren't interested? Any tips for next steps?

Pam Snow: That's a good question, Anna. Tanya and I do connect with such people from time to time. We have to meet in a dark alley, metaphorically. No one's allowed to know that they're talking to us. It's in the same way that over the years, teachers have contacted me and said, "If my principal knew I was talking to you, I'd be in so much trouble." We are happy for people to reach out to us and make contact.

This is as difficult for university academics to make change in as it is for individual teachers in schools who want to move away from balanced literacy. It is just as challenging.

Similar to the United States I would guess, a lot of academics are on fixed-term contracts, and you are vulnerable if you rock the boat. If you're a junior academic on a fixed-term contract, without tenure, without job security, then rocking the boat isn't going to be a very strategic career move, unfortunately.

Anna Geiger: So do you have any answers? What's it going to take?

Pam Snow: I hope that it doesn't take ten years for people to see that La Trobe graduates are graduates of choice, and probably staying in the workforce longer because they're going to be more satisfied with their knowledge and skills. Because that's another big problem that we have in Australia, the attrition after five years away from the teaching workforce. I think a lot of that comes back to initial teacher preparation and not having a proper toolkit around classroom management, the science of learning, the science of reading, and so forth.

What I can see is that there are more and more examples of ground-up shift occurring. That's individual schools, the teachers, and in some cases, sectors saying, "We're going to change the way we teach reading."

I just don't want it to be one school at a time. The bottom-up stuff is very powerful, and we support that as much as we possibly can. We roll up our sleeves, work with those schools, provide guidance, and advice, and so forth.

But this needs to be happening top-down. Policy makers need to be leaning in and saying, "At a population level, this is a public health issue. And yes, the research may not answer every question that we want it to answer, but there is enough research to tell us that on the basis of probabilities, we're going to get more success if we prepare our teacher workforce this way, and we're going to see better outcomes for students." It's a slow burn kind of proposition, and it really needs bipartisan political support.

Anna Geiger: Which that's hard to come by around here.

Pam Snow: It's very hard to come by. Yeah.

Anna Geiger: Well, I know that people who are listening, especially people who are professors, would really like to learn more about how things have progressed for you. Are there specific places that I can send them to?

Pam Snow: Yeah, thank you. We will have a website going live hopefully next week. You and I are talking in late September, so hopefully in early to mid-October, there will be a SOLAR Lab website, and that will continue to evolve over time. We're always happy to chat to academics who are keen to make changes, recognizing that within a university, some top-down leadership is really needed to make this real.

For example, one of the things that our dean, Joanna Barbousas has done, is worked with us on the staffing profile that's needed in the School of Education, recognizing that we can't do all of this on our own. The school or the faculty needs to have an appropriate staffing profile. It's not just a matter of saying to two people, "You fix this whole thing on your own. You do this."

We're not there yet. We're well underway. We are still a work in progress, and we fully acknowledge that. We need to continue to have some hard discussions about what we mean by the science of learning and how we can be sure that our programs have coherence and consistency. We talk about subjects where you talk about courses. We've still got work to do, and I think that will be an ongoing process of ensuring the coherence and the consistency in our messaging.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, it's a process with a lot of moving parts. I'm sure people will be really happy to know they can reach out to you to get help with some of those, because it just takes someone that's gone through it to help you, encourage you, and maybe give you a few small steps to focus on.

Pam Snow: Yeah, absolutely.

I think we need to kind of zoom out and ask ourselves how history is going to judge us on this time, and what history is going to record about what actually was the best way to teach children how to read. All children, not just the fortunate ones who are going to get there anyway by hook or by crook, by virtue of their circumstances, and their parents' resources, and so forth.

As you know, Anna, as a former balanced literacy teacher, even for those children who do get there in balanced literacy classrooms, many of them have major deficiencies in their spelling. Explicit teaching is not just about getting to efficient automaticity with decoding as quickly as possible. It's also about improving spelling and writing.

But I think history already tells us that there is a preferred method. It just happens to be harder and require us to walk up a steeper hill. We need to work out how to do that in ways that produce better outcomes. It sounds so cheesy and simple, but better outcomes for all children because, at the end of the day, this is about children and children's futures. It's not about the academics' egos, and their tribal affiliations, and their preferences. Adults who are proficient readers and writers need to be very careful about decisions that they make about other people's children.

Anna Geiger: Well, thank you very much. Thank you for the voice that you've been for so long, and continue to be, and for all the day-to-day work you're doing to train future teachers in Australia. It was such a pleasure to talk with you!

Pam Snow: Thank you, Anna! And thank you for all that YOU do. I love your podcast. I always am excited to see a new Triple R Teaching podcast episode dropping, and I hope that we get to talk again at some stage.

Anna Geiger: Thank you so much.

Thank you for listening! You can find the show notes at themeasuredmom.com/episode143. Talk to you next time!

Closing: That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, themeasuredmom.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching!