Triple R Teaching

Hello! Anna Geiger here, and I'm very excited today to kick off our series about fluency with Dr. Jan Hasbrouck!

Dr. Hasbrouck is a big name in the science of reading community because she's been a player for about fifty years. She is a researcher, educational consultant, and author. In the past, she was a reading specialist and a literacy coach, as well as a college professor, and now still after all these years, is very active in helping people understand the science of reading.

We had such a good conversation that I split this episode into two. This week we're going to meet Dr. Hasbrouck, learn more about her experience in the field of education, and learn why the concept of fluency is so complicated and how it's a lot more than just reading quickly.

I was a bit nervous as I was getting set up to welcome Dr. Hasbrouck and I chose the wrong audio for myself. So I apologize that my audio is a little muddy, but Dr. Hasbrouck comes in loud and clear.

Anna Geiger: Hello everybody! Anna Geiger here, and I am so excited to welcome Dr. Jan Hasbrouck to the podcast today! She is an educational consultant, author, and researcher, and if you're familiar with the science of reading, you've definitely seen her around. She is retired now, but still does a lot for the science of reading by giving a lot of presentations and webinars. We're going to welcome her and ask her to introduce herself. Hello, Dr. Hasbrouck!

Dr. Jan Hasbrouck: Hi, nice to be here! Yeah, and one little correction there about me being retired. I am no longer affiliated with a university, or any agency specifically like that, but I am busier than ever.

There are a lot of people, I think, in my colleagues, peer colleagues from my generation in this field, particularly in reading, who find it kind of impossible to fully retire because our mission is so important. So many teachers have eager curiousity about what are the

best practices, what does evidence say, and what is this thing called the science of reading? Speaking for myself, when I feel like I can be helpful to people answering those questions and translating this incredibly complex information into the complex world of classroom teaching, there's a mission involved in that, maybe even a moral obligation. So I can't call myself retired, certainly my kids and my family would not call me retired. Retirement has got to look a little different from what I'm doing right now!

Anna Geiger: Yeah, well it's true, I definitely appreciate hearing that. Like you said, people of your generation are very, very busy presenting at so many summits and workshops, and that's just been really helpful to the rest of us who are still trying to figure all this out.

Can you talk to us a little bit about how you got into education and transitioned into more of a professor role?

Dr. Jan Hasbrouck: Yeah, sure. I kind of always thought I would be a teacher. I dabbled around in a few other things, trying to see if teaching was a right fit for me, and it really was. And I was guided by teacher mentors along the way because it seemed like as I was moving through school, that was what I wanted to teach. When I was in elementary school, I thought for sure that I would be a fourth grade teacher, when I got to middle school, middle school biology was what I wanted to do, and it was a high school English teacher, actually, that first planted the seed about being a reading specialist.

But that really finalized when I was in my undergrad training at the University of Oregon, and I was actually very frustrated with the education I was receiving initially. I really resonate with that very vast, huge Facebook group called "The Science of Reading - What I Should Have Learned in College," because I was sitting in those courses and just kept feeling frustrated! When are they going to teach me how to teach?

By a set of just amazing life-changing happenstances, I connected with somebody else who was studying teaching, but she was in a different program at the University of Oregon where they were focusing on direct instruction. She said, "You should go over there because they're looking for students." So I did. I interviewed and they took me on, and that was during my junior year of undergrad.

So very early on I got started with understanding what explicit systematic instruction is. It's interesting for me to hear a lot of people feel like this is just a new discovery. When I was 19 years old, I was working with Zig Engelmann who taught us what explicit systematic instruction was. We were taught how to do continuous phonation and letters

for phonics. I mean, all of this stuff is at least fifty years old, but it's been confirmed. The current research has been confirming that.

So I stayed on working with that group, the direct instruction folks at the University of Oregon, and they had a Master's program that involved me doing work with them training other teachers. There was a huge multi-year research project, a federally-funded research project called Project Follow Through, that was going on. I became one of the trainers, flying around the country and working with teachers in various follow-through sites.

Then I decided I really needed to get into the real world, so I got a job as a reading specialist. I did that in two different districts for about fifteen years.

Then my boss at the time in Springfield, Oregon had this idea that it would be helpful if I could be supporting teachers. What I would now call that is a coach, a literacy coach, but he didn't have that terminology. He just said that he thought it would be good if somebody, and he was looking straight at me, could go out into the schools, and he was really focused on the other reading specialists in the district.

I took on that job, and any literacy instructional coaches listening to this can resonate with the fact that it is a rather terrifying job, especially if you have no guidance or support or job title or anything. Within a very short period of time, that terror sent me back to the University of Oregon trying to find, is there some knowledge base? Is there some skillset? How does one work with their peer colleagues to help them be the best reading teachers they can be?

That's where I connected with Gerald Tindal. He was a new graduate from the University of Minnesota, and Gerald and I worked together, and he convinced me not just to study coaching and consultation, but to stay on for a doctoral program. I did that at the University of Oregon, and ended up then at Texas A&M University.

It's been a wonderfully exciting ride since then being a practitioner and a researcher, and also someone always connected with schools. That's where I started, that's where my heart is. When I do research, it's always very practical research. "How can this be useful to teachers?," is my framework for the work that I do.

Anna Geiger: I love that, especially because I think, for a lot of teachers, myself included, in the past when we heard "researcher," we thought of someone in a coat, somewhere else, that doesn't know anything about the classroom. It's really helpful to

hear your experience that maybe many researchers were teachers already and understand how to translate it.

It's also very interesting for me to hear your background because maybe you have seen how the science of reading has really just kind of blown up in the last couple of years. I just did a ten-part blog series with people who had transitioned more from a balanced to structured approach, and for almost everybody it was around 2019, when Emily Hanford's article came out, that they had started thinking about it.

But for you, having a long career watching balanced literacy kind of take over, before we get into fluency, I would just love to hear your perspective on that a little bit and what that was like for you.

Dr. Jan Hasbrouck: It was rather horrifying for me through all the iterations.

Early on when whole language emerged as THE answer, THE way we should be teaching in classrooms, it was apparent to me from the beginning that theoretically it didn't make sense. This belief system that the acquisition of language, which is natural and supported biologically, we know a whole lot more about that now, but we've always known that. But then they rested their theory on that, well, since learning to read is intrinsically aligned with language, if we support the acquisition of reading and language in the same way we support the acquisition of language, just in this natural rich environment, making sure kids are exposed to all this stuff. I was quite certain that that was not going to be successful for all kids.

And we now know so much more! We know more about how different groups of children do acquire the skills of reading and writing in different ways, and for different reasons. We know that there is a percentage of children, we don't know the number exactly because we're always talking about human beings, but it could be up to 50%, maybe a little bit more than 50%, of kids who do learn to read and write relatively easily. You give them some kind of guidance, some kind of support, and voila, they become readers and writers!

But my entire career has been focused on the children NOT in that group, the kids who struggle. And I watched the implementation of first whole language and then balanced literacy, for the children for whom reading and writing is a painstaking acquisition.

I was just so frustrated that those very popular ways of teaching became the primary way that teachers were being prepared in universities, and knowing that if there wasn't

quality research to support that, that it was ultimately going to fail our children.

In my career now of close to fify years, I've seen these things come and go, and I had a conversation just this week with some people about, is the science of reading going to be a fad? Just like whole language came and went, and balanced literacy came?

I don't think it is going to be a fad because of social media. That's the difference.

Back in the whole language days, we didn't have internet, and we didn't have social media. Balanced literacy has emerged during this period, but we now have teachers who can get online, ask the questions, and find podcasts like you are doing, and so many others like the science of reading facebook group and The Reading League, and it's much, much easier to sort through the noise and find the truth.

We are also seeing people, some of the leaders of that alternative movement, if you want to call it that, being persuaded to at least adopt some of the language of the science of reading.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, thank you for sharing that. That's so interesting to hear your perspective after your years in education.

I'm going to switch over to fluency now, and I'm going to start by reading the definition from the book that you wrote with Dr. Deb Glaser. This is probably the most complete definition I've read, so we'll start with that, and then we'll talk about, even with this nice clean definition, why the concept of fluency is kind of hard to wrap our heads around.

You wrote that, "Fluency is reasonably accurate reading, at an appropriate rate, with suitable expression, that leads to accurate and deep comprehension and motivation to read."

Yours may be the only definition I've found that actually incorporates comprehension inside of it, which is wonderful.

Can you talk to us about why it's still so hard to grasp the concept of fluency and how to build it?

Dr. Jan Hasbrouck: I think it is hard to grasp because it seems so simple when you first talk about it, and it's often talked about and discussed incorrectly by conflating speed with fluency.

In fact, in the wonderful National Reading Panel, in their chapter on fluency, a couple of times they talk about fluency by first describing it as reading quickly. And I know, because I know some of the folks who served on that panel and wrote those pieces, that if they had a chance to go back and do it again, they would NOT write about fluency how means reading quickly. Of course, they didn't stop there, they didn't say it's only reading quickly, but they put speed first.

They put "fluency is reading quickly," and that does get conflated with this much more complex construct called fluency because when we are listening to a fluent reader, they are reading quickly, usually. Although not super fast, because if they're truly reading for comprehension, which is really THE reason we read, you can read too fast, but that diminishes comprehension. Most of us, or a lot of us, worry about or are concerned about the kids who read too slowly.

Rate is only one piece of this complex construct. In fact, when Deb and I wrote our first version of the book, several times in the book we referred to fluency as a skill. A lot of people will still have that first version of the book, we don't have a second edition, but we were recently given the opportunity to do some updates, and we wanted to reel that back a little bit. It's not a skill that you teach.

I love Hollis Scarborough's infographic of the Reading Rope, which is ubiquitous these days, it's everywhere. I don't do workshops without showing Scarborough's Rope. But I think if we look at the end of that rope, that tightly woven part where all those strands come together, she refers to that as fluent, skillful reading.

It's an outcome of all of those component pieces, acquired to the level of automaticity. Automaticity is really the combination of accuracy and reading at an appropriate rate.

We should always talk about accuracy first, as Deb and I do in our definition. Accuracy is the foundation of fluency. You cannot get to fluency through rate. Rate isn't going to do it. You have to have accuracy.

In our definition we use reasonable because it doesn't have to be perfect, but it has to be reasonable to allow comprehension, and the rate has to be appropriate. Sometimes it is appropriate to read more slowly when we're really reading complex dense information, or it's high stakes information so we should slow down, and other times it's appropriate to read more quickly. But the ability to adjust that, maintain your accuracy and read at an appropriate rate, is automaticity.

That outcome, that tightly woven rope, is indicative of automaticity, of all of those strands in Scarborough's Rope. You have automaticity in language, receptive and expressive language. You have automaticity in the underlying components of word recognition and identification, phoneme awareness and phonics, and you've moved toward orthographically mapped word-sight recognition.

As a new novice learner acquires each of those individual skills and components, and then, through practice and instruction, becomes increasingly automatic at that, that's the outcome of fluency.

So I think it's the fact that some of us have mistakenly referred to it as a skill, that's kind of conflating and confusing. The fact that it is really a multifaceted aspect of reading, and it's an outcome, and the way that people have described it and talked about it and thought about it as speed, as reading quickly. It is not reading quickly.

Anna Geiger: Can you explain its role in the overall task of reading?

Dr. Jan Hasbrouck: Well in the overall task, it's very easy to say that fluency is necessary for comprehension, that's the role in just a few words.

The purpose of fluency, the reason we care about fluency, the reason we work so hard to help our students become fluent, is because of comprehension.

The National Reading Panel and most other people get that exactly right about fluency, that fluency is necessary, but not sufficient, for comprehension. I hear that all the time from my colleagues, especially those who specialize in working with children who are English learners, or who struggle with language acquisition in some way. They often say to me that, "I've got kids who are fluent, but they don't comprehend."

And I say, "Of course! You need both aspects of Scarborough's Rope, you need both

component pieces."

I agree with everyone and I want everybody to understand that fluency is necessary, but not sufficient. So those people who are saying that their English learners are very fluent readers, but they are really word callers because they don't comprehend. Yes, because they have acquired automaticity in word reading, and that's fabulous because that will help them open that door to comprehension, but we need to develop their language so that they can interweave language with their good word-reading skill.

And then of course we know there are a lot of children who have the opposite. They have superb language, but struggle with automatic word recognition. We've got plenty of work to do!

But to your question, the purpose of fluency is comprehension. And then we, as you noted in our definition, Deb Glaser and I, stuck motivation on there. I stand behind that, and Deb does too. That's not something we've changed in the update of our book. It's not based on good rigorous science as much as it is our, I don't know, 127 years of clinical practice. We have yet to meet a reader who struggles with fluency who's also a highly motivated reader. There is a connection between fluency and motivation. And of course, just like comprehension, becoming fluent doesn't guarantee motivation, at all. But if a reader struggles with reading fluently, motivation is not going to be available to them, it's not going to be part of their reading experience.

Anna Geiger: Right.

Dr. Jan Hasbrouck: Yeah, that doesn't work.

Anna Geiger: And we know that if they're not motivated to read, they won't keep reading, and that's where the vocabulary and the background knowledge keeps building.

A lot of people talk about fluency now, but I know that wasn't always the case. In your career, have you seen when fluency became more of a hot topic, and what's your perspective on that?

Dr. Jan Hasbrouck: I would say fluency became a hot topic in the year 2000. Just like we can point to the explosion and interest in the science of reading to Emily Hanford's

work, it was the National Reading Panel that came out with their report with the five main chapters, and one of them was fluency. At the beginning of that chapter, they did say something, they quoted, I think, Dick Allington's work, but it said something like fluency is necessary for skillful reading, but it is neglected in the classroom. I'm paraphrasing, but something like that. They definitely used the word neglected.

Well that certainly changed after that point! I think that, along with the relatively new, they were not brand new, they'd been around for about fifteen years at that point, but those curriculum-based measures of oral reading fluency, right around that time, those measures became more known to the general population. People confused the measures of oral reading fluency with this outcome of reading fluency that was so important, and we started teaching kids to read fast to get their oral reading fluency scores up without really understanding what was going on.

But you're right, before the year 2000, you didn't see a whole lot of discussion around fluency.

Anna Geiger: I hope you enjoyed part one of my conversation with Dr. Hasbrouck. Next week, we're going to talk more about ORF, Oral Reading Fluency, what we can learn from the results of a words correct per minute assessment, and what we can't learn, and what to do after we get those results. In the show notes for today's episode, you will get links to the book that Dr. Hasbrouck has written, as well as a big collection of YouTube presentations I could find that she's given for various groups. You can find those show notes at themeasuredmom.com/episode97. Talk to you next time!