



How to improve literacy outcomes for secondary students - with Jeanne Schopf

Reach All Readers Podcast #250

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Jeannie!

Jeanne Schopf: Thank you. Pleasure to be here today talking to you

Anna Geiger: So you and I are friends in real life. We've been able to be at a lot of conferences together, and we both serve with the Wisconsin Reading League. So I've gotten to talk to you many times about the science of reading in person, but now we get to talk about the book that you've edited and written for, *Reading Is Not Optional*.

Before we do that, though, can you talk to us about your history in education and what you're doing now?

Jeanne Schopf: All right. Thank you so much. So I was a public school educator for 33 and a half years. I have a bachelor's degree for grades one through eight, and then I got my master's in reading in 1992. Shortly after that, I got my National Board Certification in early adolescent English, and then I became certified as a dyslexia interventionist through CERI.

In those 33 years, I taught sixth grade, fifth grade, third grade, seventh grade English language arts, and I was a middle school reading interventionist, district interventionist, and middle school coach. So it was definitely a long journey in education.

I loved the work that I did, but like many of us who have been teaching for that length of time, we were born-and-raised whole language teachers. I didn't even know what balanced literacy was, actually, because I was whole language, and then I transitioned right into the workshop model. Lucy Calkins, Ralph Fletcher, Nancie Atwell, Linda Rief—I mean, you name them, I read them all.

I didn't really come into what we know today as the science of reading until I was teaching third grade and our school became a Reading First school. They were part of the grant process, but because I came in at the tail end of the grant, that's when things shifted.

I got just a small dosage of what we know as the science of reading, and it was really just hinged around comprehension instruction. I was not introduced to the Simple View of Reading or Scarborough's Reading Rope. I started hearing talk around digraphs and diphthongs, and I wasn't sure what that meant.

Then, because I had a master's in reading, a reading job opened up in the middle school, and I thought, "Hey, why not? I like change. Let's go up to the middle school, use my master's degree, and teach reading."

I taught reading for that first year, and then the special ed director asked me if I wanted to get trained in an Orton-Gillingham program so I could serve the kids in the middle school with dyslexia. I said yes.

I didn't even bat an eyelash because I was already looking into it because my youngest daughter was struggling with reading. She was very loquacious, had a strong vocabulary and strong oral language,

and I thought, “She’s going to be my reader,” because my oldest was born prematurely, so school was not really easy for her.

Come to find out, my younger daughter had dyslexia, and I didn’t know it because I wasn’t trained in what dyslexia is. I was just trained to say, “Keep reading, keep reading, keep reading,” which I did.

My children, I always say, were my greatest teachers. I went to a lot of trainings and read a lot, but my own two daughters really taught me more about teaching and instruction because they weren’t your typical students.

Anna Geiger: So when you started learning about the science of reading, was that about the time your younger daughter was struggling in school, or what was the timeline for that?

Jeanne Schopf: When I was teaching third grade, she was my student. I just wanted the opportunity to be her teacher, and I said, “I’d love to have her be my student.”

I think anybody who speaks to Reading First will say that it was good professional development and good materials, but implementation was not its strength. So when I came into third grade, I had no idea what DIBELS was. I didn’t know what it measured. I didn’t know why we were using it. I’m the teacher, and I didn’t understand.

I’ll never forget the moment where I was called to talk about a student who was consistently showing below benchmark on DIBELS, and it was my own daughter.

I just didn’t understand, and because I was so tethered to my belief system, I didn’t lean into the new information. I actually resisted quite a bit. That’s human nature. When you don’t understand, you resist, resist, resist. So even though it was my own daughter, I resisted.

Now, for her, she had some really good teachers. She was really bright, so she compensated really well. She went through middle school, and it wasn’t until she was a freshman in high school that the wheels fell off, and we got the neuropsych evaluation, and she was diagnosed with dyslexia.

That’s when I kind of came into the science of reading, but it really wasn’t until five years later, at the end of Reading First, when I moved into the middle school and took my first course on structured literacy and how children learn to read.

I was just like all of us who feel like we were shielded from this information for so long, and we failed so many kids. I even failed my own children because I didn’t know. I was always one of those professionals who was constantly reading. I always had a professional book in my hand and was constantly growing, but I had never encountered the Simple View of Reading or Scarborough’s Reading Rope or what we know today as the science of reading until middle school.

Anna Geiger: Do you remember any of the light bulb moments that you had and, and how those changed how you approached reading difficulties with your students?

Jeanne Schopf: You know, the first light bulb moment was when I was in the middle school, and I had so many kids that couldn’t access grade-level text. And I remember my middle school leaders wanted to bring in Lucy Calkins’ *Units of Study*, and we’re all like, “Nope.”

And around that time, Common Core came out, and I moved from sixth-grade reading to seventh-grade English language arts. And when Common Core came out, we had a great organization here that

gave us a really good, structured way to organize our lessons. And really, Common Core became my guidepost on how I taught.

Anna Geiger: So a big part of your light bulb moment was just moving into the middle school and seeing how many students were behind.

Let's talk about your book. Can you talk about the name of it, where that came from, and why you wrote it?

Jeanne Schopf: *It's Reading Isn't Optional: Fulfilling the Promise of Literacy for Secondary Students.*

This really, Anna, is my own lived experience as a teacher working in the middle school, transforming our systems in the middle school, bringing in evidence-aligned assessments, having a schedule to do intervention, and bringing in evidence-based instruction and data meetings.

A lot of the students that I worked with in middle school had been left behind for a very long time. They were given residency in intervention, and they've had it every year. They were oppositional, defiant, angry, and unmotivated. And it really wasn't any of those things. It's just that no one ever really taught them to read.

And so when I had conversations with the kids about, "This is the reading brain. This is how a brain learns to read. This is how we have to teach the brain, and it's not your fault," I had middle school kids break down in tears because of the shame they had felt for so long.

And then working with my neurodiverse daughters going through middle and high school and really not getting structured instruction for them to help them really grow into their potential is really what came about with this book, as far as everything that's in it is really my own lived experience.

Anna Geiger: Okay, so the focus of your book is helping students learn to read who are in grades 6–12. There was a myth that you broke down in one of the chapters that you wrote: If students haven't learned to read before reaching secondary school, it's too late. Why is this myth so pervasive, and why is it not true? Why is it a myth?

Jeanne Schopf: It really starts with the messaging around foundational skills and the misconception that so many teachers have in the 6–12 space about foundational reading, due to the fact that they are trained in content or they're trained in literature. They're not really trained in literacy, and they have very little understanding of the cognitive science of reading.

"I'm an expert in English. I'm an expert in science. I'm an expert in math. These students can't read, and I really don't know what to do about it. So they must not have been able to learn it when they were supposed to learn it, and I'm just going to continue to teach the way I've always done because I don't know."

Anna Geiger: here's a lot to be said for that they must not have been able to learn it, so there's not really anything I can do about it now.

Jeanne Schopf: Right. I have to cover my content. I have to teach my standards.

Because remember, when we go into education, we have some choices. We can choose to be elementary teachers. We can choose to be a phy ed teacher. We can choose to be a science or an English or a social studies teacher.

And generally speaking, people who choose to teach in the 6–12 space, they love their content, and it came easy to them. When a student struggles with accessing that grade-level text, they don't really know the instructional moves to make it accessible to them.

So then they just kind of believe, well, they're never going to get it, and what I have to do is I have to lower my expectations. I have to give them an easier text that they can get access to because they're not going to be able to learn to read.

So why is this false? Well, it's false because we know that all children can become reasonably successful readers with good instruction, no matter what the age, right? That's why there are adult learning centers. The reading brain can learn to read. It will probably, due to its lack of neuroplasticity, always will be challenged with reading with fluency, but it will be able to read the words reasonably well and spell them reasonably well.

We know the research is really clear. Ninety-five percent of our kids can read reasonably well with good instruction, good structured literacy instruction that teaches them to read. And also, Reid Lyon spoke to this in one of his texts, *Children of the Code*, that in all reality, in the secondary space, of the 95% of the kids that are struggling, 75% of them just have unfinished learning. They were the instructional casualties. They didn't get good instruction at the time that they needed it.

And I saw that happen, Anna, when I was working with my kids in the middle school that had IEPs. I had the luxury of teaching them every day for 45 minutes of structured literacy, and I had kids where I thought, "That child shouldn't be on an IEP. That child was under-instructed."

Anna Geiger: Because they could learn so well with you.

Jeanne Schopf: They picked it up so fast! And they moved so quickly! Their growth rate was so high. And I'm like, "This is not a reading difference. This is instructional casualty. This child just needed good instruction every day."

Anna Geiger: Yeah. So of course, we know that the sooner the intervention is provided, the better. Because, as you noted, the brains are more plastic when kids are young, which is why early intervention is so important. But for a variety of reasons, whether because the teacher is still teaching in a balanced literacy way or there just aren't the systems and support for all students' needs to be met, we do have instructional casualties.

But we don't want to let these kids fall through the cracks or just keep doing business as usual. We can help them. The challenge, of course, is figuring out when to provide intervention.

I do want to say that I think a big strength of your book is, not only does it talk about specific things to do in different areas like comprehension and vocabulary, but it's couched in systems work. The book is written by many different authors, and some of the authors write about MTSS and student-focused coaching and just how you can support teachers in doing this because this can't be just ... I mean, you can try, but if a social studies teacher just wants to help the kids who are struggling, they probably aren't going to get very far, right? Unless they have a system that is set up to help. So I appreciate that the book walks through that.

I think someone listening might wonder, "Yeah, I know I've got kids in my sixth-grade social studies class that have really struggled to read this text, but when are they supposed to get intervention? They have a full schedule." Can you talk to that a little bit?

Jeanne Schopf: To your point, I was one of those teachers in my classroom working really hard using evidence-aligned instruction. I was working really, really hard with my intervention kids. But the key to that, and that's why this book is designed that way, is the foundation of literacy transformation begins with leadership.

Everything rises and falls on leadership, and our leaders are the greatest lever of change because they're the ones that drive the schedule. They're the ones that, generally speaking, have access to the assessment tools and do the ordering. They're the ones that have the ability to decide what curriculum gets bought or not bought, and what gets de-implemented. They're the ones that really are the drivers of this.

What do we need? We need a leader that really understands that literacy is a moral imperative. We have to design our systems so we ensure that children learn to read because, as Stephanie Stollar said in a previous talk, we know too much to fail so many.

What does it take really to look at our schedule? Yes, we have our core standards, and I was one of those. I had my seventh-grade standards, and I loved teaching seventh-grade ELA, reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

But we also have to look at where can we block some time in our elective block where everybody has a WIN time that's part of the electives. Because in the upper grades we do have our requirements for phy ed. You've got to have phy ed. But then we have electives, band, choir, shop, or whatever the electives are.

But the reality is we have to create space for literacy, and we need leaders to do that because you can't intervene out of this in your core content area.

I had the privilege of having an intervention block five days a week for 45 minutes every day.

Anna Geiger: What were the kids doing who weren't in intervention during that 45-minute block?

Jeanne Schopf: Well, it was like a WIN time, right? We have at least 70% of our kids that are not at or above benchmark according to our screening data. So we have a great percentage of kids that are not reading at grade level, so a great percentage of them need that WIN time, that intervention block. There are just too many kids.

For the kids that are not going to that intervention block or that WIN time, they could be going to an enrichment block, an acceleration, because we are either going to accelerate them, or I love the quote from Adam Grant: "School either is going to fuel or flatten growth." So we're either going to flatten their growth or we're going to fuel them.

We have to figure out how we're going to fuel their growth, the kids who are at or above, and then how are we going to grow the kids that have to close those gaps and that have that unfinished learning.

They're all going somewhere, and one thing that we did in our school is we got rid of the quintessential study hall, which has the effect size of not even, like, .10.

Anna Geiger: Oh, interesting.

Jeanne Schopf: Right. So there was no such thing as study hall anymore because they didn't use it anyway, so we just put them into a learning situation.

Anna Geiger: Interesting. So what about, like, let's say you have a social studies teacher. What are they doing during that 45-minute block? Are they getting a group that they're working with?

Jeanne Schopf: It depends on the schedule.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Jeanne Schopf: It depends on the size of the school. It depends on the schedule. It depends on what their roles and responsibilities are. Oftentimes in our school, our content area teachers were blocked just like everybody else, and so this intervention block, it was staggered throughout the day. So sixth graders had their WIN time, seventh graders had their WIN time, eighth graders had their WIN time. The intervention was blocked throughout the day.

Anna Geiger: I appreciate you talking about how this is so important, that the school is working together because it can feel, as a teacher, heavy on your heart when you see kids in your class really struggling. It's good to know that you really have to get people on board to solve this in a school, which is why your book would be such an excellent book study, including your admin, right? Your principal needs to be there. It's not just for the teachers because they can't make all this happen on their own.

Jeanne Schopf: No. No. And they're the ones leading it. I was privileged to work with a leader who really knew his data. Like, he knew the kids, he knew the data, and he knew that we had to do something different because our data was representing that a lot of our kids were struggling. He created the conditions, the system, to allow all of us to be more successful.

Anna Geiger: So a classroom teacher has heard, "Every teacher's a reading teacher," right? They've heard people say that, and they've thought, "Well, that sounds nice, but," as you said, "I've got to teach my standards." And they do have to keep doing that, but there are things they can keep in mind as they're teaching a group of diverse learners who may be receiving intervention at a different time of the day.

Jeanne Schopf: Well, one thing that we really tried to do in the work that we did in our building is help everybody understand that this is not just on the shoulders of the ELA department, which sometimes we felt like it was on our shoulders. And it's like, no, everybody has standards around vocabulary. Everyone has standards around writing. Whether you're a teacher in the wood shop, to the teacher in art, to the teacher in social studies, we have these universal core standards.

And really, everybody understanding that we are all responsible for literacy is first and foremost.

The second thing is, again, going back to that belief system that all children can be reasonably successful readers and help them see that we have to reach all children.

That means I have to be reflective on my practice as far as I'm responsible. I'm not responsible for teaching foundational skills, but I am responsible for my students learning the content, which means they have to have access to the information. I have to support them processing the content, and I have to support them in how they demonstrate their understanding and rethinking that.

I worked with too many people and too many teachers in my own building and beyond that just don't really understand what comprehension is. 'd have people come to me, "My kids can't comprehend. My kids can't comprehend." And then I'm like, "Well, why don't they comprehend?" And then breaking that down.

Anna Geiger: What kind of supports would they provide in the different areas, like comprehension?

Jeanne Schopf: Well, good instruction is good instruction, whether you are doing explicit instruction in kindergarten and accessing the code or you're using good instruction in the upper grades. That's what I try to get people to understand, good explicit instruction, right?

It's less of, "Here's the assignment. Read these two chapters. There's a test at the end." Or "Here's an audiobook. You can listen to it. Here's your study guide for the test tomorrow." It's more of that where the responsibility and the onus is on the student to navigate, right?

And we have to know that our role as a teacher is to teach. I was a coach. I was an athlete, and I find it fascinating when we compare the role of instruction in the classroom as it relates to the role of instruction on a baseball diamond, right?

When we want kids on the diamond to throw the ball efficiently and effectively, we break those skills down to how you hold the ball, your grip on it, how you toss it. We break down all those actions to the smallest points in order to put the whole action together to make it effective and efficient, right? Why can't we do that in the classroom?

So what that means is, yes, I have to have really good planning, meaning I have to know what is my critical content. Not what the text that's in the textbook says. What is my critical content, right? How am I going to measure that content? It begins and ends with what do my students have to know and be able to do at the end of this unit?

And my performance task was always addressed in some way of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. And that performance task was designed with cognitive rigor. It wasn't a multiple-choice test, okay? In the end, I wanted them to generalize, not just spit out declarative information.

It really starts with that, and then going into that backwards design model and breaking all the critical segments down and then teaching each one through the design and delivery of my instruction.

Anna Geiger: I think we see that a lot in middle school and upper grades. A teacher is "teaching something they love" without really breaking it down for students. It's more, "Here it is. Read it. Answer these questions." We think that's teaching, but it's not. It's more just presenting.

Jeanne Schopf: It's presenting, assigning, and grading.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. And so much of this starts with just being a better teacher overall, which will help everyone. And the book does give a lot of good, specific things teachers can do when it comes to foundational skills, comprehension, vocabulary, and writing.

Can you talk about maybe a favorite part of the book? What do you think teachers are going to find most valuable?

Jeanne Schopf: That first section of the book is so critical because after leadership is understanding MTSS... In my experience, most middle and high school systems, they don't have a system in place where middle school kids are screened three times a year and then we have assessment protocols that help us identify where's the unfinished learning. It's having that schedule in place to address that unfinished learning and that data to know who my kids are.

Because, in all reality, if I see kids that can't access the grade-level text that I'm teaching like I've always taught, well, these kids didn't do their assignment. They're unmotivated. They're disengaged. Their parents aren't helping them. It's kind of all on the student rather than, no, how well I teach equals how well they learn, right? Anita Archer.

It's really looking at, I've got to do a better job teaching it because I didn't teach it well enough. And that's why that other section in this chapter is so important on the coaching.

Anna Geiger: Can you talk about that a little bit?

Jeanne Schopf: Yeah, because Daryl Michel wrote this chapter, and he's done a lot of work around student-centered coaching. Most of us know the research of the percentage of teachers that go to a training and integrate that into their classroom immediately is like 5%. I mean, I was probably one of those five percenters, but it's very, very, very low.

And the only way we can really get this information we're giving teachers shifting into practice is those coaches that are doing that instructional coaching alongside extra modeling, helping look at the data, helping look at your performance assessment and how it's designed. And if your kids didn't get it, asking those probing, reflecting questions about what I could... It's kind of going into the film room with you, just like an athlete would do, right?

So as Daryl speaks to, it doesn't have to be somebody who's designated with a title. It can be somebody who infiltrates that role of mentoring and coaching teachers because if we don't have that happen, we can give all the PD in the world, it's just not going to always integrate and land and improve instruction.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. So can you tell me who you think the ideal audience for your book is and what you hope they'll take away from it?

Jeanne Schopf: think anybody can pick up this book, whether you are an elementary teacher, a middle school teacher, or a high school teacher, and get something out of it. Our target audience is geared toward that 6–12 space.

The reason being is in this work, and I know, Anna, you must hear it too when people say, "Oh, the science of reading, it's gotten out there everywhere." They're teaching junior English or they're teaching eighth-grade social studies, and they're saying, "Is there a book for me?"

Anna Geiger: Yes, I've heard this a lot.

Jeanne Schopf: "Is there a book for me?" And I'm like, "Actually, there isn't."

Now, what there is for them are these great IES practice guides, and there are other people who have written in the secondary space. But what I know that teachers need is more than just the instructional practices. They have to have a deep understanding of the cognitive science, the Simple View of Reading, Scarborough's Reading Rope, the implementation science, good instruction, which Laura Stewart brings to light, right?

Because we have to know the why behind the what do I do. Why am I giving explicit vocabulary instruction? Well, let's talk about the four-part processing model and how our brain learns, you know?

And so yes, it's designed for that 6–12 space, but it really is about transformation.

And I was excited that it got highly rated to be on the list for NCTQ, which means it can be in universities.

Anna Geiger: Oh, wonderful!

Jeanne Schopf: So for a young adult going into education, a professor can have this as their adolescent literacy selection.

Because what I have found, right, is okay, so we can teach the pedagogy, and we can teach explicit routines, but again, I find so many teachers coming into this work, they don't know what MTSS is. They don't know the role of coaching. They don't even know what the science of reading is.

Anna Geiger: Well, I'm going to close out with just a quick overview of the chapters.

As we're recording this, the book is not actually in our hands yet, but I received an earlier digital copy for review, and so I'm going to go back to this file on my computer and just talk through the chapters really briefly for anyone who's listening so you know what's waiting for you. We hope that you'll go ahead and preorder it or buy it. By the time this interview comes out, it might be ready to be in your hands. It'll be really close.

You start with a foreword by Louisa Moats, which is wonderful, about adolescents who are unable to read. Then chapter one, you talk about the myths about barriers to strong literacy outcomes in secondary schools. Chapter two is implementation science with Laura Stewart. Chapter three is leadership and why that's so important in this work by Terrie Noland. Chapter four is about MTSS with Kim St. Martin. Chapter five is about student-focused coaching with Daryl Michel. And then chapter six is Jan Hasbrouck talking about fluency. Chapter seven, construction of meaning with Mitchell Brookins, and chapter eight, more about comprehension with Nancy Hennessy and Julia Salamone. And then your chapter, chapter nine, about vocabulary. Chapter 10, scaffolding text for all students by Jennifer Thronsen. Chapter 11, writing instruction with Leslie Laud. You also wrote chapter 12 about oral language. And then finally, chapter 13, helping adolescent newcomer English learners with Antonio Fierro and Gabriela Bell Jiménez, if I said that right.

What I also really appreciate about the book is that even though it's written by all these different authors, I felt like it flowed very naturally. I highly recommend it, and I thank you so much for working with others to put this together. I'm very excited for you to get this out into the world.

Jeanne Schopf: Yes, and also for any of your listeners, The Reading League National is doing this for the summer for their summer book study.

Anna Geiger: Oh, good.

Jeanne Schopf: And if you are not involved with your chapter, this is an invite to get involved with your state chapter, and be a part of this amazing book study. All the authors are going to be involved, and you can have that great experience this summer of learning in a community to really change the lives of children because that's why we go into education.

Anna Geiger: Well, thank you so much, Jeannie.

Jeanne Schopf: Thank you.