A special education teacher's journey from balanced to structured literacy - with Melanie Brethour

Triple R Teaching Podcast #157

Hello, Anna Geiger here from Reach All Readers, and today I was able to talk with Melanie Brethour. She is a special education teacher who became interested in the science of reading when she learned that her son had dyslexia. That sent her down a path of learning what it would take to help him learn to read, and she hasn't looked back.

I absolutely love the advocacy work she does for the science of reading and all the ways that she educates teachers through her Instagram account and through her Twitter account. She's made it her mission to help not only the teachers at her school, but teachers everywhere learn more about the science of reading. I know you're going to enjoy our conversation.

Anna Geiger:

Welcome, Melanie!

Melanie Brethour:

Hi, I'm very happy to be here!

Anna Geiger:

Thank you so much for joining me. On this podcast we always love to talk to people who have found their way out of balanced literacy and now understand and apply the science of reading, and you're definitely one of those people. Can you tell us a little bit about your background as a teacher and then what led you into the science of reading?

Melanie Brethour:

Well, I'm going to start right away. It's really because of my son Benjamin that led me down this, I would say, rabbit hole of science of reading obsession, because I was taught balanced literacy really through osmosis. Even my curriculum is based on a very balanced literacy approach and I've been pretty much in special education, I would say, for the majority of my career. I've taught many different behavioral classrooms, also students with learning disabilities, but I always taught them based on what I was taught in my university program.

Then when my son was starting kindergarten, that's when I started to realize, as a teacher, that he was having difficulty. I went into just finding out why was he having so much difficulty remembering his letter names and sounds. That was really a red flag for me.

Here where I live in Montreal Quebec, we learn two languages, English and French, so I actually thought, "Well, it's because he's learning a second language. It's difficult. He's in French immersion. We're Anglophones, and we speak English at home." I really just brushed it off as he's having difficulty maybe because of the second language.

Then it just continued to get more difficult. We went to see a speech and language pathologist to find out a little bit about his difficulties. They couldn't diagnose dyslexia though until he was the age of nine and a half, so we went through ALL those difficulties.

He was getting support. However, because everybody here was taught the same way I was, we were really reinforcing those balanced literacy strategies of guessing, the three-cueing. I was reinforcing that at home, memorizing words. So he really didn't get effective intervention, I would say, until I started learning about what was effective.

I had no clue! I really thought balanced literacy, guided reading, was the best thing for him, and I was doing that at home. So he really is my reason why I went down this journey.

Anna Geiger:

What was it that led you away from balanced literacy? Was it a particular book or a podcast or an article? How did you see there's another way?

Melanie Brethour:

Well when he was diagnosed with dyslexia, I felt I knew enough about dyslexia as a special education teacher, but it turns out I didn't. Just like I didn't really know how to teach reading. I remember watching a dyslexia 101 webinar. I was obsessed with watching TED talks and I was like, "I need to learn as much as I can about dyslexia." That's when I first heard about Orton-Gillingham, Wilson, Barton, and evidence-based interventions and the science of reading.

It was like this aha moment of, "Wow, I never heard of any of this!" And I'm a teacher that loves professional development, I love learning, and I'm open to trying new things. It's just mind-boggling to me that I had never heard of any of this in my circle.

It seems to be there are a lot of teachers all over the world that were not taught any of these effective strategies or these things about how we learn to read. That was really the aha moment.

That's when I also started learning about the science of reading. I joined the Facebook group with Donna a few years ago, and that's kind of when it led me down the rabbit hole. I took courses, PD, everything and anything that I could get my hands on, to not only help my son, but then obviously transform my teaching.

Anna Geiger:

So were you your son's tutor or did you get special help for him?

Melanie Brethour:

This was during the pandemic, which was a little challenging. I looked at Orton-Gillingham because I wanted him to get effective intervention during that time. He was also just diagnosed and we were home, so I actually took the Orton-Gillingham associate level training and I asked them if he could be my student. Now they don't usually do that, but they made an exception for me because it was during the pandemic and getting another student to work with in-person was impossible, and so I was doing Orton-Gillingham lessons with him. I did my practicum with my son Benjamin.

Then we actually decided to find a school for him. He finally, unfortunately only starting in grade five, was able to get the intervention and teachers who are knowledgeable about how to help students with dyslexia. It's like a special school.

He unfortunately did not get the intervention early on, and that's why I'm very passionate about spreading awareness to parents about "Don't wait for a diagnosis, don't wait and see." I even said that when I taught grade 1 at one point and I would say, "Don't worry, just wait a little bit. There's going to be this light bulb that goes off."

I said all those things and now I tell teachers, "When you know better, you do better." That's my motto I live by. But I did all those things; I just didn't know.

Anna Geiger:

So how is he doing now?

Melanie Brethour:

You know, we know that it's a continuum from mild, moderate, to severe, he's definitely in the severe category. He really struggles still. He has improved so much, don't get me wrong, but as a thirteen year old, he's definitely not at level. He's gone for speech and other tutoring and he has me as well, but I don't always recommend that, to be your child's teacher. It's definitely very different from working with students at school to your child at home. But during that time, during the pandemic, it was definitely something. But he has made huge gains.

Another piece to all this is the mental health piece that I see at home. That's another something that I want to even talk about more on my social media because I don't think people realize the mental toll it takes, and I've seen that firsthand with my son.

So he's doing well. The school that he's at is fantastic. I actually cried at the IEP meeting, but in happy tears, because for the first time it was like finally, you're speaking the same language I'm talking. I was just so happy. His confidence is building.

I often think that if he did get the intervention early on, would he be as severe? He would definitely be in the severe category, I believe, but would he be maybe mild or moderate? That's always in the back of my mind. I have this guilt, he's my baby, and you don't want to see your child struggle.

Anna Geiger:

Of course.

Melanie Brethour:

Especially as a teacher, seeing your child struggle and not wanting to go to school, it really breaks your heart. I wear two hats.

Anna Geiger:

This reminds me of speaking with Lindsay Kemeny. You probably heard her talk before about her story with her son with dyslexia too, and she talked about the same thing with the mental health issue, and I think he was only in second grade when it was diagnosed as being very severe.

That's just more to your point about getting help early. It's not going to hurt to look into something, and it can help to hopefully prevent some of this later on. But I'm so glad he's in a place where he is getting support now.

When you look at the teaching that you've done as a special educator, talk to me about how that's morphed. Can you tell us how you used to support students and how you do now, now that you understand?

Melanie Brethour:

Well, we're not really big on programs here for some reason. I don't understand that, and I feel like now that I know what evidence-based programs are, I'm the first to be like, "Why am I reinventing the wheel? Everything is there."

Before I would beg, borrow, and steal to make a lesson, but it was really based on guided reading, with the three-cueing and the memorization. I remember covering up the word and just showing the first letter and saying to the student, "Look at the picture." I cannot believe that I didn't question how this was a reading strategy. It's mind-boggling; I just I cannot believe that.

So I did all that. I did everything that you're not supposed to do.

After learning about the body of research called the science of reading and just looking at what are the things that you should be letting go of and what should you be doing, I started making changes. And I'm still learning. I always tell everybody I'm constantly learning. I don't consider myself an expert because the research is always changing. There might be something I do in my classroom this year and I might change next year, but it's definitely a structured literacy approach.

I've used a few different programs, just trying things out that are evidence-based and explicit. I used to not even teach the rules. I would just be like, "This is the /k/ sound, this is the letter C. English is a crazy language."

I didn't know the rules. I think I was 42 when I first learned the Cat/Kite Rule, and my students know these rules now. They know the floss rule. There's no assuming that they will learn through osmosis, it's explicitly teaching them.

I work with students who are struggling, and I'm really hoping with my school and my school board that the Tier 1 is going to change because I realize as an interventionist, we call it a resource teacher, I cannot see the majority of the students in the classroom. It's been like that for the past few years, and we said there's a problem and we need to make some changes.

There is change happening, which I'm really happy about, at my school. We're doing a book study with Lindsey Kemeny.

Anna Geiger:

Oh, good.

Melanie Brethour:

Just a lot of little things like that, so I'm really happy change is coming.

Anna Geiger:

So you're saying that there are a lot more kids that need to see you than you can possibly meet?

Melanie Brethour:

Yes, yes. I started even using universal screeners. I was doing the running records and we were using PM benchmarks, which was very much like-

Anna Geiger:

Fountas and Pinnell.

Melanie Brethour:

Yes, exactly, and I felt like I was a guru for that. I had it all planned out.

We switched to universal screeners last year, Acadience, and it's been a game changer. That's one thing that I highly recommend. Then using diagnostics, and it was a lot of reds, a LOT of red students, at well below benchmark. It was a little concerning.

I think over time teachers are realizing too, the classroom teachers, the core Tier 1 teachers, are realizing that things have to change as well. I think it's not saying you're doing something wrong, it's just that like me, we weren't taught this. I know that for my colleagues and many teachers around the world, it's the same thing. The university programs were not teaching us effectively, unfortunately.

Anna Geiger:

When I look back to it for myself, I think a lot of it is a confusion about comprehension and where that begins. For me, a lot of the things I was doing, like guess the covered word, use the picture to help, three-cueing, the context, it was all because I thought that I was, by doing that, focusing on meaning, which is of course the goal of reading, or comprehension is the goal of reading.

But to understand that we have to develop these foundational skills first was something I was, I don't know, I think it was drilled into my head that you never practice skills in isolation, that skills work was drilling and that was wrong.

Were there any, would you say, light bulb moments as you started learning about this where things suddenly made sense?

Melanie Brethour:

Well, I think the memorization of words. I remember with my son, I would be constantly drilling these and even sight words, which I learned that that's not the right definition either. It's a word that you automatically recognize. But I would be drilling him with these cards that I used with my students, and he had it in class, and I would get frustrated because I'm like, "You just saw this word."

I didn't know as much about dyslexia. I think that's a huge piece. Now I know obviously, but then I'd be like how many repetitions does a student need? It's not just memorizing the word; it's that process of orthographic mapping. So having him do it using, I like the heart word method, that's something that I changed as well with my students and my son.

I just felt, "Okay, he's actually getting it now. He's able to not only write it, but read it."

I always said that "what" was like our nemesis word. He would say /w/ /ă/ /t/ or something like that every time. It was just like that was kind of the aha moment of the sounding out, even those irregular words that can be very challenging for our students that are struggling.

That was a method that I noticed even with him, that he was having more success. I always call him my little guinea pig. He would be doing all those things.

But there are so many aha moments. I've really transformed I think everything pretty much, but I'm still learning. I'm not a classroom teacher, I work with students who are struggling, and there are so many. But as I said, change is happening.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, I remember when I was first teaching first grade. It wasn't my first year of teaching, but my first year in the primary grades, and I really didn't know much about teaching reading. I thought, "Well, I can figure this out." Before that I taught a group of three grades at once, so now this first year of first grade was just one grade, so I thought, "I can figure out how to teach reading."

I didn't do very well that year, to be honest. I remember I had one little girl who had spent two years in kindergarten and didn't know all her letters, and I spent three months teaching her to read the word, "the." It took her that long to remember the word, but I remember what I was doing. I was just writing it on a paper, having her try to remember it. It was total memorization.

There was nothing about, "This is TH, and in this word TH says /th/. This is E, and this word E says /ŭ/," Not says, but you know what I mean. I didn't understand the importance of breaking words down and explaining the parts, which is what you're talking about too, so that kids can actually connect the sounds to the letters in their brain and map those words.

What about reading material? Were you using leveled books with your intervention students? How has that changed?

Melanie Brethour:

I was. And then you look at The Purple Challenge, that video really resonated with me. It was, again, an aha moment. I had all those leveled books. I had them nicely laid out. I even had which students and which level would they be at. That is something that I've obviously changed.

I'm not saying leveled readers are... I've seen that where people say, "I'm throwing out my leveled readers!" They're still books. It's just that for emergent readers and our students who are struggling, they're not going to have learned that concept yet, especially in kindergarten and grade one, so we're kind of encouraging them, especially if we ARE encouraging them, to guess based on the pictures. I don't use leveled readers. I really use decodables. My principal has been great, and I was able to purchase some decodables. I use UFLI as well, so I use a lot of those passages for my students who are where I know, based on the scope and sequence.

Anna Geiger:

Do you have any ideas for teachers who are trying to help other teachers that they teach with? Because I think you're maybe in sort of a similar setting since your school is still a balanced literacy school. Do you have things that you can share, or ways that can get them interested in the science of reading? For you, it was your son, but many people don't have that situation and they feel that what they're doing is working.

Melanie Brethour:

I feel like if you tell teachers, "This is what you have to do," then there's resistance.

I came in, and they know my story with my son and all that, and I actually had the data from our universal screener. I spoke to my principal, and I said, "Can I share this with the whole staff and say, we have a problem here. We need to do something differently." That's when I kind of did a little spiel about using evidence-based intervention programs.

It was saying, "We have a problem. Now what are we going to do? Most of our students cannot read proficiently."

I've done some things, like I'm doing a book study, as I said. Not everybody's doing it, but it was open, and I have a lot of interested people.

You did that incredible thing with the science of reading podcasts, your 500 podcasts that you listened to and you organized by topic. So I did Popcorn and Podcasts where I just picked some of the go-to ones that I thought my staff would like, and I left them in the staff room and they just took a bag of popcorn with the QR code.

It's just little things like that. I personally feel you can't be pushing it down anybody's throat. I think there's a bit more resistance.

Now I have a few teachers at my school that see the results. They have that data now to say, "Look, they're still struggling, but they've made gains. We're closing the gaps."

Anna Geiger:

So data talks, but of course you need the right data collection tool. Is your whole school using Acadience now or how is that working?

Melanie Brethour:

So I am the resource teacher. I'm the main one, and I have my partners. Last year I pretty much said, "We're going to use universal screeners, Acadience, and I want to try this out."

We screened the whole school last year. We did it three times with them, and I trained my partners at the time. This year too, we're doing the same thing. I do the universal screening with my two partners. We'll be doing that again in January for the second time, and then we share the data with the school, the staff, the teachers.

I find it's just a game changer. I used to use, as I said, the PM benchmarks, and I mean, it just takes forever to do. It's really not convenient in terms of time.

That's what we do at our school, and I have a very supportive principal and VP where I just say, "Can I do this?" And they're like, "Sure."

Anna Geiger:

That's great.

Melanie Brethour:

I don't know if every school's like that, but yeah.

Anna Geiger:

So if I think back to myself as a balanced lieracy teacher, if someone had come in and said, "We're going to do this assessment that we're going to share it with you," I don't think I would've had any clue what it was even about or that it was valuable. Did you have to get some buy-in from teachers to realize why this data mattered?

Melanie Brethour:

Well, that's it. When I did the initial assessment, I always sent a little email saying, "We're going to be trying something new this year," and I gave them the reason why, but I feel like sometimes teachers don't even have time to read a full email.

That's when I met with the whole staff and shared the data for the whole school. I didn't even share the data with everybody per class. I said, "This is the issue with our school," because I didn't want anybody saying it was only certain teachers. I mean, there were lots of reds everywhere though, so I don't think it really mattered.

Then I sat down with each teacher and I gave them a color coded report to say, "These are the students that are in red, well below benchmark. These are the students in blue, green, and yellow."

Then that's how I made the intervention groups, pretty much the reds. Yellows too, we are trying to- But still, this is very new process for our school and even for me.

But I just find it so important. I explained that there's longitudinal studies to say that if a student in grade one is not reaching the benchmark by the end of grade one, they only have a 10% chance of catching up. I shared that with my staff. It's such a sad statistic. I'm sure many who are listening to that have seen those studies where if they don't get that early intervention, they're going to be struggling for the rest of their academic careers.

So that was a huge piece that I shared with the staff and I said we have the data. It's almost like a crystal ball to say, "These are the students that if we don't help them, they're going to struggle for the rest of their lives, unfortunately."

I think that's the huge thing about universal screeners that's so different from before where it was just, "Okay, they're struggling," but now we know that they have that longitudinal data.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, that's great. I have not heard of someone sharing that with their staff.

I think that's so great, because like you said, so many of us just think, "Well, they'll just catch up." That is a thing you hear, "Everybody catches up by third grade", which is ridiculous, and it still goes around in Facebook groups! And so to give them that information from the research to show them how important it is that you take care of this now.

But of course, as an intervention teacher, you can't do it all. As you said, it's a balanced literacy school, are the teachers able to make some changes in their instruction to help as well?

Melanie Brethour:

They have, and I even had some of them get on board with UFLI, which is great.

There are many programs that I've tried out. I think a structured literacy approach is fantastic too, but it's a lot of professional development in the sense that you need to be able to, like an Orton-Gillingham lesson, make your own lesson. It's a lot of PD on your part, and I find time is really difficult for teachers sometimes.

UFLI was one that I felt could be something that teachers could try out and see. I said, "This is not your whole curriculum. This is not your whole program. It's just one small piece," especially for our younger grades. I have a few teachers who are doing it.

I just always share things with them like instead of memorizing words, I know we love the cards, but there has been some change. I'm very fortunate that they know that I'm really passionately obsessed about this. But again, I don't force it down anybody's throat. As I said, I just find it doesn't work. But there have been changes. I've had one teacher adopt another program and she's had such success with that.

Anna Geiger:

What's she using?

Melanie Brethour:

She's using Really Great Reading. She's a classroom teacher, and she actually has the weakest students. It's just phenomenal the gains that these kids are making with an evidence-based program.

It is just little things like that. I said, "Let's try using decodables, don't use the leveled readers, especially for an emergent reader." I do try and send emails and things like that with small tips. I do a newsletter each month where I share them.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah. Wow.

Melanie Brethour:

Yeah, I use those to share all these little tidbits and things like that.

Anna Geiger:

Well, I know that people who are listening are very interested in the things that you're sharing that they want to help other teachers at their school. I know a great place they can go is Twitter or X which was a surprise to me. I learned about that from Kate Wynn when I was interviewing her. I was like, "Well, where can I go to get more information?"

She said, "Oh, go to Twitter."

"Really?"

I'd never used Twitter at all, but it is! There's a great subgroup of people that talk a lot about the science of reading and share things like that statistic that you shared and helpful research articles. Really all you have to do is just go on there and find somebody like you or me and follow a lot of the same people they're following. You will start curating, every time you log in you will get useful information. I think that's surprisingly a good place to start getting the types of things that you're sharing.

Then of course, there's Instagram and other social media things, but you talked about how you took courses and read things. What were some things that really were helpful to you?

Melanie Brethour:

Well I was very fortunate that when I joined the Facebook group Science of Reading-What I Should Have Learned in College, that they didn't have nearly as many members now. Sometimes I find it a little overwhelming with all the information, but I still think it's one of my go-tos in sense. Join that group. They're fantastic.

They gave me a scholarship to take Top 10 Tools which I was so thankful for. I found that was fantastic.

My Orton-Gillingham training has been incredible as well. That was a great background in terms of just learning about dyslexia and structured literacy and all that.

On my bucket list is LETRS, but unfortunately LETRS is not available in Canada.

Anna Geiger:

Oh, it's not?

Melanie Brethour:

No, I keep on bugging them! My fellow Canadian SOR people want that as well. That's on my bucket list.

I've done Really Great Reading's training as well, which is completely free. I try and share as many free resources as I can.

I've been fortunate because my school board does give some money each year for professional development that you can pretty much choose what to use it on, which is fantastic. I've gone to many fantastic conferences, like The Reading League. I went this past October which was fantastic.

Anna Geiger:

I was there too! I'm sorry I didn't see you there!

Melanie Brethour:

Oh my gosh! I'm going again. I cannot wait. I'm going again.

Anna Geiger:

I hope to go again too. Yes, definitely.

Melanie Brethour:

Yeah, and that's the thing you were saying about social media. I never thought social media was such a positive thing in the sense of connecting, like I would never be sitting here with you. It's just incredible, the community out there. I just find this to be fantastic.

I agree about Twitter. Kathryn Garforth, she was the one that told me about Twitter as well, and I go, really? She goes, "Yeah, you have to join." I was already on it, but I'm like, really? I was shocked, but I find that it's fantastic, and if anybody like you makes a tweet, I get so excited!

Anna Geiger:

I don't do it very much, but I'm working on it.

Well it was so nice to talk to you, and I know your Instagram is @soarwithdyslexia. Is that what you are on Instagram?

Melanie Brethour:

Yes, so I played with the words of the Science of Reading - SOR - with Dyslexia, and it's just bringing those two together. If somebody just thinks it's only about dyslexia, it's not. It's about helping ALL students in your classroom, and parents too. I get a lot of parents who hopefully follow as well.

Anna Geiger:

Great! I'll be sure to share that in the show notes as well as your X account, and anything else that you let me know you want me to share. Thank you so much for sharing your story with us.

Melanie Brethour:

Well, thank you so much for having me. It was truly an honor speaking with you.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you.

Thank you so much for listening. You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode157. 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, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.