How to cure the balanced literacy hangover - with Dr. Brent Conway & Jen Hogan

Triple R Teaching Podcast #202

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website.

In today's episode, I welcome back Dr. Brent Conway, and he joins me today with Jen Hogan. Dr. Conway is the superintendent and Jen Hogan is the curriculum coordinator, and together we talk about their white paper called *Early Literacy and the Balanced Literacy Hangover*.

Today we discuss lingering beliefs and practices that, as Jen and Brent would say, have become like a bad hangover that's tough to shake. I encourage you to refer to the show notes so you can check out their white paper. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome Brent and Jen!

Brent Conway:

How are you? Thanks for having us!

Anna Geiger:

I'm glad to have you guys here.

Jen Hogan:

We're excited to be here!

Anna Geiger:

We're going to talk today about the white paper you recently wrote about moving away from balanced literacy, the balanced literacy hangover.

Before we do that, could I have each of you introduce yourself and just give a brief introduction about your history in education and also what led you toward the science of reading.

Brent Conway:

Sure. I'm Brent Conway, and I'm the assistant superintendent in Pentucket Regional School District in Massachusetts. It's three small towns up in the northeast corner, West Newbury, Merrimac, and Groveland, Massachusetts. It's my seventh year here as the assistant superintendent.

Prior to that, I was a principal in Melrose, Massachusetts for 11 years, and I had been a classroom teacher before that and a special ed coordinator.

I'm approaching almost over 25 years in education, and I've done a lot of work around evidence-based literacy practices, being data-informed, and a lot of the systems behind it.

As a principal, I was able to lead a school to become a national blue ribbon school for closing achievement gaps, particularly around literacy.

I've been doing a lot of work around the country, and locally in Massachusetts on, and I'm really fortunate to work alongside Jen.

Anna Geiger:

Were you in the balanced literacy space at one time and shifted over, or have you been pretty aware of this all along?

Brent Conway:

Yeah, I guess if I was in the balanced literacy space, I don't know that I knew it.

As a classroom teacher, I distinctly remember, in 1999, being trained in Writer's Workshop. I definitely remember that and remember thinking to myself, "Okay, this is kind of good, but when do we actually teach kids?"

I remember that from over 20 years ago, but as a principal, the work really was evidence-based literacy practices from the get-go, so this has been a long time.

That was 2007 when I started a lot of that work, and before we had the phrase "the science of reading," we just said it was teaching all kids to read.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, so you've been in this for a long time.

How about you, Jen?

Jen Hogan:

Right now I am the Literacy and Humanities Curriculum Coordinator at the elementary level here in Pentucket, working with Brent. Our elementary schools are K-6, so I cover all of those grade levels, which is a huge range. Before I joined the team in Pentucket, this is my fourth year here, I was a reading specialist in the city.

For me, the science of reading kind of takes that lens of a matter of equity. The population that I was working with when I was in the city was quite different than the population here in Pentucket.

I feel like I can relate to many teachers because when I went to school, I came out with a reading specialist degree in what we would now call the science of reading, but I didn't learn any of that when I was in school. I came out and I really had to kind of teach myself as I was in the classroom.

I have to credit Emily Hanford with really opening my eyes to the research that was out there that I otherwise may or may not have stumbled upon. Once I heard it, I could never go back.

I started working with Brent at the state level, so I work closely with the Department of Education in Massachusetts to help spread the science of reading and research-based instructional practices statewide, and to really help them refine some of that communication and working with the state to kind of help everybody get on board, if you will.

I'm still learning even now, so it's definitely an ongoing process, but something that is fairly new to me and not something that I learned in school, which I think many people can relate with and are frustrated by as well.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, it's a similar story for me. I think I'm definitely Brent's era; we're right about the same number of years in education, even though I'm not in the classroom right now. That was me too. It was around 2019 or 2020 when someone sent me an Emily Hanford article, and that was not something I welcomed at the time. But once you get into it and you realize, like you said, you really can't go back.

This learning can go very quickly, because that's just a few years ago, but as you said, we're always learning.

The two of you have worked together to put together a white paper. Brent, could you give us the title of that white paper and let us know why you wrote it?

Brent Conway:

Yeah, so the title is *Early Literacy and the Balanced Literacy Hangover*.

Stepping back a minute, Pentucket as a school district, seven years ago when I came here as the assistant superintendent, had been doing Readers and Writers Workshops, balanced literacy practices, assessments were leveled assessments, and so forth, and all the decisions around that.

One of my charges upon coming here with the new superintendent as well, Dr. Justin Bartholomew, was to change and put systems in place for us to teach literacy and so forth. That was the experience I had had.

In doing so, having those conversations, making some of those early changes…

Then along the way in 2021, we implemented Wit & Wisdom to sort of build off of some of the other things that we were doing, which is a complex text literacy curriculum. Jen joined us at that same time.

Some of the observations we saw early on, despite us doing *multiple* years of professional development, and using data, and having these conversations with people around what evidence-based instruction was…

People had made a lot of gains, but…

We were watching teachers teach with a knowledge building, or a complex text, curriculum, but they were asking for our feedback because they were frustrated and having a really hard time. We were watching them basically still trying to do it using some of the balanced literacy practices and sort of the mindset and thoughts that they had.

Despite lots of professional development and really good intentions on behalf of teachers, they were still really struggling.

It was after an observation where Jen and I both said, "This is like a hangover. This is going to linger for a long time."

To get people away from these practices, we really have to think about how do we undo some of that learning and have them understand that you don't do this in addition to… You don't take this and try to shoehorn it into the way you used to do things.

You really do have to rethink your approach to teaching literacy and leverage systems that could get put in place so that we can make the best use of the resources we have. Resources are time, support, personnel, and so forth, all of those things. That's really where that came from.

Anna Geiger:

So it's really helping people get rid of these big understandings they have about how reading works.

That's very interesting, because I remember when I first became aware of the science of reading, I joined the big Facebook group and someone had put a picture of all these professional books they had. A lot of them were Fountas and Pinnell books. They said, "Which ones should I keep? Which ones should I get rid of?"

Everybody's was like, "Toss all the Fountas and Pinnell!"

I remember at the time thinking, "Well, that's not a good idea. I'm sure there's good stuff in their books still."

But now, I personally would not recommend any of their books anymore because I know their foundational beliefs are what everything rests on, and that's confusing.

But that's what I think people are trying to do. They're still wrestling with these foundational understandings that they have.

Jen, do you have anything else to share about why you wrote the paper?

Jen Hogan:

Well, I think there's a widespread effort right now to really bring people on board to the science of reading. What I find really astounding is when we talk to other districts, whether it be leaders or teachers, and when I'm working at the state level… When we go to these larger conferences with larger platforms and we meet with other leaders of literacy, everybody's experience is unique, but we're also sharing those same experiences. Every district that's adopting new curricula is facing these same hurdles. They have the same stories and teachers share the same frustration.

I think part of the motivation behind writing this white paper was that we've been in this now for years, we're in our fourth year with Wit & Wisdom, but like Brent said, for years beyond that, they've been doing this work. I think we can all learn from each other's experiences and really trying to put that out there to help others make this in a way that will allow it to be successful. That's really what we want in the end is for this to be successful for the kids.

It can be really easy, when it's not done the right way, to watch it collapse, whether that be from a lack of teacher buy-in or lack of student outcomes. There are a lot of reasons and a lot of levers that we can get into when we talk about the paper.

But I think for me, it's about really wanting to see this movement, if you will, be successful. It is based on research and it should be, but you really have to go about it the right way. It's very nuanced because it's very personal for a lot of teachers and for a lot of kids, too.

Brent Conway:

I'll add, and like Jen said, when we hear from other people, I think a lot of people think of it as a few shifts they can make. "If we just implement this curriculum," or, "All right, we didn't really teach phonics before, so now we'll teach phonics, and now we're *doing* the science of reading."

I think certainly what we knew, but also what we've seen, is that it's much more than any one of those individual things. It's an entire systematic approach and a lot of it rests in 20+ years of learning that people had to unwind from.

And it wasn't just phonics, right? It wasn't just a new curriculum. If anyone thinks that's what is going to solve their problems, I think they're in for a rough ride, and I think Jen alluded to it. They're going to see maybe it doesn't work the way everyone promised it would work, because there's just a lot more to it.

But you do have to get started somewhere, and anticipating what might be the hurdles and the barriers and the stumbling blocks is part of that sort of that hangover.

People, I think, can learn from our experiences of what we've seen, and people can apply it to their context to help them think more structurally and systematically about how do we really make this something that is effective for all.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, going back to what Jen said, I think that is the real risk right now, right? We're finally seeing changes, all these laws are being passed and people are implementing things, but when they don't see the results...

I was talking to Maria Murray recently and she was saying how a school here and a school down the road could be implementing the same program, but have completely different results because of many different things, which we'll talk about today.

I think initially when people are learning about the science of reading, I think it's really good to explain that these are the small changes you can make, but we *have* to get beyond that, which is to your point.

We'll start with reading comprehension because you and I, Brent, talked about that a long time ago. We'll put a link in the show notes to our previous conversation.

In your white paper, you say reading comprehension can't actually be taught, and that it's an outcome. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Then we can also talk about what it means to give instruction that boosts comprehension.

Brent Conway:

Yeah, and it's funny when you say it can't actually be taught. That could easily be taken out of context. It *can* be taught, right? We can teach it, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's learned. Probably we can teach anything, but it doesn't necessarily mean that it's learned. I wouldn't want to take that phrase out of context.

Reading comprehension is the outcome.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, sure.

Brent Conway:

This is actually one of the key tenants that we saw of this hangover effect of "Well, now we're going to teach phonics, but we're still going to continue to teach reading comprehension the way we did because we know it works that way."

When you look at the rope, and this is hard to have a conversation without actually using the visual of the rope, which is probably on the wall behind me here. The middle of the rope, Scarborough's Rope is what I'm referencing, is maybe one of the most underappreciated components of the rope.

It literally talks about how the word reading components, which would be done through phonological instruction and programs, is meant to be taught with increasing automaticity. Versus all the language strands would be taught with increasing strategic use or strategy.

How you teach something to be automatic, and how it's learned, is really different from how you would teach, and how someone would learn, something to be strategic.

Automaticity comes from practice. For some kids, it's not a lot of practice; it comes rather easily. For others, it takes lots of practice.

But then what was happening was, in a lot of the balanced literacy programs that were out there when we were teaching comprehension, it was being taught as if that could be done with automaticity. They were treating it with the same level of automaticity, and if we just practice those strategies enough and frequently enough... For kids who weren't getting it, we could just practice more and more and more on random texts and at random times, and we can fill it in here and there, and then they'll learn to comprehend.

Yet what we know, especially from Hugh Catts, he does some great research and papers, and Tim Shanahan as well, and I'm sure Jen will talk more about how she actually uses some of their work with teachers, is that there are so many other factors.

When you look at the language and when you're trying to learn something with increasing strategic purposes, well, strategies require you to make choices. You have to strategically use and make choices. That's not done with automaticity. There are too many other factors that come into play.

It's not that we shouldn't teach strategies. To be abundantly clear, there's so much research that states there are several reading strategies that when kids learn how to do them, they are incredibly effective and they help, but there are other factors that still contribute to when you use what type of strategy.

That was something that people really needed to learn differently, and we still struggle with it. We still have teachers saying, “Can we practice some strategies?”

We just have to have conversations about what is the intent of practicing the strategy? What is it that you think the outcome is going to be?

Typically, it's more that students do actually already know the strategy they want practice, what they need is more understanding of syntax, sentence structure, and language. That's the barrier of how to navigate that so that they can choose and apply the strategy that's most appropriate and helpful for them.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you for highlighting that part of the rope, because honestly that is something I've never really given much thought to, and that makes so much sense. We need practice for the basic word reading skills but we need to teach strategy for using those.

When I look back to my own teaching of comprehension, I thought it was talking about the text. That was pretty much it. I didn't understand the complexity of syntax and all those things, and that's what we're trying to get across.

I think sometimes with the talk about, and I know you clarified this, but people are hearing sometimes that you don't actually teach comprehension. They might just think that we just read with them and then all this stuff will come together. You pointed out that's not true either.

But I think people might have a hard time visualizing what this looks like in practice. Jen, could you talk about how we marry strategies and knowledge and all that?

Jen Hogan:

Well, I think coming out of the balanced literacy space, we have this idea that comprehension is this kind of global entity that if we just teach it freestanding then they'll be able to transfer it and apply it to any text.

Really, when you think back to that time, and I think about myself too, it was a source of frustration for me. I remember working as an interventionist, and I'd work with my group and all week we'd practice sequencing. We'd sequence the text all week and we'd really dig in, and then I'd give them some type of cold assessment at the end and none of them would do very well. It was so frustrating to kind of rinse and repeat that cycle over and over again.

I think that lack of transference is really for me the conversation that I'm often having with teachers. Just because they're able to apply whatever strategy you're trying to teach with a text doesn't mean they're going to be able to apply it to texts they've never seen before or texts that are complex. The research tells us that, but also just your time as an educator and as a professional in practice tells you that too.

We all have those kids where you're like, "We just spent all week on this or all month on this! Why isn't this making sense?" And so it's an easier conversation to have with teachers to talk about what types of things can we do to build that idea of transference. What types of things do we see carry over from text to text to text?

One of those ways is by using texts that are conceptually coherent. We use our curricula, but we also try to expand the volume of reading that kids are doing. There's a lot of research around that cohesion of topic and of that knowledge building, of course, so we talk about that.

Then again, also breaking down those pieces of the rope that fall under that language umbrella. When you're coming to me and saying that the student is struggling with comprehension, what are we actually talking about here? Are we talking about a weakness in vocabulary and we need to really assess and then work with them on their vocabulary? Are we talking about weakness in understanding language? Could we do a language screener with our speech and language pathologists? Are we looking at the complexity of the text and realizing that the syntax or the cohesion of the text is above what they're able to comprehend and understand?

I think it's about really working with teachers and breaking down for them the different pieces of what are we really talking about when we're talking about comprehension. When students are struggling, what skill under that umbrella of language comprehension are we actually talking about?

That doesn't even get to maybe they really are disfluent, and they're just having a hard time understanding because of a fluency issue.

When I'm working with teachers, we try to unpack some of that, and that helps them understand what they can do to really leverage that understanding of text across text, transferring from text to text and topic to topic, if that makes sense.

Anna Geiger:

Let's say you have a second grade teacher who's doing a story with their class. Maybe they have a reading basil and they're required to do these stories. How might you coach them to teach that story in a structured literacy way versus a balanced literacy way? How is it going to look different?

Jen Hogan:

From a balanced literacy perspective, when we're looking at a text, we really are kind of siloing to that text.

When I was using a second grade text, so maybe a level like P, Q, or R text, we'd really dive into just that text, and we'd practice whatever skill I felt like could go with that text. Maybe it was main idea and details, so I'd really unpack that text for main idea and details within the context of that book and that book only. Then the kids would be able to understand it, and they'd be able to read it, but rarely would I take it outside of the silo of whatever that text was saying.

If I'm using that text in the future, I would be looking for what are those high-level vocabulary words that we can use and then unpack to really stretch and take it further. Do we have high-utility words, maybe some Tier 2, mid-level words that we can unpack for what the morphology of the word is to really extend student understanding of that vocabulary concept? Could we unpack affixes and prefixes and suffixes? Could we build a conceptual map of that word with other related words to the topic? Could I provide students with other texts about that same topic to really extend their knowledge base and extend their learning that way?

Then instead of focusing on that main idea and details… We do want to make sure that students have a general understanding of what the text is saying. Having that discussion once is probably sufficient for most kids after reading the text. Then could I find, are there complex sentences that contain different clauses or pronouns that may or may not be cohesive as we're reading the text? I could I lay that out for students and help them unpack some of that complex language within the text to teach them those structures.

Then I could have students possibly even write about it afterwards. Could we do some of those wonderful sentence expansion activities the ones that are laid out in *The Writing Revolution*. I love "Because, But, So," we talk about that all the time. Could we extend it that way too?

It's really about taking whatever that text is and finding and extending it beyond the scope of that text. Then unpacking vocabulary, language, and then writing about it could really help push the students a little bit further.

Anna Geiger:

Really getting as much as you can out of it, but also connecting it to other texts. It may be difficult for teachers who are given a program that they're required to use that isn't a program that has connected texts, like many programs are starting to have now. It's something to think about.

I was talking to Dr. Amy Elleman recently, her episode came out in January, and we talked specifically about inferencing. She was all for introducing inferencing outside of text, using jokes and things like that to say this is what inferencing is and so on, but that when we're teaching students to use it within text, it needs to be something they have to do to understand it. It needs to be challenging, in other words.

If we're teaching these strategies in text that's too simple, and it's kind of a "duh" thing, then they're not going to see the value.

Maybe, Brent, you could talk about that, or Jen.

Brent Conway:

Yeah, and that's true of anything, right? If you use a strategy for anything, if what you're being asked to do is so easy, then you don't use any strategies! We use strategies to help us get something accomplished that is sufficiently challenging, right? So if we're using lower level text, then there is no need to apply any of those strategies, and we get no understanding of how they work. That really is critical.

Inferencing, for instance, is a cognitive skill; it's not really a reading skill, but we apply it to text and reading. To teach it outside of reading, like in jokes or whatever it might be, you do it so students have the metacognition of understanding what it is they're doing with information. That way when they're faced with a situation, they can say is this a situation where I can use inferencing to help figure something out because I have some background knowledge.

Then yes, you would use it, but if we just practice inferencing for the sake of practicing inferencing, and a kid has nothing to draw upon, then they're not getting anything out of that activity.

Anna Geiger:

Right.

Go ahead, Jen.

Jen Hogan:

I was going say the analogy that I like to use. My daughter will be two next week, and she's really into puzzles right now, so we have some fairly simplistic puzzles. They might be four or so pieces, right? Four to six pieces that are animals.

When I'm helping her do those puzzles, I don't need to use any strategies at all. I'm just putting the puzzle together with her.

But then I think about if I were to extend that to say a thousand piece jigsaw. We have lots of strategies that we might have to employ in order to be successful with that jigsaw puzzle like sorting by color, using the box as a reference, doing the edges first, maybe dividing it into quadrants.

But I'm only using those strategies when the task is complex or challenging for me to achieve. When the text is too easy… Then there's that line of, at what point does the puzzle become challenging enough that I have to use *one* of those strategies? I *just* have to do the edges first. Then you have to layer them all on top.

I think we can look at comprehension and text with that analogy and through that lens, you may not even need to deploy all your strategies. Depending on the puzzle, one of those may work better than another. It doesn't really help to do the edges if you don't have a rectangle puzzle, right?

Thinking about it from that way helps me explain to teachers as well.

Anna Geiger:

I love that analogy. Some people call complex texts, "stretch texts," which makes a lot of sense too.

I think the tricky part for teachers that, like me, were very much into leveled texts from Fountas and Pinnell, because we just trusted that those meant something, is that we may not know exactly how to

choose the right “level” of a complex text. The fact is, even though we want to give a stretch text, there are some texts that are just not appropriate or just too hard.

How do you, Jen, help teachers choose the text? I mean, I guess they have a program already, but let's just say someone doesn't have that, and they're trying to choose something. How do they know what provides the appropriate challenge without being just way too hard?

Jen Hogan:

I think that's a really loaded question, but I'll try to give the simplest answer that I can.

I think you have two things that you have to think of, but the first and primary is the student, right? The students sitting in front of you are going to be widely varied within your classroom. We know that in an average fourth grade classroom, we have students that are highly successful readers, and we have students that are going to need a lot of support.

Now, I mentioned earlier, kind of coming at this from an equity standpoint, one of, I think, the most valuable parts of the science of reading movement is not holding those students that may struggle with reading back from accessing that complex text and language that are in those grade level or above texts. It's about providing the appropriate level of scaffold for kids to be able to access.

I don't know that it's necessarily about changing the text, but it’s about changing the level of scaffolding that students might need to access that text.

With that being said, I think that we do have some valid and reliable assessment measures that can give us a rough idea. Maybe it’s not what the level of the text should be, but maybe you're looking at the Lexile level. They do come in large ranges though, so it's not going to be pinpointed right to exactly what it should be, but you can kind of get a ballpark of a text based on something like a Lexile range. That’s what I'd recommend in order to figure out roughly where the kids should be.

But I think no matter what text you're choosing, you're going to have to scaffold it differently for different students. Even highly successful readers might need some vocabulary instruction ahead of time or help unpacking that with a reread.

I think using Lexile and some assessment data that's valid and reliable can be a great starting point, but you're going to have to do a little bit of work beyond that probably.

Anna Geiger:

There may be a little bit of trial and error as teachers are getting started and that's okay. You could try something and say, “Oooh, that was way too much,” but that's a learning opportunity for the teacher.

Could you walk us through some specific scaffolds that teachers can provide to help students access the complex text? Let's say they're doing a text with the whole class, maybe we're in second grade. What are some things they can do?

Jen Hogan:

Before I get into some of those scaffolds that many of us think of when we think about a scaffold… The conversation that I frequently have that we often forget is that a scaffold doesn't always have to be a tool. It doesn't always have to be a thing, or a new strategy, or a skill. Often a scaffold is just more opportunities for practice, whether it's with a teacher, with some feedback, or with a peer.

We look at maybe the tiers of instruction, and we think about something like a gradual release, or I always think of Dr. Anita Archer's "I Do, We Do, You Do." Sometimes it's just more opportunities for the "We Do." For some students the scaffold might be working with the teacher at the table, while the rest of the class is working more independently or with partners, to get some more opportunities for teacher guided practice and then some feedback from the teacher as well.

But it doesn't always have to be a *thing* that we are providing or giving them; it can just be more opportunities. For some kids, they might need a "I Do, We Do, We Do, We Do, We Do, You Do Together," right? Sometimes that feels like you're just kind beating the dead horse for a little bit, but for kids to really unlock some of that, they need those opportunities.

I think that's important to keep in mind, especially when we think about things that are difficult to teach, like writing, for example. Working with a teacher and getting some feedback and some direct instruction can often be the most underrated but powerful scaffold that we have access to.

With that being said, outside of that, making sure that students are familiar with, have a general idea of, what the content or topic of the text is, is super important. That's why it can help to have these programs that are conceptually built.

We were just talking about levels of text and being too challenging. Often we'll give students a text and they will really struggle with it, and then we'll give them a text that actually has a maybe more challenging Lexile or grade level, but it's a topic that they're super familiar with, and they're able to be highly successful with it. That's part of it too, but we can teach that concept, and we can pre-teach some of the vocabulary.

Again, trying to stretch outside past the text, but making sure that students have enough of the vocabulary to have a general understanding of the text.

I once heard Tim Shanahan talk on a podcast, and he gave this great example, though, about how we have the tendency to want to *overteach* everything before giving students access and allowing them to learn right from the text. We don't want to show two videos, and teach them every word, and then show them a whole bunch of images about the text, so that there's nothing left to learn or to gain from the text.

There is a fine line there too, but scaffolding in terms of reading aloud to the students, doing some rereads, and unpacking certain parts of the text, maybe note-taking in the margins, to identify some topics.

Let students, depending on the age level, be self-reflective about words and parts that are challenging for them, and allow them to have some oral discourse with peers or the teacher to unpack some of that.

Then really going back and guiding students through those parts that are challenging is going to be a scaffold, and giving them multiple opportunities to work through and wrestle with some of those parts of the text.

Brent Conway:

Yeah, I'll say we've seen kids and teachers in third and second grade run Socratic seminars where you've got kids doing the talking, the speaking, the listening, and responding to one another, and just the dialogue that goes along is amazing. You can see kids in the Socratic seminar thinking about what other kids are saying.

It's having them think more deeply around what they read, and multiple reads of texts, and that should not be a fear. We shouldn't be fearful that we're going to bore students.

For students who may not be quite as fluent, knowing that we can read portions of text once or twice to get the fluency, and then the second or third read is to focus more on your comprehension, and that's okay too.

Anna Geiger:

Thinking about all the things you just mentioned, Jen, made me think a lot about what we talked about at the beginning, which was that a program in different hands can have different results based on what the teacher notices kids need extra support in.

We'll skip ahead to a different question that I had planned about implementation, using a program with fidelity versus skillfully implementing. In your white paper, you talk about "skillfully implementing" versus "implementing with fidelity." Brent, could you talk about the difference between those two things?

Brent Conway:

Yeah. I know this is a PG audience, so we often refer to fidelity as the F word, right? Fidelity is a funny word because I think that is a word that publishers, for instance, will say, "You have to use our program with fidelity."

Actually, Holly Lane wrote something recently about this and this is exactly what we've been talking about! Dr. Lane did a great job of describing things that we discussed before. Fidelity would suggest that something has been developed and tested under particular circumstances and conditions. Then it's saying that the outcomes that they got, which, assumingly, are positive, can be replicated if said program is simply done under the same conditions.

That is true typically for rather focused sort of intervention-based programs, things that are a little bit more narrow and intensive. They were tested under very certain circumstances and conditions. They got certain outcomes and with high, or at least high enough, degree of confidence can say, "You do this, as we describe here, and you'll get similar outcomes."

The problem with using fidelity with large Tier 1 programs is that the majority of them have never been tested like that before. Even if they were to use a large Tier 1 program, it's being done with so many variables, including the students that teachers have in front of them. Just as you described, if you do it here in one place, you get a completely different result.

I think TNTP actually did a study, and they had that exact same thing. They actually have a study that shows completely different results using the same program.

A lot of that actually goes back to leadership in how you guide people to implement things. Some of these programs, people fear them because they are "scripted." They have these meta scripts that the first year a teacher is using it, they have the guide up, and they're literally reading word for word as they do it.

That is not the intention of those scripts. It is not intended to be read like a script or to be implemented with "fidelity." Those scripts are meant to give you, as a teacher, a guide of how to walk through and how to do a lesson. These are the things you might encounter and might want to say, but that takes planning.

In a Guided Reading sort of Reader's Workshop model, there wasn't a lot of planning. There was tons of organizing; teachers were masterful organizers. It was the vibes-based literacy, and the buzzer went off and everyone moved here, and you had the work board, and it was masterful organization.

The planning is now taking a program that is designed with intentionality… It's designed to do particular things: reading, writing, speaking, listening with complex text is one of them. How do you now plan instruction using this tool, knowing that you have variability?

If this is a topic students know nothing about, I might have to frontload a little bit more information. If I know the syntax and sentence structure of this section we're going to read today is particularly challenging, I might have to teach some of that more in advance, and even more than what the teacher's guide might suggest.

Whereas vice versa, our students studied this topic last year in science and actually they're pretty good with the vocabulary around it. Then we can think differently about how we're going to introduce this.

It takes planning and that sort of skillful implementation, but it's also having data on your students.

If a large group of your students are reading at a first grade level and you're teaching fourth grade text, you're going to have to probably scaffold how you access that fourth grade text. You can't ask students to go just read it together in partners with two reads and you'll be fine. That's not going to happen. We know that.

Whereas if you have a bunch of kids who are about a grade level behind, that scaffolding looks different. I think that's where it is.

There is fidelity to what? There is no fidelity to follow for some of these large Tier 1 curriculums, but there is integrity and purpose and intention. That's how you have to skillfully implement it based on how it's intended to engage students in learning.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, and I agree with all of that.

I think the slippery slope is, "Well, we can do this however we want! I don't like this part of it, so I'm not going to do that because that doesn't make sense to me." Versus, and I don't know how you feel about this, but I just talked to someone the other day that at their school, they were required to all be on the exact same page every day for their fidelity checks. Someone would come by and check to make sure every first grade teacher was on this lesson. Those are two sides, right? Could you speak to that a little bit?

Brent Conway:

Yeah, that seems a little draconian to do a fidelity check. Have we ever done a fidelity check, Jen? I don't think so.

Jen Hogan:

You know, it's funny because a lot of what I do, I'm actually trying to *undo* fidelity.

I do think we need to kind of know where the plane is going before we fly it.

I will say that in our first year, our teachers were probably following the program with a bit more fidelity than what they're doing right now, which would be my suggestion.

There are certain non-negotiables from a leadership standpoint that we do have. It's not like we're expecting them to just kind of wing it using whatever's in front of them. You have to do it really in the order that it's laid out. You must use the text that the curriculum is suggesting. By and large, the assessments remain the same, but it's just how you're doing things that are a little bit different.

Often when I'm meeting with teachers who have this sense of frustration where the lessons in the curriculum or student learning outcomes aren't quite what they expect, it's actually a matter of *undoing* some of that fidelity, because what is laid out in the program isn't necessarily the best match for what the students in front of them need.

One of the pitfalls to that fidelity is that it really does change year to year. Teachers face changes year to year, the students that are in front of them change year to year.

I'm thinking of a lesson in second grade where one of the key vocabulary words is the word, "change." It took quite a bit of time in the beginning of this program to teach a vocabulary lesson to second graders. I had to have conversations with my teachers about if I was back in the city, and I had the majority of my students as English learners, I may need to spend that kind of direct instruction and extensive time on the word change, but using the data from your students and what you know as a professional in front of them, do you need to teach that word?

That word is included because it is a key concept, but if your students are already there and they already understand, I actually don't want you to spend your time on that. I would much rather you spend your time elsewhere. Those are the kinds of conversations that we have to have with teachers.

Many teachers are also fearful when you move in this direction of a program that they're going to lose their autonomy, right? That they'll lose that sense of being a professional because they are, and so you have to grant them some of that too, right? This is a give and take.

If you want it to be successful, you do at some point have to work with teachers on using data, but also let them know that using their professionalism and giving them some of that autonomy to know that year to year and day to day, what you're doing in the classroom next door might not work for my students in front of me and mine.

Brent Conway:

Yeah, and I'll add that in a workshop model or balanced literacy, and this is a part that's almost a little controversial, the reader was centered, and I consider myself a student-centered educator where we center the student.

But when we're teaching this way, the text is at the center. Hugh Catts actually does a great job of talking about this. The text is at the center, but the two other factors that are on either end are the reader and the purpose. There's an interaction between the reader and the text, the purpose and the text, and the reader and the purpose. There's an interaction that's ongoing there that drives both what strategies you use and what approach you take.

As Jen said, from year to year, the text may stay the same, but the reader is a little different. They're bringing something different to the text, and the text is doing something different to the reader.

We have to consider all of that when we're implementing Tier 1 curricula like this.

Anna Geiger:

Jen, going back to what you just said about… I appreciate what you said about teacher autonomy and all of that, because that was definitely a big hang-up for me. I felt like I wasn't being a good teacher unless I developed everything myself. I think a lot of people feel that way, at least back in the day they did, 10 or 15 years ago.

I think we want teachers to understand that we're giving you this really valuable tool to save you time and energy, but we know that we are putting it in the hands of a skillful educator and your skill is very much required.

Unfortunately, I think in some places teachers are being made to feel like you're just a body in the room, and we just need you to read this and make sure that you do it because then then we'll see the results we want. That again will lead to people blaming the science of reading for not working. Of course, I know "the science of reading" doesn't work, but that's the way people would say it.

I'm just going to close this part by reading a quote that I had saved, which I thought was a really excellent quote from your paper. Then we'll move on to something else. You wrote,

> "We just have to be mindful as we implement that if some aspect of a program seems off or not designed in an effective manner, that we can and should revisit it, but making tweaks or changes based on what research tells us. This is not cause to abandon a program and revert back to practices that data has proven are not as effective as we need them to be."

I thought that was a really excellent summary of some of the things we just talked about.

We just have a couple other things, motivation and the love of reading, which was always my main focus.

In fact I had a blog post, which I have since changed, but it was about mistakes to avoid when teaching reading, and my last number 10 was forgetting the ultimate goal. It was, and you can guess, getting kids to love reading. It wasn't teaching them *how* to read; it was getting them to *love* reading because that was drilled into me, and I believed it.

Of course we want kids to love reading, but we know that may not happen. There's a wonderful blog post by Margaret Goldberg, "We Can't Teach Love But We Can Teach Reading." Can you expand on that point in your paper?

Brent Conway:

Yeah, we love talking about this topic. It is sort of this lingering question. It is one of those things that was sort of embedded within the expectation. Most people who went into the field of teaching elementary and early literacy loved reading! A lot of people love reading, and they found love at different points, enjoying reading and enjoying books.

We all love different books, though. What I enjoy reading is likely different than you, and I know it's different than Jen. I've seen the books that she reads!

The love of reading, it's an emotion. I think we can do lots of things to develop an environment that makes it conducive to students learning how to enjoy and love reading. They can see you enjoying reading and finding love in reading, but to make that a goal, it's not measurable. We can't measure whether we're successful at that or not.

Truth be told, whether a student really loves to read or not can't be our ultimate goal. Our ultimate goal is to make sure they *can*. Reading is a skill, and a functional skill, that we must, as a matter of equity, make a priority for kids.

Loving reading is not the ultimate thing, that's not what makes us successful in life, but being able to do it is. We certainly cannot love something that we're not able to do.

For some kids, they may not really love reading, but they very much enjoy learning. There is not a human in existence who doesn't enjoy learning.

The mechanism they use to learn might be different. I think of adults who have learned to read and use reading as a mechanism for them to learn other things. The act of reading is not what they love. They love the learning that they get from reading. That is awesome! That's what we as educators hope to do.

But this concept of love… I had this visual, and I think Emily Hanford even used the phrase "vibes-based literacy." You have this vision of the fireplace on, and the kids curled up on the beanie bag, and they're reading. For those kids, they loved reading regardless of what we did for them. They found it.

But there are other kids who are 10, 11, 12, 13, and they just don't love it. They've got a lot going on in their lives. We want to make sure they know *how* to do it.

I'll be honest, I was not a reader. I didn't read much as a kid. I certainly didn't love it, and I had a lot of other things going on. Now as an adult, though, I really do enjoy reading. But I didn't as a kid.

I found it, I enjoyed it, and I got there on my own; it was not something that was instilled upon me. Despite the fact that both of my parents read, and they modeled it, but I just didn't get there on my own. I don't think this is a personal thing for me.

It's just that thing about the love of reading that we could *teach* kids, and we *had* to do that because that was our goal. It's hard to be a goal because you can't really measure it.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah. Well, you give me hope for my two middle boys, they're 13 and 14. That is not their choice for free time, but they can do it!

When you talked about being able to do it when you need it, or appreciating what it gets you, that made me think about exercise. I exercise every morning at five in the morning before my kids are up. I don't particularly enjoy lifting weights, but I like how I feel the rest of the day, and I like the health that I have. Yeah, that's interesting.

Are there any other things you want to share, other highlights from the white paper, or any other thoughts before we kind of round it off?

Brent Conway:

I guess I would just say that the white paper is intended to give people thought, to make people think about our experiences. Are we perfect in everything we do? Far from it. Actually the white paper will talk about what we've learned.

A lot of the professional development we did, including this past Friday, we had an early release day, and we did it! Jen ran a session with a group of educators, and I ran a session. It was around literacy in particular. It's responsive to what we see. It's continuously evolving.

Revisiting something we talked about earlier, if we think that just buying curriculum is going to solve our problems, we're sorely mistaken. If we think just going to professional development is going to solve it… Because if you get that PD, and you come back, and you're expected in your systems to do something else, it doesn't really work. If we think we just make a few shifts, and we add this, and then we're good…

It's all of it together. Educators are critical to it. Leadership is critical to it. It's a big lift, and the white paper is meant to understand that none of this happens in one year. This is a multi-year effort. All factors contribute to it, professional development, the right tools, curriculum resources, the systems, the assessment tools, the data-driven decisions, all of it works together. And just when you think you've got it figured out, there's another piece coming that you're going to have to work on.

Jen Hogan:

As somebody that spends my whole day either in classrooms or working with teachers, for them this really is deeply personal. It's learning that what you've invested a significant amount of time and energy and even money on for some people, was all based on something that really isn't going to be in the best interest of kids. Which is probably the reason you got into teaching in the first place.

With all these initiatives happening, we're seeing people really rush, "Okay, we need to make a decision in the next two months! What program should we use? We're going to roll it out, and we're going to hand it to people," but you really can't expect that to go super smoothly. There needs to be some groundwork out of respect for the educators that you have in front of you. There has to be some groundwork to help them move past and unlearn some of those things that they have been doing for decades in the classroom.

If you're not listening to them, even though the message that they're saying may not be what you as a leader want to hear, if you're not listening to what they have to say, then you're not going to know how to pivot and how to best support them to ultimately make it successful.

Whether you agree with them or not, it's my job to really listen to what people are saying and figure out what they're really trying to tell me and where those struggles really are. Do I need to help them plan? Do I need to provide more professional development? Do I need to find an article or a tool for them to use to help? Do I need to send them into a colleague's classroom to observe how it may or may not be done?

I think we really have to listen to the educators that are in front of us. They're going to be singing a different tune school to school and district to district, but we have to be listening so that we can figure out how to support it and help make it successful.

Brent Conway:

Yeah, and I'll just add, Anna, that this does work. We started seven years ago when Pentucket Regional was in the 32nd percentile in the state of Massachusetts for literacy scores. Seven years later we're in the 68th percentile, and every year it's sort of an incremental climb. There's more work to do, for sure, and we think we know where that is headed.

It does work; it just takes time.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, that's a good, important message.

I will make sure to link to your white paper in the show notes, so people certainly should check that out, and they can certainly reach out to either of you if they want to share comments or thoughts.

Thank you so much for joining me to talk about this today!

Brent Conway:

Thank you for having us.

Jen Hogan:

Thank you so much!

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode 202. 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.