Why implementation is the missing piece - with Justin Browning

Triple R Teaching Podcast #211

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. Today I'm speaking with implementation specialist, Justin Browning, and he shares what it really takes to move from research to classroom practice. We talk about the challenges of implementation, the importance of strong leadership, and why real change requires more than just a new program. I hope you enjoy this conversation and look forward to more episodes about implementation.

Anna Geiger:

Welcome, Justin!

Justin Browning:

Thank you, Anna. Glad to be here.

Anna Geiger:

Glad to have you. We're going to get into implementation very soon, but before we do that, could you introduce us to yourself? Tell us your history in education and what you're up to now.

Justin Browning:

Yeah, my name is Justin Browning. I'm in Atlanta, Georgia. If I had to put a title to who I am or what I do, I feel like that's difficult, but I would say I'm an implementation specialist, probably more than anything. I work with schools and districts to really implement evidence-based practices and bring the science of reading to life, if that makes sense. I want to make sure that we move from the pages of research into the practice of classrooms. That's what I do day in and day out.

As far as kind of education and where I've been, I was pretty traditional and I got my bachelor's in education from the University of Mississippi, Ole Miss, which is fun because the Barksdale Reading Institute is in Mississippi. Very early on in my educational journey, I was exposed to strong literacy instruction and evidence-based practices through the work that they were doing there. That's fun. That kind of was my initial eye-opening experience with, well, we have a reading problem in America, and it's very real.

I can actually remember going to a school, I wish I knew exactly the school's name because I would go back today, but it was a school that was struggling in the Delta. The amazing thing was you would discount the school as a school where learning was happening if you just looked at it at first glance, and the learning that was happening was amazing because they were doing the things we know! It was explicit instruction. It was rooted in the science of reading and evidence-based practice. That was really probably the first spark of like, "Ooh, this is something that aligns with my heart."

Then I did some work in the nonprofit world for a while. I was kind of a latecomer into actually being a teacher. I started teaching when I was 26, and so it's been a few minutes now, but I did some nonprofit

work and then went and got my master's in education. I taught first grade, second grade, fourth grade, sixth and seventh grade math.

People are probably like, “Hoo! Did you have a momentary lapse of judgment there?” The answer was yes and but, there are a lot of yeses and buts there.

When we're thinking about why was I teaching sixth and seventh grade math… I had learned a lot about literacy instruction. I felt that as someone moving into administration, I needed to learn about math. What's a better way to learn math than from going all the way up to learn all the way down?

The thing that I learned in teaching sixth and seventh grade math was one, that good instruction is good instruction. And two, that it wasn't that the kids couldn't do the math. It was that they didn't have the language to articulate their thinking, and they couldn't read the words on the page.

Eye opener number two, if you think about my story that's led me to where I am, is that I saw it all the way in middle school that reading failure was pervasive in our schools. It was impacting not just reading instruction, and not just reading and writing, but math and everything else.

After teaching sixth and seventh grade math I had the opportunity to go and be a turnaround school coach, which is really exciting. We were actually closing two of the poorest performing schools in the district that I was working in, and they were creating a new school. I got to be a founding member of a new school that was low achieving and was struggling.

This is kind of where my science of reading journey started, because I realized that hopping into this role, I didn't know what I needed to know. I also realized the people around me and the leaders didn't know what we needed to know, because there's this idea of really we just need to do more, harder, and faster of what we've always been doing.

In my gut, I just really knew that something was wrong there, that we were going to have to really rethink reading instruction for the most vulnerable populations that we served and make sure that we were doing something different.

That's what led me down… When I talk about a rabbit hole, this was like a deep rabbit hole of what could we do different to ensure that all kids have a chance to learn, but also to live and to thrive and to have the opportunity in front of them.

That placed a burden on my heart to make sure that I knew what I needed to know to best impact the teachers that I was serving and the kids that were a part of really my responsibility as an instructional coach in a school that was named vulnerable. This wasn't just any school; this was a known school where reading failure was highly, highly pervasive. It was a part of who they were, like they had just almost accepted that, because of demographics, these kids were probably not going to learn to read, and I couldn't stand with that.

So I dug in and my journey started with LETRS, like a lot of people. Let's be real, my journey started with the rabbit hole, and I just started learning as much as I could through social media, through podcasts, through reading, but then it led to LETRS and it was life changing. I think it's the “when you know better, you do better” mentality. I knew better, and now I knew I had to do better.

But what happens in those moments is we've developed this knowledge, but the people around us haven't. There was this barrier in that work where I knew what was right, but the people who were dictating what we had to do in the district and in the schools were not aligned yet. It became a barrier.

I had a magical opportunity. I was working with kindergarten and first grade the first year. How much more amazing does it get to be able to start with kindergarten and first grade and do deep implementation work?

We really were able to do some amazing things, even though I felt like in a lot of ways we were going against the system. It was uncomfortable. I did that for two years; I was able to work there for two years.

Then I got a tap on the shoulder to join the team at the Rollins Center for Language and Literacy, which was really exciting. We were starting a project called Literacy & Justice for All, an initiative that created an ecosystem approach.

We're starting really in birthing hospitals, thinking about the prenatal care, what happens when a baby is born, all the way into early learning and preschool, and then into kindergarten through third grade. We were working with partners across the state, across the city, to really make sure that we were supporting parents and supporting really healthy brain development and reading brain construction.

I have to tip my hat and give a nod to the people at the Rollins Center for Language and Literacy and Cox Campus for the work that they've done there. That's really what's led me to where I am now.

Right now I have my own business called SoR for More, which is really focused on helping schools achieve more. When I think about schools, I think about how students, leaders, and teachers achieve more by implementing evidence-based practices and the science of reading. I am on the ground every day in schools, working with leaders, working with teachers, working with students, to really help them achieve more.

I was really lucky to partner with Marietta City Schools early on here in Georgia to really see them soar, which is where the name of my business came from. Once you see that moment of lift, that lifting off the ground, we have got this work off the ground and now we're flying...

When you see that, when you see the evidence and teacher actions changing, leadership making changes at a district level, at a very high level, when you see the test scores then change too (I hate to talk about test scores because I think sometimes we get so hyper-focused on the test score and we have to know that teacher change and leader change takes place first), then you can't help but want to do this and do this work more and make sure that it's more scalable. That's really where I'm working now.

Anna Geiger:

Well, I think your name of your business is brilliant. I just love it. That's a really hard thing to do, to come up with a good name. For those who are listening, it's S-O-R as in science of reading for More, but that's a fantastic play on words, and it's easy to remember.

Justin Browning:

It's been fun. It's been fun for sure.

Anna Geiger:

I like hearing what you said about the Rollins Center working with babies. That would be a whole different conversation, but that's super amazing because we know how important it is that kids are getting that oral language from the very beginning. They're taking care of that by working with parents from the beginning.

Justin Browning:

They do a fantastic job. They have free courses online at coxcampus.org. You're able to go there and really access all of the information, resources, and coursework to support really caregivers and families, whoever's working with children birth through literacy. I like to say birth through literacy now because we know that grade three is not realistic.

Definitely check that out because that's the work that I was implementing for a long time, but also the work that is really being implemented in the state of Georgia right now, which is really exciting. They're able to use that across the state of Georgia and it's free and it's accessible.

Anna Geiger:

You said that in earlier in your teaching journey, you understood the value of explicit instruction and good teaching, but then you did have some learning to do about the science of reading. Did you have to undo any learning, or do you think there was this gap that was never given to you?

Justing Browning:

Are you kidding? Always, always when I'm working with teachers and leaders, I say "Our big job here is unlearning and relearning. We have to unlearn and relearn."

I was a balanced literacy guru. I like to be good at what I do, and I was a balanced literacy guru because I had been sold the story. I had been sold that this is what works for kids.

But deep within me, what I knew is that we were playing the game. We were running the cycle every day, going through small groups, leveled readers, all of this, and I would see the kids who weren't achieving. I would see the kids who weren't being impacted by the reading instruction being provided.

I think I also innately knew they need more explicit instruction and word recognition, and they need more language. I was lucky to have really early on in my education career some training from the Rollins Center. That's how I got connected there. I was a teacher that was impacted by their work, and I was then a model teacher. People would come visit my classroom and I would serve as a facilitator in the summer doing summer learning with teachers as a coach, but I was able to really see that it wasn't working.

Innately, for some things, like language I knew was important, so oral language I prioritized in my classroom. I was able to really bring in the word recognition work, and it wasn't just phonics. I think I had a little bit more around phonemic awareness that I didn't get in college really.

I hate to say I didn't get it in college, but I think maybe I didn't understand the importance of it in college. I was lucky to go to Ole Miss where because of the Barksdale Reading Institute they did offer coursework that was pretty aligned in a lot of ways to the science of reading. I was lucky to experience that. I can still remember, and I have it probably on that shelf right behind me, but I have the book, *Phonics A to Z*, because we had Wiley Blevin's book early on. I was lucky enough to have that foundation, but at the same time, we were being asked to implement tools that weren't supporting all readers.

For me, I think I became that teacher who would close his door and do what he knew was right and true. There are a lot of moments that as I'm thinking through what's happening in classrooms around the nation... When I think about what's happening in classrooms, I think teachers are doing that. They're closing their door and doing what's best.

But you know, what's true is that it's a whole lot easier and it's a whole lot more effective if the systems and the structures have been created, the groundwork has been laid, the path has been paved, and then you're supported in doing that, instead of closing your door and doing it in silence and in isolation.

That drives my work too. Yes, I learned the hard way, if you want to go that way. I learned the hard way that the science of reading works. I learned that what I was doing didn't work. I think now my push, based on that learning and that unlearning/relearning, is that it's not just at the teacher level. What drives my work is that I was that teacher that in some ways had to close his doors and be like, "This guided reading is not working," and had to do what was right for kids.

I don't want that to be anyone's experience anymore. I want them to live in places where they are fully supported, live and work in places where they're fully supported by their administration, by their system, and where those systems and structures really support them so that we can maximize achievement for all students.

Because here's the thing, teachers are tired, and you know this from just talking to teachers. You see it all the time. Leaders are tired, and we can blame it on the pandemic, but here's the reality. We're tired because we're working so hard doing things that aren't working. That's exhausting. You don't want to show up every day and spin your wheels and realize this isn't working.

I often get pushback in schools. People will say things like, "Justin, this is a lot of work. You're laying out a three-year plan for implementation, and it's intense, and it's a lot of work. I don't know that we can do this because it's going to burn out our teachers." There's always that burnout excuse.

Well, one, they're already burned out in a lot of places, so I don't know if that's a viable excuse. But the reality, and I've seen this with my own eyes, is that when we get in places and we start doing this work and we start seeing real change, burnout goes away.

If you want to motivate, inspire, and really lift teachers, then support them in doing what works and let them see success. That's what's going to change the culture of a school.

It's that constant doing and doing and grinding and grinding that gets to a place where burnout is really the norm and the culture.

I think it's a game changer. I think when you implement work, even though it's hard, people would rather work hard at work worth doing. I love that quote. It's a Teddy Roosevelt quote and I might butcher it right now, but it says, "The greatest prize in life is to work hard at work worth doing."

Anna Geiger:

I appreciate you saying that because teachers are hard workers.

Justin Browning:

Everywhere! I don't know one that isn't!

Anna Geiger:

Just keeping up with the regular demands of a classroom, children's behavior and all of that, is exhausting! Teachers aren't afraid of hard work.

But that is exactly where burnout comes from, where you're working super, super hard and you're not seeing the payoff, and then you're discouraged. Yeah, I appreciate that distinction.

I want to go back to this SOR movement. I'm not a real fan of that phrase, but that is what we have started to call it. Of course, we know the science of reading is the body of research, but it has come to mean other things.

The movement, I think of that as kind of sweeping across states with legislation changes, schools, and everyday teachers being aware of what the science of reading is.

I remember asking one of my kids' teachers about this like six years ago, and she had no idea, maybe five years ago. She'd never heard of it! That's very rare to find that now.

Things are happening, good things and maybe not so good things. What is your overall view? This could be whole episode, and we won't do that, but what are you seeing as positive or maybe areas of concern in the movement?

Justin Browning:

Yeah, so for the positive. When I think about... I too hate to calling it a movement because that feels a little cultish and that's weird to me, and I hesitated putting SOR in the name of my business, but like I said earlier, the whole idea is like moving from the pages of research into the practice of it.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, I love it.

Justin Browning:

When I think about the positives right now, and I'm always looking because, if you're on social media, people can get down and out around this work all the time. I'm constantly reminding people, "Look for the positives, look for the positives." Here's the things that I see that are positive.

One is I think it's caused us to be truly reflective educators. I think that that's one piece of the puzzle that is positive is that we have people and teachers that may not have been reflective previously that are now reflecting.

At this point, and I could be wrong, but you are either hearing about the science of reading, you have access to it through social media, through the internet... There are so many access points that it's almost willful ignorance if you're ignoring it.

Those people that aren't ignoring it, I think, are caused to be reflective. Now, whether that reflection moves them to change or not, that's a different story, but there is some reflection taking place.

I think the second thing that is really important to me is that the science of reading movement has given us hope in education, and I see this everywhere. I see these little glimmers of hope and I think hope is such a powerful force. It is possible. Something is possible, and we're seeing growth in schools because of it. I think like we haven't had hope in education in quite some time.

I'm saying that today right on the morning, I believe, that the NAEP scores just came out.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah. I saw something, but I didn't read them yet.

Justin Browning:

Yeah, I did the same thing. I think it said that reading scores in the nation dropped by two points. But for the schools that are doing this work, I think they're experiencing hope. I've seen that in real life, tangible ways.

The other thing that I think has been a positive is I think we're finally moving beyond this really basic understanding of reading instruction, where we used to just talk in unison about the five pillars of instruction like we really knew it, but I don't think anyone really knew it. We just knew like, "Ooh, the Big 5." We're moving beyond that.

We're able now to speak a little bit more clearly around how do we support students who are failing in reading? How do we prevent reading failure? What does that look like? The knowledge base in general, I believe, is growing. Those are things that I would say are positive.

There's an awareness of reading failure. That's a big thing. Major media are putting it front and center because I think it's really impacting who we are as a society. I think we begin to realize reading failure doesn't just impact a child in his first grade year or his fourth grade year, but it impacts lives for the long-term, which then impacts our society.

I'm glad that the science of reading movement, if you will, that does feel icky saying movement, but I'm glad that the research making its way to the forefront has exposed some of these things that has really allowed people to look at it in a deeper way.

Anna Geiger:

What would you say are maybe some concerns or challenges that we're facing right now?

Justin Browning:

I think we're in a place where we're doing too much in schools. Too much is being implemented in schools and we're not de-implementing things. When I think about the challenges... We're seeing what needs to happen in reading instruction, but we're adding one more layer and one more layer and one more layer and one more layer, which then gets to that exhaustion point that we were talking about earlier, that burnout. I think in some ways, schools are doing too much and kids aren't getting enough.

Anna Geiger:

When you say doing too much, you're saying we're trying to add what we know research supports, but we're not taking away the things that aren't helpful.

Justin Browning:

It's the de-implementation, but it's also things like... This is not going to be popular opinion, but if I'm a school leader and I have to prioritize arts integration and STEAM and all of these other things, how in the world do we do anything well? How do we do it? How do we do anything well? It's the programming that's being demanded in schools that I think is taking up time, which is finite.

As school districts and school leaders and people working in policy, we have to realize that there is a real construct and it is time. We have finite amounts of time that we have to start treating as real minutes in real days that impact real students.

I think that is huge and too often what we're doing is we're adding something on and not thinking about the 10 more minutes that takes, or the 30 minutes that takes, or the amount of time. Then the overwhelm sets in, the ineffectiveness sets in, and all of these things begin to impact what's happening in classrooms every single day. Schools are doing too much and I think that's a systems issue.

Kids aren't getting enough. I think in some ways, this creates this problem of the blame game. Kids are failing, so who do we blame? Well, we blame the kid or we blame the parent or we blame…

This is kind of a challenge and a positive. I think us having the knowledge now means we're moving away from the blame game to the claim game. We're able to say we can't blame all these external factors anymore. What we're having to do now is we're having to claim our responsibility and then restructure our systems, our organizations, whatever's producing the failure. We have to restructure that to produce different outcomes.

I'm excited about that, but it's hard to do if you're doing too much. School leaders are really juggling all of this, trying to make it work. Then they're throwing their hands in the air because how do you juggle all of that because this is deep, deep work, Anna. This is not a tweak.

I think this is really where a lot of people fail with implementation. This implementation of the science of reading and evidence-based practices is not a tweak. We like tweaks in schools. We like quick fixes, band-aids, and things that like tools. We like things that we can throw at a problem and think that it's getting better, but it's really about changing what we know, changing what we do, and then changing who we are for the children that are in front of us.

For our teachers and our educators, it's a culture shift. It's that de-implementation, that taking things away, and I can't credit myself for this, but someone said, "Pull the weeds so the flowers can grow." We have to pull the weeds. That de-implementation is critical because if we're doing too much, kids aren't getting enough. If we're doing too much, teachers aren't effective. If everything is important, nothing is important. I think that's so critical for us to…

When we're thinking about the challenges of this work, my biggest fear is that we're going to state that the science of reading doesn't work, that following the research doesn't work, because of failed implementation.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, I agree with you a hundred percent. In fact, that's something I've been starting to say more. That's why I want to talk to you about this because I think there are multiple things that if they're not there, the science of reading is going to be blamed.

I think it's the science of learning, effectively teaching and communicating the material, and then things like systems for assessment, and intervention, and of course, implementation.

This would be a good time then to start talking about how does this even work? I'm not sure exactly how your work works with your company, but do you get hired by a school and go in and start doing this implementation work? How does that even begin?

Justin Browning:

I do. Generally what happens is I'm able to have some kind of discovery call with the school, and I want to get to know their current reality. I want to get to know where they are because this gives me an idea of are we falling in the doing too much bucket? Is that the first thing?

We're in a place where these courses are available online, any of them that we're taking around the science of reading, and we're giving teachers knowledge. A lot of times it's legislation-based, so what's happening is it's becoming compliance-based. "Check! We did it."

We're taking this coursework and nothing is happening.

When I think about the first thing, we have to go back and examine what all's happening. Do we have the time and the space to dig into this work, but dig into the work beyond simply building some knowledge on the fly. That's the first thing is just getting a real pulse check of where schools are, what's happening, and what is the data say?

Then from there, helping them begin to get a current reality of... And really I use a literacy scan tool. There's one that Literacy How has offered, and there are others, but just to get an idea of where are we with MTSS? How are we supporting all the tiers of instruction?

What I think we're seeing too is that we keep putting all of our energy and resources into intervention, intervention, intervention, intervention, and we're never fixing the root cause, poor Tier 1 instruction.

We examine Tier 1 instruction. We examine where are there gaps in the current support systems? It's oftentimes easier for us to intervene, intervene.

We tend to, and then I say this all the time when I'm working with schools and teachers feel this, we start running a three-ring circus in our classrooms and no one's really winning, but it looks very busy. Sometimes it looks like there's high engagement, but we're not fixing the root problem. We have to fix that Tier 1 instruction first. I think that's critical. I work with schools on fixing Tier 1 instruction, really thinking about like what that looks like.

You mentioned the science of teaching and the science of learning. I think there are so many things that have to be in play. This goes back to that idea of, is the science of reading going to be blamed as a failure because we have poor teaching practices in place?

We have teachers who aren't being artful in their teaching. I'm not blaming of teachers, I want to be very clear on that. We have to help teachers develop that artful finesse, if you will, around how we support learners and how we move through different situations.

Then let's look at the science of implementation. Is that being followed?

There are all those sciences, I think, that can get in the way here if we're not careful. Looking at Tier 1 instruction, teaching and learning in general, and our opportunities to respond being increased in the classroom.

What does practice look like? I'm constantly talking with schools about practice because what's the difference, Anna? What's the difference between a poor reader and a proficient reader? It's practice. It's the amount of practice that the proficient reader has had over time that has helped really accelerate their ability to build language, to build word recognition, and that then leads to comprehension. I think that so often practice gets undermined in schools.

We have to look at all of those pieces of instruction, and then we develop with the schools a PD plan. How are we going to lift teacher knowledge? How are we going to build teacher knowledge? I don't want to be in a position where I'm coming in schools and I'm there one day and I'm walking out. They're used to that. They're used to a one-day show where someone comes in, they feel like it's a waste of their time, and then they walk out.

What I want to do is I want to invest deeply in the school, the culture, but also work with leaders as I'm working with teachers to make sure that we're developing professional knowledge across the board. I am a strong believer that leaders have to know this work deeply and intimately. It cannot be a, "I know enough that I don't look dumb in front of people." That bothers me. I think we've lived in that, "I know enough so that I can guide the work, can pave the way, and I can support it." By supporting, it's knowing if they're doing this or they're not.

I think leaders have to live in a space of having the knowledge of being able to say, “This isn't right. I know what is right. Now I'm going to partner with you right here or as soon as I can have a moment to meet with you to show you the right way to do it.”

That whole idea of support is critical that we're able to provide professional development to all levels of leadership so that they can provide the precision of support, that real time feedback is critical, and it can't just fall.

I think this is one thing I'm seeing in every school is they're like, “Yep, we have hired a literacy coach.” So that literacy coach is then supposed to save the school? There is no way that one person can lead this work and can be responsible for this transformation.

I say that all the time with the work that I've done in Marietta and the work that I've done in other schools, it is a group effort. There is no position where one person could take all the responsibility and be effective. There's just no way.

Every leader, assistant principals, principals, coaches, MTSS leader, whatever those people are that are in leadership in the building, all have to assume the role of a literacy coach and move into a supportive role in this work.

We're going to train first principals and district leaders to make sure that they are geared up to lead their coaches. Then we're going to work with coaches. Then we're going to work with teachers, so everyone gets a little bit ahead of the other group.

Anna Geiger:

That’s super interesting.

Justin Browning:

Yeah, because I think the supportive factor of… If we're all learning together, it gets a little sticky. If I'm sitting next to my teachers and I'm doing this for the first time…

I do think there's benefit of it. I want principals and leaders in the room with teachers, but I want to make sure that they have a chance to hear and experience and really have a better idea beforehand so that they can then support that teacher with implementation.

Anna Geiger:

That makes a lot of sense. I never thought about it that way. Everyone I talk to about this sort of thing will say, “We've got to the principals in line. They have to understand this.”

I think it’s for different reasons. One, we said because they can support the teachers, absolutely.

But also, I think, so they're not… I don't mean this in a bad way, because I think of my own experience, but so they're not at the mercy of a teacher's perceived knowledge.

I look back and I think as a balanced literacy teacher, my principals just let me do whatever I wanted because they trusted me. But I really didn't know! I thought I did, but I really didn't know what was best practice, but they just trusted me because they didn't know. They hadn't studied it. What I was doing wasn't, wasn't evidence-based.

So absolutely it’s for them to be a coach, but also to be that guide too.

Justin Browning:

Yeah, and we don't want to live in a place where we're just letting it happen, and we're relying on what everyone is bringing in. What we know that the majority of undergrad programs in America, the majority of teacher training, isn't training teachers to implement evidence-based practices. This is a whole different episode!

Anita Archer talks about assumicide all the time, when we assume the teachers are doing this work, and we're just letting it happen. I think we have to move from letting it happen to making it happen.

Then making it happen is thinking about the how, the implementation, the steps, the strategies, to how we're improving data systems, professional development, all of those things in our buildings, day in and day out.

I think with leaders too, because I get a lot of pushback on, "Can you just work with our teachers?" I am going to work with your teachers, but I'm going to work with them with you in the room with me, because when I walk out of the building, this work has to be sustainable. A sustainability piece is huge here.

There are a lot of things that I do to make sure that leaders learn what they have to know, because leaders can't lead what they haven't learned, and teachers don't teach what they haven't been taught. It's both of those things.

When we're thinking about PD, how do we help leaders learn so that they can lead? How do we help teachers learn? How do we teach them so they can teach what they've been taught? They're going to avoid what they don't know, and the same thing is true with leaders. Leaders aren't going to address those big issues in schools if they don't have the knowledge.

This requires a lot of courage from principals. I've worked with courageous leaders like Grant Rivera in Marietta City Schools. I would say he is a courageous leader because when we think about making big changes, big changes require big decisions to be made that require big courage.

I don't know that we always think about courage. We talk about transformational leadership and we talk about all of these things, but the courageous thing is sometimes acquiring the knowledge. Part of being courageous is saying, as a leader, "I'm a learner too. I'm not just learning enough to get by; I'm learning enough that I can lead this work."

Leaders should be able to know how to teach kids to read. I do this when I'm in schools all the time kind of early on in the process. When I'm working with them I say, "Hey, here's an index card. What I want you to do is I want you to write down how you teach a kid to read. Take three minutes.

I mean we know what happens, and how I was in the same boat to prior to building my knowledge and implementing this work every day. We can't really articulate it. I want teachers and I want leaders to get to a place where we're not just going through compliance-driven courses, but we're able to fully articulate, how do I teach a kid to read?

Because we have to move beyond in schools this idea of, "Just tell me what to do. It's happening at all levels, right? "Just tell me what to do."

I want leaders and teachers to be in a place where they're saying, "I know what to do, and I know why I'm doing it." That's empowering.

Anna Geiger:

I really appreciate you talking about how when they want you just to go in and help the teachers, how you say, "No, you have to come in with me."

I was just listening to a presentation by Jessica Hammond of Glean in a Lunch & Lit with Margaret Goldberg. She was talking about the work that she does with schools, and that sometimes there'll be these big conversations and she'll say, "I'm not going to be speaking at this meeting. That is your job." It's the job of the coach or interventionist or whoever is the person leading this, because she wants it to come from them, not from her.

I'm sure that that would be a barrier to implementation. If the person leading it completely is in control, and then they leave and everyone's like, well, now we can do whatever we want. Or they're not here now, what do we do? Do you find that to be a challenge to kind of transfer that to the leaders in the school?

Justin Browning:

So generally when I'm with schools and when I create our contract of the work that we're going to do, it is a must that I'm not working with one person in the building leader-wise, but that I'm working with a team of leaders. I bring capacity. If I move from bringing that capacity to them, to building the capacity with the people in the room, I can't have it sitting with one person that could leave.

I think you have to think about the structures that are in place. This is part of implementation science too, your implementation team.

That implementation team has to be stacked deep in some ways so that there are several carriers of knowledge in your building. That should include grade level chairs, that should include maybe people who are the most coachable and the first adopters of things. I don't think it has to be the star teacher. I'm going to say that it doesn't have to be your teacher of the year. It should be the people that are the most coachable and the most willing to lean in and learn.

It's those teachers, it's the leaders across the different departments you may have, it's the assistant principals, it's the principal, it's the coaches. All of those people have to be a part of that leadership team.

It has to be that we are collectively building knowledge. It's that collective efficacy too. Once we know more, we believe that we can do more, and then we are able to move forward with that.

I think that we have to create structures that if one person walks out or leaves, this doesn't flop. We still have a big team of people that understand this work and can carry it forward because we're in this place of know better, do better.

I think we've almost overused that in some ways, know better do better, and it's become just this phrase that we do. But here's the reality is that even though we know better, we're not always doing better. When we know better, we have to actually do better.

I think there's evidence of that right in the NAEP scores that just came out today. The knowing piece is there. I think we're almost to a checkbox place of knowing.

Now I would push back a little bit there, because I think what's happening is we have some surface-level knowledge. We've devoured some courses very quickly, and so we have a baseline of knowledge that we didn't have previously.

Now what we have to do is we have to move that knowledge that we have into working knowledge. How does this knowledge play out day to day in my practices, my decision making, and my leadership?

That's really the work that I do with leaders and the work that I'm doing in schools. We know what the research says, we've done the learning, now what does this look like with the kid in front of you? If you're a leader, what does this look like with a teacher in front of you or the coach beside you? What does this look like in district meetings when you need to speak up and say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa!"

This is going to impact everything because this question is huge. Again, this could have been a whole podcast about the challenges.

One of the challenges that I see in schools is that we're not thinking about all the pieces. It's a domino effect, right? When we change literacy practices, reporting structures have to change, schedules have to change, all of these things have to change.

Often who is that dictated by? People above the principal. Principals have to have knowledge to be able to lean in and lead up. It's critical because otherwise this work will fail, and I don't think any of us want that.

Especially if you're building the knowledge and seeing great things on the ground level of your school, you don't want to hit that ceiling just because maybe someone up at the top doesn't have the knowledge that they need to lead and lead well.

Anna Geiger:

You've talked about starting with that kind of an assessment, like where are you at? I am sure that's a process, getting all that information you're getting. You're putting together an implementation team. You're educating from the top down, staggering a little bit so that the level above can support the next level and teach them. Then what do you feel the next step is?

We talked about taking things out, are you taking out bad programs? We know that it's way more than just throwing a program at teachers. Where do you go next?

Justin Browning:

Yeah. I'm really codifying right now the steps of what I'm doing in schools. I'm hesitant right now to be like, here's the five-part process I have, but I will tell you that the basic underlying principle in all the work that I do is that knowledge plus action leads to a change in student outcomes. That's at all levels.

That action piece in the knowledge building has to happen at all levels within an organization. It's the school level. It's the classroom level. It's the district level that we have to build knowledge, but then we also have to take action after we've done all of this work. It's the actual action of that do better part.

We know we have the knowledge, now what does the do piece look like for every layer of leadership?

Here's where schools, I don't want to say go wrong, but I think it's just the culture is that what we're go, go, go people. We are generally ambitious, and I think people who go into education are ambitious. They are driven, and so do which one do we lean on first - knowledge or action? We tend to go straight towards action like, "Let's just do it. Let's do it." It's the build the plane as we're flying it mentality.

What happens when we take action before we build knowledge is we get confusion, we get frustration, and we get poor implementation.

We want to build that knowledge first, like you just said, and then we take the action because that's when we get the alignment piece. That's when we get the success. That's when we get the comfort of, "OK, I can do this and can implement it well."

That next piece is once we've done all of this work. We've assessed where we are as a school. We've jumped into developing some knowledge. Now where does it land? There is the taking out. There is that piece that has to happen. There is the action on the district level of really rethinking curriculum, and rethinking is our Tier 1 instruction actually working? And if it's not, why not? We have to be asking those questions.

I would encourage schools to use the curriculum evaluation tool from The Reading League. Look closely at that. Build knowledge of what are those red flags? What are the green flags that you're looking for? That's happening really probably at the district level more than the school level.

It's having those conversations about what do reporting structures look like? If we're still reporting on things like sight words, guess what's happening in schools? They're still sending lists home to memorize because reporting structures are mandating those. Those have to be rethought at the school level.

I think that action piece really entails moving that knowledge that we have into classroom practice and restructuring around Tier 1 instruction, Tier 2, and Tier 3. What does intervention look like? What does special education look like?

It's making sure that we've streamlined the practices right across all of those because what I see happening is that we pretend that intervention and special education and work with ESOL students or ML students is really living in a silo. We have to unsilo those silos, if that makes sense, and get everyone on the same page, which is part of that building knowledge practices.

Everyone's in the room. I think that that's the piece that's critical. Everyone's in the room. The right people are at the table having the conversations because we need alignment there. That's more at the school level.

Beyond that, If we're thinking now at the classroom level, it's moving that knowledge into practice. We don't just tell people to do something and hope it happens because hope is a tricky word. It's promising, it's powerful, but I think we lean on it too heavily sometimes. We have to make it happen, so what do we do to make it happen?

The thing that I've seen, and this is really still in this challenge conversation too, is that we lean on things like a good old coaching cycle. I'm a huge fan of the old school coaching cycle like Jim Knight's work. I'm a fan of it.

But the reality with this work is that there's too much changing too fast for us to meet with you one day, observe you the next day, and go through kind of this stretched-out cycle.

I say move into real time coaching. You can't move into real time coaching if you don't have knowledge, and if you don't have working knowledge. This goes back to that knowledge piece, but in classrooms I'm going to position myself, as the principal, the AP, the coach, or whoever, as a support at all times when I'm in there. I'm going to be able to in real time pop in and fix it.

Why am I doing that? I'm doing that for a few reasons. One is it's teaching the teacher on the fly right there that right practice. It's also making sure that students are getting the right instruction right there in real time. I think that's critical because in too many schools we forget that time is finite. We forget that for some kids, yes, this is their first grade year. This is their only first grade year. You may have 12 years as a teacher here. This is that kid's only first grade year. We don't have time in a high-stakes environment like a live classroom to practice on kids.

Too often what we're doing is we're practicing on kids in real time, and that practice isn't quite perfect yet. And I'm not an advocate for perfection. I'm an advocate of progress. I want us to be getting better every day. But if I'm a teacher in a room, if I'm an admin in a room, if I'm a whoever in a room and I see something a little bit off, I'm going to hop in in that moment.

I coined it in one of my schools, "See something, say something." I love New York City, and on the subway, what do they say? They say, "If you see something, say something."

We're not sitting back anymore. There is no more mentality of a clipboard crew, if you will. No one's coming in observing with their nose in the air, walking out of the room and then leaving me to wonder. We are in the business of shifting and changing cultures of learning in schools for teachers and kids.

We want to make sure that teachers feel supported, and you know what makes a teacher feel supported? When you know what you need to know as a leader, and when you can help me in the moment. It's nonjudgmental and it's supportive and it's all for the sake of learning. It's learning for the student and learning for the teacher.

A big shift that I've seen in schools is that we have to change the culture - what we know, what we do, and who we are. We have to change that culture into a culture that celebrates and prioritizes not only student learning, but teacher learning.

One of the things we do is like that real time coaching and that real time feedback with a knowledgeable person that can sit in there. Teachers are over people walking in their room and not supporting, not being able to help. Really the root of that oftentimes is that there's a lack of knowledge and there's a lack of know-how.

I'm hopeful because I've seen this in places that the culture shifts and then what do we get? We get something like this. We get a teacher that runs out as soon as we're done. They're like, "Hey, what could you tell me? What can I do different?" That's exciting. Where does that happen? It felt like an alternative universe the first time that happened.

Or when you show up in a school and teacher says, "Hey, thanks so much for being here and for the work that you all are doing." In those moments the support feels like support.

I worked with a principal and she said, "You better make sure that support looks and feels like support to the people that you're working with."

That really changed who I was as a leader because I was in the position where support didn't look and feel like support for a long time. It felt like evaluation. It felt like scrutiny. It felt like all of these things.

This is a culture shift with that action piece. We have to ensure that support looks and feels like support.

I also encourage schools if you're shifting practices, if you're implementing something in the literacy block... Whether it's you're changing Tier 1 instruction, if that's what you're working on, if it's phonics, if it's the language comprehension, whatever piece it is, if it's writing, then don't evaluate teachers during that block.

We know evaluation is a reality; we know that they have to do evaluations. But if I feel like I'm going to get evaluated and you're going to be my evaluator, you can't also be my supporter in most situations.

And so how can we think really carefully about how we're aligning ourselves as leaders to make sure that teachers feel supported and that that action is real-time feedback. It's real-time feedback that looks and feels like support.

I think we have a lot of trust issues in schools. You know what makes people trust people? When you're knowledgeable, and you can do what you want me to do. That builds trust.

I'm excited about the work with real-time coaching and real-time feedback in schools. I just think that it's another shift. When we think about the implementation of moving beyond coaching cycles that take too much time, I need teachers and principals and leaders in classrooms, day in and day out, every single day. That's a shift. It's the changing of your schedule as a leader.

But I also need you to be so alert and knowledgeable that you're able to say, "Oh, something is wrong in that classroom. Guess what? I know what's wrong and I know how to fix it." Then you're able to really lead in a transformative way.

When you pull that group together and say, "Hey, I'm not sure exactly what was happening here today, but let's debrief this for a second, and then let's talk about our next steps," and you're able to do that in a meaningful way. That's when knowledge has moved into a place where it's transformative.

That is really the goal that the knowledge that we're building in schools with leaders, with coaches, and with teachers is transforming practices. I'm super hopeful that we're getting in a place where people are going to say, "Yep, we've done the knowledge piece, but we've realized also that that's not enough." Just building knowledge isn't enough. We actually have to do better, and the do piece is really that implementation. It is the changing of practices and supporting that, and that's really that next step.

Let me tell you, this step takes time. This is not something that is a quick fix. I get really irritated when people think that this is something that happens quickly or overnight, or that we should see test scores change within a month or two months. You should see improvement in teacher practice after teacher knowledge has changed, but it takes some time to get to the student level.

I think that's okay, but it's the consistency of making sure that that's happening day in and day out, which really is that support piece. You have to be in there and supporting that work. You have to be in there and modeling. You have to be monitoring. John Maxwell, I'm a huge fan of him. He talks about modeling, mentoring, making sure that we're monitoring, that we're motivating, and then that we're multiplying. We've found these people that are doing it right, let's multiply those leaders and help other people do it the right way.

It's critical work, because consistency is key in this work, and we have to really be uncommonly consistent.

There's a school that I work with that on their wall, one of their teacher practices, who they are as teachers, is that they are uncommonly consistent. I use that all the time because that's beautiful. We are uncommonly consistent as teachers. When I tell you their instruction is spot on, it's spot on because they're consistent, because it's been expected, and it's been supported, and it's been celebrated. I just think it's really, really special.

Anna Geiger:

I love that too, and I actually have embraced consistency in many areas of my life. I'm still working on it in many areas over the last few years. But that would not have been something that would have inspired me as a new teacher, which is fascinating. I would have wanted to see uncommonly creative or uncommonly energetic or whatever, but that *is* what makes the difference.

We could go on forever. There's so much goodness in this episode. Thank you so much for sharing all of that.

I'd like to kind of close out with… You mentioned John Maxwell. Are there any other resources that you would recommend for anyone who wants to learn more about either implementation or leadership. That could be someone in your position or someone at a teacher level who wants to figure out how we can make these changes at our school, or at an admin level, any of those things.

Justin Browning:

One of the things that I would tell people to do first is to lean into some resources. The Reading League has the *Defining the Science of Reading Guide*. I think that is an excellent tool to kind of just jumpstart your knowledge on what is the science of reading.

Then make sure that you have those (I don't always like calling them theoretical models) conceptual frameworks, those conceptualizations, really embedded in you because they should drive. That's Scarborough's Rope, the Simple View of Reading, the Four-Part Processor, how the brain learns to read, all of those things should guide your thinking process when you're in the classroom around assessment, instruction, curriculum, all of those things. Make sure when you're thinking about implementation that

you're highlighting and spotlighting those things because everything goes back to that research. Making sure that we're following what we know from there.

The other thing that I would say is that Laura Stewart at the 95 % Group, she is brilliant. At the helm of the organization, what she's done is she has really helped as the academic lead there, making sure that she's leaning into the implementation work. There are two documents that I would support. I think it's called *The Science of Reading 2.0*. Lean into that one to make sure you have a quick go-to around the science of reading and what information you need to know. There's also *The Courage to Lead Literacy* book that she created. Both of those I think are critical and are great conversation starters for leaders to sit down around a table and talk about implementation. What does it look like in our buildings?

The other thing selfishly that I would say is reach out to me like. I love this work. You probably figured this out, Anna. It's justin@sorformore.com. It sounds like a jingle, but it's justin@sorformore.com. I would love to chat with you and see how I can support them, but also just be a partner in this work, because it's transformational.

I think once you've seen one school soar, you don't want to see anything but that from now on. That's what drives me day in and day out. I've seen it happen. I've seen Marietta City Schools take where they were and move schools 20/22/26% to proficient and distinguished in two years. That's pretty significant in two years that they've grown like that.

But the work isn't done there, and the work isn't done anywhere. I like to say the work isn't done until all kids can read.

It is my life's passion and my life's work to make sure that leaders, teachers, and district leaders are really digging into this work and making sure that they're moving knowledge to action. That we're moving from the pages of research into the practices in classrooms because that's what makes the difference.

Anna Geiger:

Well, thank you so much. It was a pleasure to talk to you and I'll be sure to link to the things you mentioned, including your email and your website, in the show notes.

Justin Browning:

Awesome. Thank you.

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode211. 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.