Triple R Teaching

Hello, this is Anna Geiger from Reach All Readers. This is the last episode of our . She is the co-host of The Literacy View podcast. She's also an author of multiple books for parents and teachers, and she is the founder of High Five Literacy.

Faith has been in education for a long time, and she has seen the switch from whole language, to balanced literacy, and now to an understanding and applying of the science of reading.

She's certainly worked with all kinds of teachers, some who were open to learning more and others not so much. So if you find yourself alone on your science of reading journey, I think you're going to get a lot of encouragement and inspiration from this episode.

A couple of things. You'd think after doing this for four years, I would remember to click the correct microphone, but again, I did not. I apologize for that. I'm a little fuzzy, but Faith comes in loud and clear. Also, while I was recording this episode, we were having some technical difficulties, and so I was typing in the chat to our software provider. I apologize for those clicks that you hear. I promise I was listening to every word that Faith was saying and I'm sure that you will too. Here we go!

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Faith!

Faith Borkowsky: Thank you, Anna. Thanks for having me!

Anna Geiger: I've really been enjoying binge listening to your podcast, "The Literacy View," where you talk with other people that may not share your same perspective, and it's really neat to see how you're able to talk things through with people. You slowly help people see things from a different angle, and so I thought this would be wonderful for our listeners to hear from you as we talk about making change.

Maybe you could start by introducing yourself and telling us about what you're doing today?

Faith Borkowsky: Sure. My name is Faith Borkowsky, and I have been in education for over 35 years. I started out as a classroom teacher, became a reading specialist, then I became a regional reading coach for Reading First many years ago. Now presently I am a consultant. I've been tutoring children for years and it's my passion. That's what I do.

Anna Geiger: When you started teaching that was in the whole language era, can you talk to us about that and how you saw there were some changes that you needed to make?

Faith Borkowsky: Yeah. Well, the first grade I taught was third grade, and at that point you would expect that kids would already come in knowing how to read for the most part. They didn't. Many of them did not know.

Just when I entered teaching, there was this big shift to whole language, and that's what I was taught in college, and it's basically the idea that if you immerse children in wonderful books the they will just pick up learning how to read. I wasn't seeing that.

I decided to get a master's in reading hoping that that would further my education so that I would know how to help kids, but it really wasn't very helpful. We did not have phonics in that program. It was more about genre studies and appreciation of children's literature, but it did not really help me to teach children who were struggling how to read.

I ended up doing my own research. The internet at the time was not something that was really around to be able to get information, so I got all my information by going to the library and bookstores. I started to learn that there was another way to teach by reading this book by Diane McGuinness, I wrote about that in my own book, and it was called "Why Our Children Can't Read and What We Can Do About It."

I started to go for my own professional development, and I learned that basically there was a way to teach kids other than just immersing them in books. From there on, I wasn't turning back. I entered into working as a regional reading coach, and here we are over twenty years later, still discussing the same things that I thought would've ended many years ago.

Anna Geiger: The science of reading has become more of a household word in the last couple of years. Can you talk to me about what you noticed and why you think that happened?

Faith Borkowsky: Well, the internet. I think these problems existed many years ago, but because of Facebook and these groups, there's power in numbers. I think that back then there might've been parents on their own dealing with school systems and just trying to navigate this. I think that they were embarrassed, and they didn't talk about this years ago. Basically, if you had a child who was struggling in school, it was kept a secret. The parents just dealt with the schools on their own.

Now here we have it with people really airing their dirty laundry on social media and all these platforms and people say, "Hey, you had that problem? I had that problem." The more they spoke to each other, the more they realized that they were not alone.

So there's a new world now where people have come together, even if they're across the country or from a different country. I've met so many people this way. Look how you and I are communicating from different states. It's just a new world, and that didn't exist years ago.

Anna Geiger: You came to this much sooner than a lot of us did, and you were teaching with other teachers who were maybe still using whole language or later a balanced literacy approach. What did you find was helpful in helping people rethink practices and maybe what didn't work?

Faith Borkowsky: When I first started to spread the word, people really did not want to listen. I think they thought this was for other people, other teachers, other children; it did not apply to them.

What I learned quickly was that research alone doesn't change minds, and that's what I thought. I was naive, I was young, and I really thought that if people just read research or read the importance of certain types of strategies or programs, that there wouldn't really be an issue. I thought that they would just want to learn themselves and want to come around and try things.

What I learned quickly was that that's not the case, and this really became a study into human nature and people. I think probably why I have gotten to a point where I can talk

to so many people about this is because I am a student of human nature and it really is psychology, learning that we all have common attributes and how we all respond to the same things positively or negatively.

Anna Geiger: I would agree that pointing someone to research isn't necessarily going to change minds. I know Mark Seidenberg talks about that a lot in his book about how research just feels like something completely separate and sterile and, "Why would I be interested in that? Those aren't people that really understand teaching."

Of course, it's very interesting once you start learning about it, and lots of researchers were actually teachers, so it's not just this random group of people that are disconnected from the classroom.

If it's not the research itself that's going to get someone's attention, is there something else you would suggest?

Faith Borkowsky: Yeah, I think we are emotional beings, right? Emotion, feeling.

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

Faith Borkowsky: That's where we work from, that part in us, that emotional part, and that's where we have to reach people through their emotions and their feelings.

Intellectually, they can hear something and process it, but they could be disconnected. They could say, "Well, this just doesn't apply to me." But when you get to the aspect of feeling and really that emotional component, it could flip the switch. That's kind of what we need to think about, these primal emotions that we all have.

That's kind what I've learned about people in general. It goes beyond education; it's really about fear and love. If we get it down to those two basic components, fear and love, we could really begin to see what's going on here, because most resistance is about fear.

Anna Geiger: Yes, agreed. Agreed.

Faith Borkowsky: People are fearful about change, they're fearful of being exposed as though they don't know something, and we all want to be loved, right?

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

Faith Borkowsky: So if we respond in a way where we are trying to do a "gotcha!" it's not going to have the effect that we want. We still have to try to love people who might not agree with us and show them that we care, even though I don't agree with you.

Anna Geiger: I think that's a really good point, what you said about the "gotcha," because that's what happens on social media, right? Although that's not always the case. But person-to-person, when we're really trying to make changes, then trying to show how much smarter we are or how much further along we are is not going to work for people.

For me it was Emily Hanford's "At a Loss for Words" article. It just struck a chord, and I think so much of it can be said for sharing things like that, and certainly sharing episodes from your podcast because there are different perspectives, and it's good to hear that conversation happening.

I also think your podcast is useful for people who are trying to help others see more about what we've learned from the science of reading, to see what the other side might, where they might be coming from. When you can understand someone else's perspective, that helps.

I know in your, I think it was in your book, you talked about specific examples. You said that once you were trying to reach out to somebody, and she just shut her door and put something in front of it so you couldn't even see what was happening.

So sometimes you were successful and sometimes not. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Faith Borkowsky: Yeah. So one thing I would recommend is what I learned. You always try to work with the people who are willing to work with you.

This particular teacher really had only a few years left before retirement and did not want to be bothered to learn anything else. But it was my job to go into rooms and do that embedded training and to co-teach, and she knew, she expected me.

Then right before I was supposed to arrive, she had all the kids sitting on the floor, and she put this pocket chart on the back of the door and used it so that I couldn't open the door and come in. She had the kids kind of blocking the door.

Anna Geiger: Oh, my.

Faith Borkowsky: Which really was a strong statement, and it was really literal and figurative, if you think about it. She was putting up the walls, right? "Do not enter my world. I don't want you entering my world."

For someone to go to that extreme, it was like, okay, I am not going to enter right now. I'll spend my time with other people I can work with.

What happened really was that she was so fearful that it was better for me to just leave it alone at that moment in time. That doesn't mean that she was going to be off the hook forever, but it just did not make sense at that time to push and say, "Well, I'm coming in, move those kids." That would not have been successful.

By working with others and allowing her to learn that, well, I'm not as bad as maybe she thought that I was. I'm not that evil person, and I can work with her in a different way. It ended up eventually where I was able to get in, not that we got very far, because she decided to retire sooner than later, but there was somewhat of a breakthrough. She just did not want it. That was just her own thing.

But it's a good lesson. It's a good lesson not to waste time with the people who are most resistant. Let them learn from others because they will talk to others. What you want to do is you want to spread that positive energy rather than letting somebody negative really take over, because that spreads too. That's continuous as well.

There's a lot of learning going on here. It's not simply like, "Okay, here's the research. Now let's get a program in and let's do it."

I think a lot of times programs will hire people, they'll hire consultants, with very little teaching experience. You see that. They'll just hire representatives, and they're just kind of doing the lessons for that particular program, but they haven't dealt with this other component because they don't have the experience in the classroom. They don't have the experience as a trainer and the coaching experience of working with people because that's an art form too.

Anna Geiger: When I think about the other episodes that I've recorded for this, and talking with other people about ways to approach this with colleagues who may not be on board, some of the other things we've talked about include the fact that data talks. Teachers can use a good benchmark assessment like DIBELS or Acadience, and then share that information. It can be helpful, especially if you're talking to an administrator.

Another idea someone else mentioned, if you're having trouble getting people on your grade level team to listen, then you can bring in an administrator and show them what you're doing so they can see what's happening in your classroom.

Another one was to lead by example, of course, which is what they're doing already.

Then you just said don't use "gotcha!" moments, but lead with love.

Then sharing articles with people can be a way. Of course, you can't guarantee they're going to read it but you could say, "Can we read this and just talk about it? Can I meet you for lunch or whatever because I'd to hear your perspective on these points?"

What about starting a book club? Do you think that could be a good idea, but what if people aren't really on the same page?

Do you have any other ideas, dos and don'ts, for trying to get the conversation moving and change happening?

Faith Borkowsky: Yeah, so I think a book club is great if you have a group of people ready to learn. Again, it goes back to where they are in their heads and their hearts. You can't just have people open books and say, "Okay, now we're all going to learn

together." You first have to win them over before you can get to that point. I think a book study is great, but it has to be introduced in the right moment, not at the very beginning.

There were people who used my book as a book club type of read, but they were all people wanting to learn. They were looking for answers, so the discussion was already with people who kind of knew that they wanted something better. It wasn't really about changing minds at that point.

Anna Geiger: That makes sense.

Faith Borkowsky: As I said before, a lot of this is psychology, a lot of it is about the mental games that we have to realize. People are people and we all have the same desires, we all have the same fears, and a major fear is not feeling adequate in your job, right?

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

Faith Borkowsky: Not feeling that we're going to be loved, feeling that we're going to be judged if we make mistakes. Once people could get past that - the insecurity, the fear, the feelings of being judged, the feelings of being inadequate - I think that's your turning point, right?

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

Faith Borkowsky: All people kind of function on the same page of wanting to be loved and the fear of not being loved. If you kind of look at it that way with the most basic instincts.

Anna Geiger: I think that's good to remember because I do see some people get kind of nasty on social media, and it's like they really believe that some other teachers don't want the best for their students, and I really don't think that's where people are coming from.

There is resistance and we all have issues with ego, which can certainly be playing a

part, but I think overall it's fear and because it feels a little overwhelming, like, "Well, if I have to listen to you, then I may have to rethink a lot of things and I just don't feel that I... I'm afraid to do that. I don't feel prepared to do that."

Then also, "Well, if I've been doing something wrong, I'll have to admit that," and nobody wants to have to do that.

I think the hard part for someone who's trying to bring change about is that it's a very urgent issue. They feel, "Well, how long do I have to wait for this person to come around because they're using three-queuing in kindergarten and their kids aren't making the right progress?" Any thoughts on that?

Faith Borkowsky: Yeah. I feel that when I'm honest with people, and I am, I'm very open and I tell people, "I didn't know this. I didn't do this. I wish I could go back and apologize to all the students I had before I knew better." I think that that opens the door to trust, and then people are more willing to put themselves out there. But it has to come from somebody admitting, "Hey, I didn't know this. I did not do this well. I would love a do-over, but we can't go backwards."

That honest talk helps to move people along saying, "Okay, I'm going to do this."

There are people who now will call me into their rooms and say, "Faith, take a look at this. What do you think?" It flips where people start looking for me because they really want to know if they're doing it correctly or what I think.

Whereas at the beginning, it's a lot of me doing my own development, talking about my own professional development, and how far I had to come and putting myself out there.

Before I ask teachers to do anything, I do it myself. I think leaders need to really consider that. The best leaders are willing to put themselves out there and show they are vulnerable. That's one of the most important things that we could do as people, is to show that we are all vulnerable, we're not perfect, we don't expect perfection right away, but let's inch a little bit toward making that change.

One of the things that Judy and I wanted to do on "The Literacy View" was to really have this brand of no BS. With the BS Button, we make a joke out of it, trying to make light of this, but at the same time not backing down and being fearful. We like going to those

places where I don't think a lot of other people do.

You see a lot of people in their echo chamber. They'll get the same people on, you see the same names that come up, you see the same thing just being recycled over and over again, and that's great, but you're not winning anybody else over that way.

That's one of the reasons I wanted to come together with somebody like Judy. She's really open and really honest that she tries to do the best she can, and she's always on this journey, and she doesn't back away from the fact that she really loved Reading Recovery.

She still will say she loves some aspects of Reading Recovery and that she learned so much, and that's healthy to be able to kind of sort through this and get rid of what doesn't work and embrace what does work.

That's really the goal of the show. It's not for us to TELL you what to do, I don't think that works; I want you to come to your own conclusions based on the conversations that we have.

Anna Geiger: Well, definitely, it's one of a kind. I listen to a lot of education podcasts and I've not heard anybody else doing that. You're very brave to people on your podcast that may disagree with you, I think, and the way that you react to them is always very respectful. I really appreciate that. It's a good example for people who are working to help other people change their heart and mind.

Thanks also for the reminder about humility, because most of us trying to bring about a change did not start out in this place, and it's very good to be honest about where we were and what brought us to where we are.

Maybe we can close with suggestions for first steps or first talking points. When you're a teacher who feels alone in your school and no one else really seems to care or be interested in learning about the science of reading, what might you do?

Faith Borkowsky: I think you could make small changes in your own room.

Teaching is a very unnatural profession if you think about it. You're with kids all day long. You're by yourself for the most part. You don't see adults until maybe your lunchtime, and then sometimes you're so busy, you just stay in your room doing what you have to do. You're really alone through your whole workday with little kids, and you don't really get much interaction unless you meet with somebody after school. You're in this silo not really knowing if you're doing the right thing or the wrong thing, and everything is trial and error.

So I would say start off small and see those small wins. See what happens if you just start off trying things.

I did that. I started off when I first became trained in something called Phono-Graphix, which is a speech-to-print program. I started using some of this in my classroom, going in that direction with words and breaking words down and thinking about the letters that match up with the sounds, and I started to see kids really getting it.

So I started to share these small changes that I was doing, and I think then people become curious, "Oh boy, that child never was able to do this. What did you do to get this child to do that?"

I mean, this happens even today where there are kids in school where they're going out to intervention and they're not making any progress, but then when I work with those kids, all of a sudden they start to make great gains. That's not to pat myself on the back, it's just from years of trial and error and experience, I'll recognize what to do to move them. Then that opens the door for more conversation.

So I think starting small, not expecting yourself to be able to take on everything at once, but maybe starting off with something where you could just try it. Then sharing it with people on your grade and an administrator, and having people watch and see and share, not telling people what to do or that they're wrong because that doesn't work.

It doesn't work to tell them that they're not following the science because there are a lot of deniers out there. It's not going to work really when you're just telling them to change like, "What's wrong with you? Get on board. There's something wrong with you." No, that just creates more resistance.

So I think the way to do it is to show those small wins, open up conversation, and remember that people are people and that if there is resistance, don't take it personally. I try to kind of have a Teflon coat on myself; I don't take anything

personally.

I just approach it as, "Well if that's how you feel right now, I'm sure it's because you're fearful that maybe you won't be able to still continue working in the same realm. You won't have the same opportunities or maybe what you thought will not be accepted anymore."

A lot of this is fear, and so we have to attack that with love. "I still care about you. I disagree with you, but I still care to know what you have to say." Maybe if we continue to have these conversations, we will see that maybe we could have this dialogue that wasn't there before.

Anna Geiger: Well, that is wonderful advice. Thank you so much for sharing all of that.

Can you remind me the name of your book, and did you write additional books in addition to the one for parents? Can you talk to us about those and anything else that you'd want to share with people who are listening?

Faith Borkowsky: Yeah. My latest book is "If Only I Would Have Known." It is a book that is a narrative play based on conversations a mother is having with a pediatrician, a preschool teacher, and a librarian. She had older children who went down this road of intervention, and now she wants to do something different for her youngest child and learns through these different community professionals what she should be doing.

Through this narrative, through this play format, I'm hoping to get parents aware of what to look for before their children even get to school. It's meant for parents from birth to age seven where they can learn about this, and hopefully people could give this book as a gift to pediatricians, to preschool and daycare workers, and to librarians, so they can learn it in a very easy, basic way. It's written for somebody who has very little knowledge about this and could just get the basics down. That's my latest book, "If Only I Would Have Known."

Then "Failing Students Or Failing Schools?" was the book that was recognized and won an award. Actually, my first book was "Reading Intervention Behind School Walls: Why Your Child Continues to Struggle," and then it was republished as "Failing Students Or Failing Schools?" Those books are pretty much for parents with kids in the school system already, and their children are in services and not advancing.

Anna Geiger: Wonderful. Anything else you'd like to share about where people can find you or learn more from you?

Faith Borkowsky: Sure. I'm on social media. I have a Facebook page, "High Five Literacy and Academic Coaching." I'm on Twitter, @FaithBorkowsky High Five Literacy. I'm on LinkedIn, and I have a little bit of a presence on Instagram. That's not really my favorite platform, but I have High Five Literacy, which I have to get better at using, to be honest. All the fancy videos, it's not really my thing, but I guess that's what people are looking for today, right? I have to get with the program.

Anna Geiger: I know, so do I. I'm not a big fan of making videos, but that has to be on my list.

Well, it was so nice to meet you, and thank you so much for sharing all of this.

Faith Borkowsky: Thank you, Anna. It was really a pleasure meeting with you. Thank you.

Anna Geiger: Thank you so much for listening. I want to give one more plug for Faith and Judy's podcast, "The Literacy View." I really love it because they do such a great job of interviewing people who may have different opinions. Also what's really interesting, if you start with the very first episode and go through now, which is what I did, you'll see how Judy's perspective has changed in a lot of things. It's really exciting. I hope you'll check that out, and all the other resources in the show notes, which you can find at reachallreaders.com/episode 144. 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

episode of Triple R Teaching.