Triple R Teaching

We're moving along in our Balanced to Structured Literacy Series, and this week I had the true delight of speaking with Heidi Jane, who is very active on TikTok and Instagram spreading the news about the science of reading. When she first started learning, she felt like she was all alone, but now she's found a whole community of teachers who are anxious to learn more. We'll get started right after the intro.

Intro: Welcome to Triple R Teaching, where we encourage you to think differently about education by helping you reflect, refine, and recharge. This isn't just about trying something new as you educate those entrusted to your care. We'll equip you with simple strategies and practical tips that will fill your toolbox and reignite your passion for teaching. It's time to reflect, refine, and recharge with your host, Anna Geiger.

Anna Geiger: Hello and welcome everyone! Today, I'm excited to interview Heidi Jane. If you follow the science of reading on TikTok or Instagram, you definitely know Heidi. She's @learningwithheidi on TikTok and @droppinknowledgewithheidi on Instagram. She is always there sharing lots of relevant information about the science of reading, and what's most exciting about Heidi is that she started out as a balanced literacy teacher, and she's very open about her journey and that's why we're thrilled to welcome her to our Balanced to Structured Literacy Podcast Series.

Welcome, Heidi. We're so glad you're here!

Heidi Jane: Thank you so much. I'm very excited to be here. Thank you for having me.

Anna: Can you tell us a little bit about your teaching background? Can you start with how you learned to teach reading, how you did that, and how it looked in your classroom?

Heidi: Sure. You know what? Cut me off if this goes too long because I have a lot to say about this. I completely 100% come from a balanced literacy, very much balanced literacy background. I was taught to teach kids to memorize words. I was a first grade teacher for eleven years, and I taught kids to memorize words, had my word wall, and

used leveled readers. I had two leveled libraries in my classroom, one for my guided reading, and the second for their book shopping. We used leveled assessments.That's how I always assessed my kids.

We didn't even get a phonics program until later, but that was kind of like thrown at us as, "Here, supplement a little bit with this," but we were still teaching whole language strategies such as guessing words. I literally had a lesson in our curriculum called Guess the Covered Word where we cover the word and the kids have to guess based on pictures. Those were the strategies that I knew.

My second year of teaching, my school that I was working at actually was identified as what's called a priority school. Are you familiar with that at all?

Anna: No, I'm not.

Heidi: A lot of people are not and I never was until this happened, but it basically means that we were identified as failing by the state and the federal government. We had a lot of federal mandates that came in to us such as we had to go to school for eight and a half hours a day with the kids. My day actually went from like 7:15 to 2:05 to 7:15 to 3:35. We added an hour and a half onto our school day, and we all knew that wasn't really a good thing. Let's work smarter maybe, not harder, right?

We had these people come in that we paid millions of dollars to that were called Turnaround Partners, and they were consultants who were coming in to turn the school around. Because if we didn't turn the school around in four years, we would get shut down.

Anna: Wow!

Heidi: Yeah, I've only told this story one other time in a different conference, but I refer back to that because when these Turnaround Partners came in, really what we did was we got pulled from our classrooms and a sub was put in our classrooms. We got pulled. I remember sitting in the library and they had us writing curriculum based on the common core standards. I guess this was their strategy to turn our school around.

I think back on it now because the thing is, why didn't they teach us about the science of reading?

Anna: What was their strategy in getting you to do that?

Heidi: I don't know. I think back on that time too and I'm like, "Can I pinpoint what their plan was to turn our school around?" I was one of the classrooms, one of the model classrooms, that was working really closely with them and I can't pinpoint it. They were great people and everything, but I cannot pinpoint what their strategy was on how we're going to turn this school around.

I'm a first grade teacher, right? And when I think back on it they never mentioned phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, or orthographic mapping. I didn't hear any of those terms ever until about two years ago. I didn't know what those were.

Anna: How did this turn out, and then what was the next step?

Heidi: So my third year in of teaching those long extended days, I was having a baby, my son, and so I decided I'm not going to work those long hours anymore. I ended up leaving and going and teaching in the elementary school where actually I went to school.

The school ended up getting shut down. It got shut down a year later, and it's now being used as a Montessori school. It did get shut down.

I went to work in my elementary school, which was wonderful! My kindergarten teacher was still there! It was nostalgia. Every day I walked in and smelled, I don't know, but if you've ever been back to your old schools, there's like a smell in the school that just is the same. It was great, but we were still not teaching our kids to read. I found out later that my district is very low. If you look at like all the districts in my state, we're kind of at the bottom. We are struggling in how to teach kids to read.

In 2020, and I might be jumping ahead here, but in 2020, I was trained in Reading Recovery, which is the program that my school used, my district used, for struggling readers. That's what our Title teachers used. This is what our kids got, tier two and tier three, and then tier one, we were using units of study. We were essentially failing our kids. I was too and I just didn't know.

Even through this Reading Recovery training, I never learned about phonemic awareness. I had never heard that term before. I went through my materials. I actually found my materials recently, and it's funny because there was an article in there, there was a Kilpatrick article and there was an article on orthographic mapping, but most of our time was spent on running records in MSV. We were watching videos of kids reading and we were marking the running records. We were doing that MSV training and learning more about that. That was what the majority of our training was on.

Anna: Did you ever have a chance to apply it, or did you just learn about it?

Heidi: No, because it was a year-long program and we were finishing in 2020. That's when the pandemic happened, so we had to actually finish our last two or three months or whatever that was virtually. But it was really basically the same stuff that I actually felt like I had been doing, because I had been doing running records. I had been using leveled readers.

Anna: In my experience, when I remember teaching with balanced literacy, I really felt like this was THE way to teach reading. The other ways weren't appropriate. I believed in phonics, of course, I mean, that's how I learned to read, but I felt like it was going to make reading not fun, and that decodable books were terrible. I thought that leveled books really promoted comprehension.

It took a lot for me to listen. What was it that got your attention?

Heidi: Yeah, I am the same way. I was a Jan Richardson fanatic, and I went to see her. I loved guided reading, and I was taught, I feel like you probably can relate to this, that there's this stigma around phonics and around decodable readers when you're in the balanced literacy world. You're kind of taught those are bad because they're boring and they're not fun.

Anna: I was a big fan of Regie Routman too and Lucy Calkins, and I had all their books, I actually still have their books because I want to be able to refer to them. I just loved them, and they're all marked up, because they really inspired you to be excited about teaching and reading, which I think is a positive thing.

Unfortunately, I think in Lucy Calkins' book, "The Art of Teaching Reading," there's like six pages about phonics. The book is six hundred pages long and there's like six pages about phonics. That's a real problem. But like you said, in many of the books I read,

they told me to use sound it out as a last resort because that was focusing on a discreet skill, which was a problem because it wasn't focusing on the big picture.

So what happened?

Heidi: I completely found out about the science of reading on accident. We had talked a little bit earlier that my husband is also a teacher. Well, I was working with my son, who was four at the time and had not started preschool. As my husband and I are both teachers, we saw a lot of students struggle, and we didn't want him to struggle. I have an older daughter and she struggled. So we were thinking that we're going to make sure he doesn't struggle!

He had already known his letters and sounds. For me, my next step was to start reading some CVC words. I was putting CVC words in a book and we were saying the sounds and reading the words together. Well, my husband, and if anybody's heard this story before, I literally just remember him walking down the stairs. I can picture the very day he walks downs the stairs, and I'm working with my son and he goes, "What are you doing?" It was kind of rude.

I'm like, "What do you mean? I'm working with him. We're learning how to read."

And he goes, "He's not ready for that."

I was like, "What are you talking about?"

Well, my husband was in the military, and when he got out he went back to school for teaching. He went to school after me. Well, after I had already graduated, they implemented something called the Foundations of Reading test, which touches a little bit on phonological and phonemic awareness. That's how he had exposure to it. He wasn't as familiar as we both are now, but he at least had heard of it and knew what it was.

He tells me that our son needed phonological and phonemic awareness. I'm telling you, I literally had no idea what he was talking about. I'm like, "What are you talking about? First of all, you're probably wrong because I've been teaching longer. And if this is true, why hasn't somebody told me about this? Somebody would've told me! You're wrong because do you know how long I have been teaching?" I had been teaching then for

probably nine years, and I'd been to a million PDs and no one told me about this, and they would've told me! I was sure! I had faith that somebody would've told me.

Actually I started researching those terms to prove him wrong, because I'm like, "You have no idea what you're talking about."

And now here we are. That's literally how I learned and how I started.

Anna: That's so interesting, so interesting! My husband is also a teacher, but he teaches New Testament Greek, so it's not quite the same.

Heidi: Oh wow!

Anna: I was learning the science of reading and when I taught my youngest to read, I used the structured literacy approach and everything. When he heard him sounding out all the words, really slowly, he said to me privately later, "That made me feel sad," because he was used to hearing the other kids "read" so quickly! But of course, he picked it up very quickly and he's a very advanced reader now, but it is hard at first to switch over!

I think it's so funny that your journey was to prove him wrong because that was mine, but it was with the Emily Hanford article. When blog commenters pointed me to that article, it totally blew up three-cueing and just killed me! First of all, I didn't believe it could possibly be true, because what did she know? Then more people mentioned it, and I thought, "Ugh, I guess I have to go read it so I can respond to it."

That was my plan, to put a blog post out refuting the article. I never could because she was actually right! She had it all figured out in a very easy to understand article, but that's just so interesting.

Tell me how you got started sharing on social media.

Heidi: I had been on Instagram and just recently at this time had gone on TikTok because my older daughter was like, "Mom, you need to be on TikTok, it's fun," but I wasn't sharing teaching content at the time.

At the time when I first went there, it was only dyslexia specialists, reading specialists, and speech pathologists sharing about the science reading. If I Googled or if I searched the hashtag phonemic awareness, that was all I could find. I was like, where are the classroom teachers? There were a couple like Sarah's Snippets and Meredith from Creativity to the Core, but that was it. Everybody else was specialists.

I felt like, well, I'm not a specialist, but I teach first grade and I should know how to teach these kids how to read! Really now that I've learned about phonemic awareness and a lot of other things, I can literally picture kids in my mind all the time who I could have helped if I had only known, right?

As a classroom teacher, I'm the first step. They can get tier two and tier three instruction if they need it, but I'm their first go-to. I'm the first, let's say, line of defense, against illiteracy, right? I should have known about these things.

I started sharing just a little bit because I was a nervous, because I'm just still learning myself. I just started sharing like little bits and pieces and really I think that it caught traction when I started talking about sight words.

You know How Emily Hanford blew up the MSV? That's my goal for sight words, because as a first grade teacher that was literally my life and it was so stressful. It was stressful for me. It was stressful for the kids! It was stressful for parents. It's like, wait a second, there's a better way here. Orthographic mapping and sight words really kind of became my thing. I think that's what kind of caught traction.

Then I randomly shared a video on TikTok of my son reading, and it got a bunch of views. I was like, do people on TikTok care about watching a kid learn how to read? Because a lot of people think it's just like dancing, right? But there's so much education going on on TikTok, I just started sharing more there and it caught traction there too.

I was just like, okay, well, I guess I'm not the only one who didn't know. It's okay to say we didn't know it. It's not our fault, even though I felt guilty at first and I felt like it was my fault. I want other teachers to also know it's not your fault. We can't do better until we know better.

Anna: I agree with all of that. I want to ask you, for people that are in balanced literacy,

they may not see that anything they're doing is wrong. It may seem to them like it's working. I thought it was working. I'm sure you thought it was working. But looking back, without giving too much detail that you're not comfortable giving, can you give us some examples of how you look back and think, "Oh, now I know I could have done that better."

Heidi: Oh yeah. I'll just talk about this one girl who always pops into my mind. I remember sitting with her and working with her, and I was doing all this, I know the listeners can't see me, but I'm tapping my shoulder, then my elbow, then my wrist, /k/, /ă/, /t/, /k/, /ă/, /t/, and then I go "cat." She's just staring at me. I'm like "cat" (said very slowly) and she's still just staring at me. I'm like "cat" (said very slowly in a different tone), and she's still just staring at me.

I didn't know what else to do. She was getting some tier three interventions, and I'm talking to the Title teacher asking, "What else can we do?" The Title teacher is still using leveled readers with her as well.

Well, NOW I know she didn't have the foundation of phonological and phonemic awareness. She probably was unable to identify even a beginning sound. If I said "cat," can you tell me what sound you hear in the beginning of the word "cat?" I'm almost positive she would not have been able to say /k/. Those are the skills that kids need to be successful readers.

Phonemic awareness is so important. That's just one example of a time where I'm like, "Oh, if only I had known. I know I could have helped her."

Anna: Yes, I have sad stories like that too. Now that I'm studying a lot about dyslexia, I know for sure that I had students with dyslexia. My advice to the parents was, well, read to them more and practice these leveled books more, which were not what was going to do the job. Then I think, especially now too as I learn so much, I really think that it's really important that third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade teachers study this stuff too!

My first three years of teaching were in a combined class, the third, fourth and fifth grades actually. Then after that, I moved on to primary grades, but I didn't know much at all, except how I learned to read. I hadn't studied anything about digraphs or any of that stuff in college. When I had a third grader who couldn't spell CVC and CVCE words, she kept mixing them up, it just didn't occur to me that I should give her a phonics assessment and give her some explicit instruction after school for ten minutes a day.

I mean, that would've really made a difference. This is for everybody, all teachers that teach children, not just for primary teachers, because when it gets missed in the primary grades, and it does, middle grade teachers can figure out what to do. Everyone needs this information, which brings me to your membership.

Tell us about your brand new science of reading membership and how you started that and what's included.

Heidi: This is a track that I never thought I would be on, let's just say that. But when I started sharing, a lot of teachers and a lot of parents also were like, "Well, where can I find a resource about this? Or where can I learn more about this?" I started linking everything to different websites that I was using, different books that I was using, or resources, and then a lot of times I couldn't find a resource!

I started creating these resources because I saw a need and people were asking for them. It's nothing I ever thought I would do. Then some people were like, "Well, can I just buy all of your science of reading stuff, like a science of reading bundle?" So I created that. Then I started getting messages like, "Well, how do I even use this stuff?" People would just get the stuff and then they were like, "Now what?" So I created a membership. I created the science of reading 101 membership for people who would like a little bit more support.

Inside the membership, you'll get all of the materials, but they're organized in a way to where if you are teaching CVC words tomorrow, you can literally go to the membership, click on CVC words, and grab everything you need. Watch a couple videos, grab some lessons and go. Then there's also monthly live meetings with them. There's a member Q & A section where I'm answering all of their questions. There's a place where they can request resources. There's some exclusive resources.

I just want it to be tailored towards the members and towards what they need, because it's really built as a support. How can I better support these teachers who are looking to make the change and unlearn all the things like I am? Even though I have learned a lot, I still feel like I learn new things all the time.

Can you still learn about the science of reading without joining the membership? Absolutely. Like I said, it's all out there for you. I just felt like I got a lot of messages from people who wanted that extra support and a place to go. That's what the membership is for.

Anna: Yeah, and really it's a time saver, right? It's helping someone just zero in on exactly what they need. What would you say to someone who, whether or not they choose to join your membership, what are some resources that you found really helpful, maybe specific books or other places where you've learned a lot in the last couple years?

Heidi: I always recommend the book "Know Better, Do Better" by David and Meredith Liben. It's so clear, and it is written so nicely. It's an easy read with practical tips and great background information on how we got here, why we shouldn't stick with balanced literacy, and how we even got to that point. Why we shouldn't use leveled readers, and then practical tips and tricks for teaching things like phonological and phonemic awareness. I love that book for that reason. It's a great starting point.

Then also I always recommend the free training from Really Great Reading, and they have it from pre-K through 12th grade. You can literally just take the free training and be done. They don't send you a ton of emails afterwards like, "Hey, buy this. Buy that." They don't even do that.

Anna: Awesome. Well, I will link to all these things in the show notes. If anyone, again, wants to find Heidi Jane, if you for some reason haven't found her yet, you can check her out on TikTok @learningwithheidi or on Instagram @droppinknowledgewithheidi. Thank you so much for joining us today, Heidi.

Heidi: Thank you. It was great talking with you.

Anna: Thanks so much for listening. In the show notes today, you can find all of Heidi's recommended resources, as well as places to find her, including her science of reading membership. The show notes are located at reachallreaders.com/episode82. We'll