Triple R Teaching

We have a special treat today on our Balanced to Structured Literacy podcast series. You get to hear from Jessica Farmer of Farmer Loves Phonics. She's active on TikTok and Instagram, and there she shares lots of helpful resources, links to freebies, examples of her lessons, and so much wonderful information about her experience teaching first grade. I know you're going to love the insights that she shares today, so we'll get right into it 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: Hello everybody! Today I'm very excited to be talking with Jessica Farmer from Farmer Loves Phonics, you may have seen her on TikTok and Instagram. She is an exciting first grade teacher who has been sharing on social media about the science of reading for the past couple of years. Like everyone else we've been interviewing, she was in balanced literacy for quite some time, and she's open and honest about that. She's a great person to learn from. So welcome, Jessica!

Jessica: Thank you! I'm really excited to be here.

Anna: We're really glad to have you. Can you tell us a little bit about the way you taught reading before you understood the science of reading?

Jessica: Before I learned about the science of reading, I did a lot of looking at the picture to figure out that unknown word. I had those posters on the wall, "Eagle Eye, Skippy Frog, Flippy Dolphin," and I taught a lot of those strategies. I used a lot of leveled readers.

Funny enough, over time, I learned that phonics was kind of helping my kids, and so I started to kind of slowly do more, but that was just on my own accord of what I saw

happening. I feel like my brain kind of realized, "Oh, something's going on here, this is making more of an impact." I started to use some decodables, but I didn't really know the why, I just knew this was helping my kids.

I was fully trained in guided reading, and I still have a book in my classroom that I'm not allowed to get rid of, but I don't use it anymore. I very much followed those guided reading practices and taught those guessing strategies that I now know are not good strategies to teach kids.

Anna: So I know you did that for about ten years, and you said before we started recording that Emily Hanford's article, which I've mentioned to people many times, was kind of your eye-opener. Can you talk to us a little bit about how you came upon that article and what your reaction was?

Jessica: Yeah, so I was in a first grade Facebook group and someone suggested, "Join this Facebook group, it's called 'The Science of Reading - What I Should Have Learned in College.' It's an excellent group and you can learn more about reading." So I joined this group and I just start reading everything that was posted, and I'm like, "Oh my goodness, let me read more, and more, and more."

The first thing I read was Emily Hanford's "At a Loss for Words," and I start reading this article and my heart was just beating so fast because I'm like, "Oh my goodness, I'm doing all of these things that it's saying I should not be doing, and these are things that poor readers do, not good readers."

So I started inviting all my teacher friends into this Facebook group, where you got to read these articles, and you got to learn this information because our district was very much balanced literacy, and in college I had learned balanced literacy. I didn't know in college that it was called that, but I took four reading courses in college and not a single one touched on anything I learned from that science of reading Facebook group. So that's what started it all.

Anna: Well, I totally know what you mean by having a visceral reaction to that article because I know it made me actually feel sick. When I first joined that big science of reading Facebook group (which is awesome, but you do need to have a little bit of a thick skin because some people are pretty opinionated), I would literally have a tightness in my chest, and I could only go in for about ten minutes a day until later on. Like you said, there's just so much. Now, I go in there often and I sign up for all the free webinars and put them in a folder and I watch all the recordings when I can. It's a great source of free PD, and some of it you pay for, but it's pretty inexpensive.

Was this during the pandemic, when you were doing your big learning of all of this?

Jessica: Yes, around January of 2020 is when I found the Facebook group.

Anna: Does that mean that you started changing how you were teaching virtually, or when did this start to impact your instruction?

Jessica: I think as soon as I started reading about strategies that might be harmful, I kind of slowly started to make that shift. I was already kind of delving into decodable readers and more at the phonics, but I didn't know much about phonemic awareness and those foundational skills that come beforehand. I had maybe heard phonological awareness a few times in college, some of the guided reading books touch on that, but it's more of just to do a couple activities here and there. It wasn't that explicit, systematic teaching that builds upon each other, it was just kind of sporadic and random. You can count syllables or you can rhyme, but there was nothing systematic about it at all.

So then by March of 2020, we were going on spring break. I went to the teacher of the year banquet because I had gotten teacher of the year that year, and then we went on spring break and they said, "You're not coming back for... we don't know yet, maybe two weeks." So we took a week and we learned how to do some things online. We learned how to post assignments and things. We weren't doing full virtual teaching because there just wasn't enough time to train us on that, and public schools had never really done that before, it was completely new. We were using Microsoft Teams, which was originally made for businesses, not for schools, so it really wasn't super user-friendly.

During that time is when I started my TikTok, and I started making phonics TikToks for my students because we weren't finishing out the year and there was so much more to learn, and I was learning all these new things. So that's kind of where my social media presence began, it was in March of 2020.

Anna: That is awesome. I'm sure they just loved that.

I've seen on your Instagram, you get really practical, which I'm sure people love, the way you walk through how you do your small group lessons. Can you talk us through a little bit about what it looks like teaching reading in your classroom and also do your

students transition out of decodable books during the year, or what's your perspective on when to let go of the training wheels?

Jessica: So this year has been very different of all years because a lot of our students were virtual last year. They might have been virtual the whole year, or might have been virtual half the year, meaning they were at home learning via computer, and so the instruction was maybe not the same. Internet issues, logging on in time, attendance problems with the virtual learning, it just was a very disrupted year. So a lot of our students right now are lacking a lot of those foundational skills, and they also missed that fourth-quarter of whatever the previous year was. So for my students, it would've been pre-K that they missed, the end of pre-K, for anybody who attended that. So we're just seeing a lot of gaps in learning this year.

So this year I have not let go of decodables at all because I just don't have anybody there yet. But in other years I have had students who would be ready to let go. I do have to level my students, it's a requirement, it's not my favorite assessment, but we do give a leveled A through J assessment for first grade. So I would say anybody who is maybe H and above, who has learned most of those forty-four phonemes, they're probably ready to start digging into some other books.

I am totally for free choice at the library, I don't dictate what my kids get. When we go to the library, you pick a book that interests you, you take that home and share it with your parents. In the classroom, my library's also free choice, pick what you want, but at my small group table, it's the text that has the patterns that they've learned, so they can really dig into those skills that we've been working on.

Anna: Could you talk to us a little bit about how many groups you have, how often you meet with them, just all the logistics that people would love to know?

Jessica: Yeah, so I'm lucky to have a nice small group. I have seventeen students this year. Florida's cap is 18, which I know some states have no cap on their class size, but we're lucky to have that class size. Although they can go over the class size, but primary grades are maxed at 18 students. We do have high English language learner population in Florida, so we have a lot of speakers of other languages. I think that the small class size is really important in our state.

My groups are between three to five students, it depends on where they're at. They kind of are fluid, I will shift kids frequently. If I see someone gaining some traction, oh, I'm going to bump you up to this group that's working on magic E because you're really grasping that from whole group already, so let me move you up. While this group's still working on consonant blends at the beginning and the end.

I have about five groups right now. It was four, sometimes it might only have been three groups, sometimes it might be six groups, it really just depends on how they're fitting at the moment.

I rotate through two groups in the morning. I was only doing one group in the morning and then we have special intervention time in the afternoon, where we kind of shift kids around and group those kids based on needs, but we can switch classrooms at that point. So if there's a child in this classroom, in that classroom, and in this classroom that all kind of fit together, then let's shift those kids for intervention and put them together, so we can really dig in to what those kids need.

So since you're working with other teachers, kids can be seen more often, is that what you're saying?

Jessica: Yeah. We kind of share the wealth, and we're lucky to have support staff as well.

Anna: Can you tell us what are some of the biggest bang-for-your-buck activities that you do in your small groups that you would feel like you've seen the biggest difference while using?

Jessica: Yeah. I love word chaining! That is the big activity, and my kids love it too, but it's excellent because you are building that phonemic awareness. At the start, you say the word, they repeat the word, they can tap out the word or stretch the word, and then they're spelling the word. So then you're working on the decoding as well, and then the encoding - the spelling - of it. I love word chaining.

There's different ways you can do it, you can do it with letters or you can do it without letters, depending on the group of students that you're working with. I tend to do it with letters for all my kids that know at least their basic letter sounds. You definitely could start with letters. You might not want to use letters for kids that don't have a solid foundation in that sound-symbol correspondence. You might want to just use chips to begin with before they're ready to include those letters, but that definitely is an activity that I use almost daily.

It doesn't take a ton of planning, as long as you have that list of words that you're going

to chain, and you've got your paper that you're going to word chain on (which I have in my TPT store and I have a free one), then word chaining is excellent because you're hitting so many components. You can really see who is able to manipulate those sounds, and who's struggling to change that one sound each time you're changing the word.

Anna: I know in your Instagram you're always sharing things like places to get lessons and places to get decodables, where do you go first? Are you just on a bunch of mailing lists? How do you stay on top of where to find things?

Jessica: So that science of reading Facebook group really is what started my compilation of all these free resources because as a teacher our budget is very limited and sometimes we spend all our money at the beginning of the school year. I know in Florida, we're given a little stipend of money and we get that at the beginning of the school year, but once you spend that then it's all your own money, and teachers spend so much of their own money on supplies.

So I thought, you know what, all these people are sharing these great resources that are free, let me compile them. So I started my first link tree, and I was just linking every single thing that I could find and searching that group for free resources. Then over time, anytime something would pop up, I would add it to the link tree. I kind of became the freebie finder. I know some people have called me the freebie queen on Instagram because I'm always finding freebies and sharing them because I just know that teachers, they need that, especially towards the end of the school year.

Anna: Is the link tree something that there's just a URL for that someone can go to and see all your recommendations?

Jessica: It's always linked in my bio on my TikTok or Instagram.

Anna: Awesome. So when I link to your Instagram account in the show notes, people will be able to find all the resources and that's great because we can trust you. We know that they're vetted by somebody who understands.

Jessica: Yes, and I've used them all!

Anna: Yeah, that's also good, they're kid-tested.

Can you tell us, if someone was new to the science of reading, besides joining the Facebook group, which I think is something good to do, but is a little overwhelming for someone who's brand new, are there any particular books that you would recommend people getting started with?

Jessica: I love recommending "Uncovering the Logic of English." It's not a difficult read. It could be overwhelming because of all the rules if you never learned those when you were in school. I did not learn the spelling rules in school and I was a terrible speller because of that. It could be overwhelming because of that, but it's actually a really easy read, and it's a good one because it teaches you all the spelling rules as you're reading. But it has also some of that basic science of reading information at the beginning of the book. It's a good reference to have, just to have those thirty-one spelling rules right there, so that's usually a go-to.

Anything by Kilpatrick, Moats, Anita Archer, they're all excellent people to look for when you are looking for a science of reading book.

I do have an Amazon favorites page, and I have a section called PD books. So if you click there, I have tons of books. I have not read them all, because I can't afford to buy them all at once, but I'm slowly chipping away. I have read "Speech to Print," I've read "Uncovering the Logic of English," and I've read some Kilpatrick books. I'm just kind of chipping away and finding the time to read as well.

Podcasts are great, too. Amplify has free podcasts, Voyager has free podcasts, and I love that you're doing these podcasts with all these science of reading influencers, so that's exciting.

Anna: So tell us about starting to create things for Teachers Pay Teachers, and what inspires you to decide what to create?

Jessica: For years, I wanted to start a Teachers Pay Teachers store, but I just didn't really know where to begin. I was always creating my own things for my classroom, but I just never thought anybody would want them. I thought, why am I going to spend time opening the store, when no one's going to look at them and no one's going to buy them, and I didn't have a social media presence.

Then once I started making videos and showing things I was doing in my classroom and people were like, "Can I buy that? Where do I get that?" I was like, "Oh, I just made that myself. You would buy that? Really?" And so as people started asking me that more and more and more and more, I talked to my husband, and I'm like, "Do you think I should start a store? People keep asking me if I sell this stuff and I don't sell it. Do you think I should sell it?"

And he was like, "Sure, why not?"

I just dove in and I thought, what do I personally need? The first thing I needed was things for my small group table because I was pulling all these resources and it was just taking me a lot of time, so why don't I just make something that I can use and maybe people will like to use it too. Small groups is always the thing I was being asked about - what do you do in small groups? How do you structure your small groups? If we're not supposed to do guided reading, what are we supposed to do?

So I thought, "Well, I think I can make a really nice lesson plan to follow and then maybe some activities to go with it." So that was kind of my first idea, let me make some small group resources for people because that's what they need.

Anna: Well, like I said, it's really great that you're in the trenches. People know that you've tried it and you know that it works.

In the show notes, we will definitely link the books that Jessica recommended, her Instagram account so you can check out her link tree, and also her small group resources on TPT and then you can also explore the rest of her store.

Thanks so much for joining us, Jessica! We appreciate hearing about your experience with balanced literacy and I'm sure we'll have a lot more people finding you on Instagram and TikTok.

Jessica: I'm so excited. I can't wait to meet new people who are on this journey as well and want to learn more because my page is about always learning. We are always learning together, no one ever knows it all, I definitely don't know it all. So my page is always open for discussion. I answer every DM that gets sent to me, I'm very open and very down to earth, so don't be afraid to reach out to me because I will chat with anybody.

Anna: Awesome. Well, thank you so much.

Thank you so much for joining us today. You can find all of Jessica's recommendations as well as links to her content in the show notes, which you'll find at reachallreaders.com/episode84. See you next time!