Triple R Teaching

Way back in 2020, when I was first diving deep into the research surrounding how we teach reading. I learned that there was a new book coming called, "Shifting the Balance: 6 Ways to Bring the Science of Reading into the Balanced Literacy Classroom," and you can bet that I pre-ordered that thing as quickly as I could. I couldn't wait to get my hands on it. By the time it came out in 2021, I really had come to a good understanding of the science of reading and what it meant for how I promote the teaching of reading, but I love the book and I continue to recommend it to people who are getting started in their science of reading journey. Today, we are honored to speak with the authors of "Shifting the Balance," Jan Burkins and Kari Yates, and 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, and welcome! We're so excited to have Jan Burkins and Kari Yates, who are authors of "Shifting the Balance: 6 Ways to Bring the Science of Reading into the Balanced Literacy Classroom." Jan and Kari have a huge amount of experience between them, from classroom teachers to reading interventionists and literacy coaches, as well as principal. It's exciting to hear from them to learn what led them to embrace the science of reading and to support teachers as they make shifts in their teaching. Welcome Jan and Kari!

Jan: Thank you so much, Anna.

Kari: Thank you. We're really excited to be here!

Anna: I'm really glad to have you. Can one of you maybe start speaking to what it was that got your attention when it comes to the current research and led you to reevaluate some things you had been promoting in education.

Kari: I can start. For me, when the Emily Hanford article first came out, I was in a district leadership position. I can actually remember when the first teacher forwarded that to my boss, who then forwarded it to me and said, "What do you make of this?" I think I wrote a multi-page, fairly irritated response to what I thought of it, but it got some things playing in the back of my mind, I think, and that article was followed by a whole myriad of others.

There was an EdWeek series that came out when I was working with a school in the south, I think maybe about a year later. I can remember that principal basically was really thinking about this EdWeek piece and said to me something like, "Kari, it's really tough out here. My superintendent is pushing me on the practices that we and the teachers are really promoting in our school, and what will people like you do to help educators in the field?" By "people like you," I think she meant people who are doing professional development and writing and blogging and so forth. That really felt like a real call to accountability, and to dig in more deeply.

I think I actually connected with Jan at a conference, not too long after that conversation.

Jan: Yes, I was having my own kind of journey. We were close friends and I had just been watching the tension, I guess tension is almost a euphemism, it's bigger than tension, in the field.

Kari: Polarization.

Jan: Polarization, just animosity even, anger, attacks, I guess. Like Kari, I originally dismissed some things, but I had been struggling with the use of predictable text and had issues with it. I can remember being in a workshop thinking, can we even do this? Is this working, really? That was simultaneous or almost around the same time, so I don't know if I was kind of ripe for opening up to that idea.

I think at that conference that Kari mentioned, there was a session on the science of reading and what it might mean. The audience at that conference was balanced literacy educators, and so we went to that session and were just really struck by the whole tone that was about how to rebut, how to shut down, what these criticisms were.

There was some point in that meeting where I just thought, wait a minute. I mean, maybe we should take a minute and just listen and look closely. Could this many people

be absolutely wrong about something before we shut it all down? I don't know why, I don't know why there was that moment.

Anytime we think about something, since we have an audience, we're always thinking about supporting them and it didn't take long to feel like, "Wow, we've got to think this through for our readership. We have some responsibility here."

You don't have to follow that chain of reaction long to feel pretty sick to your stomach, actually sick to your stomach might be euphemism too. It's like, oh gosh, and so then we started talking about writing a book.

Kari: Well, I think the first thing that happened, Jan, is you invited me to dig into the research with you to sort of be a thought partner with you. If I'm honest, I have to really admit that when you did and when I said yes, I was probably equal parts interested in strengthening my own ability to rebut a lot of what was being said. I was interested in being able to forward a strong argument in ways that I didn't feel equipped to do.

But I think what happened along the way was, I mean, we joke about this, but I think what kept happening for us, we were sort of saying in a variety of ways, "Oh, wow. There's something here to think about that we've got to look at." There are some things that really affected practices that we both embraced, used ourselves, and promoted with other educators.

Anna: That is very interesting because I know exactly what you mean. When I read that article, I would go on my walks and I would start to like think, "What can I say? I'm going to write a blog post, and I'm going to refute this article." It just kept going over and over in my head and I never got there, because I really didn't have the answers.

So then I went to a Facebook group of other people like me that have blogs or are selling resources, and I asked, "I know a lot of you are on the same page, you do three-cueing with leveled books and everything. What do you think of this article?" I was only putting that there to get people to help me know how to respond to it, to refute it. I was just so surprised that a whole bunch of people wrote there that they used to teach that way, but now they use decodable books and everything else and it just opened my eyes. I had no idea it was that big right now. They put in a whole bunch of professional books, and I bought them all and started reading.

I joined that big science of reading Facebook group at the time, and I literally did feel sick. I could only be in for ten minutes a day, because I felt a visceral reaction to all this

stuff.It was so hard because it felt like it was turning everything I believed upside down.

Then you just have to work through it for a while, and then you start to realize that not everything you did was wrong, but like you said, there are some shifts you have to make.

Do you remember some of the books or resources that you were studying that really helped you see things a little differently?

Jan: Yeah, I'm sure they're the ones you studied too. Marilyn Adams book was a favorite, I think it's "Beginning to Read: Learning and Thinking About Print."

Anna: Which is not a new book, interestingly.

Jan: No, it's not a new book, and I had read it before! I read it in my doctoral program, and at the time I zoomed in around different parts of it, but for some reason, it just did not resonate with me the way it did this time around.

Kari: We did a really deep dive into books and articles, and it's interesting, because I was thinking about this idea of favorite resources, and a resource that we learned about only later, we didn't know it at the time we were writing the book, but boy, this is a beauty and it's "Making Speech Visible: Constructing Words Can Help Children Organize," by Jeannine Herron.

Jan: It's a beautiful book.

Kari: Beauty that I wish we'd have had! That's the kind of a book we found ourselves longing for in all of the reading we were doing. We kept asking ourselves, how do you bridge the research and the practice in really practical ways for teachers? I love that book.

The David Kilpatrick, "Equipped for Reading Success," which it's this spiral-bound book that has a lot of exercises for building phonemic proficiency, but boy, the front matter of that text I found to be so helpful. We're always looking for resources that are sort of

helpful in synthesizing the bits and pieces. That was one that really stood out to me too.

Jan: "Know Better, Do Better" by David and Meredith Liben, and they were actually very kind to us in the writing of our book. They were very gracious and supportive in sending us resources. We really tried to find meta-analysis and work from meta-analysis as much as possible. I don't know, we were bordering on manic, I think, with just kind of immersing ourselves for fifteen hours a day for a year.

Kari: Yeah. The other experience that was happening for me kind of at the beginning of this was, I was participating in LETRS training in my home district. We wouldn't want to leave out Louisa Moats and her influence in a variety of ways.

Jan: Her book is "Speech to Print."

Kari: Quite frankly, first run through that LETRS text is also... There's a few pages that are just... I kind of almost giggle now, when I look at my angry scribblings all over them, because I was a little triggered on day one especially, as I remember.

Jan: I can remember she called me and she was like, "Oh my gosh, you won't believe what they're saying!"

Anna: This is so funny, because I actually, when I bought all those books that they recommended in that Facebook group, the first time through, I had a lot of comments on the side like, "Well, so HE says, or blah, blah, blah." Because I didn't... And I would always look and see, what do they say about three-cueing, because I was still holding onto that.

But now I read them differently and I understand, but it just takes a lot of reading the same thing over and over for it to all start to come together and start to make sense.

Kari: It's so true. There's this Willingham article that is about comprehension, and we read that article early on, but we've come back to it recently, because it has become a favorite resource to share with other educators and is such a great example for me of background knowledge and how background knowledge really affects what you take out of a text.

Jan: One of the things we were thinking about, in addition to the fact that some of the texts are pretty dense, or maybe inaccessible if you're just getting into this, was that in many, there's a lot of language that we had to really read past that was really triggering. There's some references to things that just really could make someone really, really triggered.

It began to confirm for us one of the reasons, perhaps, that balanced literacy educators were more hesitant about this, is because if they went and picked up one of these books, they might feel attacked. So it was just confirmation that there might be something we could do that would be of service to balanced literacy educators.

Kari: We've tried to approach this under the umbrella idea that, yes, this is "head" work, but this is also "heart" work. We're really calling on people to, in some cases, make smaller shifts to their practice, but in some cases make some really substantial shifts that require letting go. I mean, it's no small thing to think about what's being said about three-cueing systems, so "head" work and "heart" work.

Initially when Jan said we should write about this, it is not a lie when I say my answer was,"Absolutely not! You think I'm going to just throw myself headlong into THIS? No, not going to do that," but she's persistent in ways that if you don't know Jan, you maybe don't yet know the definition of the word persistent.

I mean, I think for me, what became appealing, what really drew me into this, was wanting to find a way to share information in such a way that supports the "heart" work side of this.

Honestly, we've been called out on this idea that we sort of mollycoddle teachers, or we act like teachers can't handle the truth. Of course, that's NOT what we think. We know teachers can handle the truth, but I think we want to do it with respect.

We challenged ourselves to really think about not just the science of learning to read, but also what's the science of human and organizational change, and what do we need to do in order to support this really important change work within organizations, because the change can only happen through adults. If adults are feeling attacked, or threatened, or defensive, they're never going to be their best with children.

We just, I think, came to believe that maybe that was a place where we could situate some work. Not that we're the experts on the science of reading, we try to be super

clear that what we've written is just an entry point, maybe it starts to help you build some background knowledge that is supportive to you as you decide what else you're going to read or do to grow yourself.

Anna: Yeah, I think that's great. When I look at your book, I think of it as a bridge, as a starters guide, a beginner's guide. And I know I've read that criticism too, that this idea... I can think of someone who said, "Teachers are fine. They're not that sensitive. You can just say it like it is."

Well, if that's really what's been done for the last forty years, it hasn't worked. Teachers love what they do and they're passionate about what they do, but they're also passionate about how they do it. For someone to come in and accuse them by saying, "What you're doing is damaging kids," that's harsh language.

I tried this in that Facebook group. I said, "Can we have a gentle discussion about the difference between balanced and structured literacy?" We had a really good discussion going, because I know a lot of people leave that group when they first join, because they ask a question and someone jumps on them and it was going really well. But then someone jumped in with all caps, "I'M SO SICK OF THIS GENTLE STUFF, IT'S TIME TO..." And then she just started "yelling" at people. "Yelling," I say in quotes, but that's what it feels like when you're using all caps. And I just shut the post down, because it was not helpful, just yelling at people to change doesn't work.

Kari: Yeah, and we understand the argument that children can't wait and they've got a limited window and there is real urgency, and making one tiny little shift won't do it. But also we're real believers in the domino effect, and if you can get some momentum going, then big things can potentially follow, but taking care of ourselves and each other is an important part of the work as well.

Anna: I think some people in the balanced literacy community are very concerned about switching to, "the science of reading." I know you don't really switch to the science of reading, but what that's been called, because it's sounds very clinical, very boring, and that's not why they became teachers. They became teachers because they love literacy and reading and they want to communicate that, and they're afraid that by making this shift, that's not going to happen.

What would you say to teachers who are hesitant, because you do speak a lot to balanced literacy teachers? I guess a better question is, what have you found has been a big point of resistance for them?

Kari: I'm a believer that resistance is how fear presents itself. Information is helpful. One of the ways we decided to write the book that I think really works is to select misunderstandings and to sort of untangle misunderstandings, and I think that has worked.

I just want to say that I think at the heart of the matter is, every educator knows and thinks about students they haven't been able to help to learn to read and write in the ways that they wanted to. That's what we lean on when we need courage for this work. We all know what we've done in the past hasn't worked for ALL children, and so the good news is that there is evidence, and there are other ways of doing this that will be more effective for many of the children who have not succeeded in our current systems.

Jan: When you asked what are the points that get kind of pushback, I don't feel like we get a ton of pushback from balanced literacy educators. It's interesting, but I hadn't thought about it until you just said it. I think the way that we wrote the book was that it starts with comprehension, which is a point of agreement, and then the science builds gradually, so that by the time you get to chapter five, which is the biggest moment where you're rethinking MSV, and then chapter six decodable text, by then you understand a bit of the why. So something about building that case logically and gradually.

The other thing I think too, if we meet with hesitation or resistance, I don't know if it's from raising teenagers, or what it is, but we've learned a little bit about not just pushing back harder and taking a deep breath. Being dogmatic and categorical and absolute is the last thing that is persuasive to people. We've done some reading about how resistance manifests and in embracing curiosity and vulnerability and finding entry points as ways to go about this work.

Kari: We were really listening also for the grain of truth, because usually with resistance, there's some truth to whatever the pushback is and people need to feel heard. They need to feel honored in their concerns.

Jan: The reason we did the online class was because the book could only do so much, and the online class, it follows the same structure, but it just goes a lot deeper. It's a lot more methodical of that building, there is a landscape of those chapters, like you don't just dip into chapter three or chapter four or chapter five, the book is meant to be building and cumulative.

Kari: And every shift, whether in the book or in the online class, starts with the why.

We start with clearing up those misunderstandings and then we move to really practical shifts for the classroom. We want for every educator to read our book and come away thinking, "Wow, some of my current practices were really affirmed, I can do even more of certain things. I'm really on track with what's going to make learning to read easier. And there are also certain practices that maybe I have that I need to strengthen or that I used to use that I should bring back."

We hear from people all the time, "I used to do that, but I quit doing it. I'm going to bring that back."

And then of course, some practices that we need to say, we thought it was right at the time, but now we know better. We're going to let go of that one and move on or do it differently.

Anna: So you have your book, "Shifting the Balance," which of course we'll link to that in the show notes, as well as your online course. How often does the course open?

Jan: We run it six times a year.

Anna: Okay, so it's very accessible. You have a website I know with resources for the book. Can you talk a little bit about those?

Kari: Yeah, we have lots of free downloads on the site. If you have the book, you know that the book is laced with references to more resources to support that, but those resources are free and downloadable to anybody, whether you're reading the book or not. There's something there to support the shift in every chapter, and we do add to those downloadables all the time.

When our book came out, we had the chance to learn from many other people who read our book and who had ideas for us. It gives us a chance to, again, practice that managing of our defenses and really trying to listen for the truth in what's being said to us, even though some days, it's not that fun to open your email or look at your Facebook and see what someone has to offer you.

But we really took to heart some of the feedback we got about shifts five and six, because some of the feedback was that maybe we didn't go far enough and maybe we left it murky or unclear to teachers, in terms of what was intended there. We have a

part of our website that's dedicated to really answering some questions about that for people who might have questions about it. In our online class, we took extra care to really be explicit and clear about our intentions with five and six, and we've been really careful to have that work vetted by some people who are deeply embedded in the science of reading communities.

Jan: Chapter four, which is about sight words, seems to be one of the most accessible entry points, because balanced literacy educators don't feel like they're nailing sight word instruction, for the most part. They don't love flashcards, but that's what a lot of folks are doing. So we have some resources, a mini course and some classroom materials, coming out to support high frequency word instruction.

Anna: Great. All right, well thank you so much! And thank you for all that you guys are doing to bridge the gap, because that's just so important and hard to find people who understand both sides and are open and honest about what they're learning. It was a treat to have you here and I'll definitely link to all those things in the show notes.

Jan: Yeah, we appreciate you.

Kari: We so appreciate you, and we really are appreciative of this opportunity.

Jan: We do appreciate you as a bridge builder and it seems like your work is particularly addressing the ongoing question of, among other things, what are the children doing while teachers are working with small groups? We've been impressed by the materials that you put out there! We first heard of you when we were with Marnie Ginsberg, and she was referring to bridge builders, I think she mentioned you and Margaret Goldberg. We're grateful for being able to connect with you.

Anna: Well, thank you very much. I'm always excited when someone has heard of me, and to be in the same sentence as Margaret Goldberg is a big compliment. I really have a lot of respect for her. Thank you so much.

Kari: Thank you.

Jan: Take care, Anna.

Anna: Thank you so much for listening today, and you can check out the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode88.