Triple R Teaching

Hello, this is Anna Geiger from Reach All Readers and I'm also the author of the book,

to help your staff learn more about the science of reading.

In today's episode, I'm interviewing Julie Speidel, who worked with her staff to help them understand and apply the science of reading. She walks us through her whole journey from when she was a balanced literacy teacher, to changing her understandings, and then the challenges, and ultimately success, that she faced when helping her staff move away from the more balanced literacy methods to more explicit instruction and more intentional instruction in foundational skills, as well as oral language and comprehension.

What I love about her story is it's very clear this is not always smooth sailing and there are ups and downs, but everyone is moving forward together, and you'll see how she developed a relationship with her staff as well as with the administrator so that all of them could work together to make these changes. Here we go!

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Julie!

Julie Speidel: Hi, there! Thank you for having me on.

Anna Geiger: Let's go back in time a little bit and tell us how you got into education.

Julie Speidel: Growing up I always knew that I wanted to be working with children, and I ended up in education. It's interesting because thinking about what area I wanted to focus in on, I thought to myself, "You know what? I just don't want to do early childhood. I just don't want to be responsible for teaching a kid how to read because that's so important, and I don't want to mess them up."

My initial license was first through sixth grade and I started as a fifth grade teacher

teaching ELA part-time and working as a special ed para.

Then I got a job full-time as a second grade teacher in the building, and that's where my heart is. Even to this day, I love second grade. I think not only are they just learning so much, but they're developing their sense of humor, their independence, and it's such a big, big learning age.

I went back to school and got my degree as a reading specialist, then I got a job in Cudahy working as a reading specialist in 2014, and that's what I have been doing ever since.

Anna Geiger: I can relate to what you said about how not wanting to teach the primary grades where you're actually teaching kids to read because that's how I felt after I left college. I had classes in teaching reading, but we never really talked about how you get kids started with reading and I felt like, "Well, I'm going to teach the middle grades because I don't know how to teach kids to read, and I don't want to mess them up."

I wish I would've known that that's important to know no matter what grade you teach, especially in those middle grades when kids are stuck, if you don't know how it all begins, then you don't know how to help them.

But yeah, I can totally relate to that. A lot of it was just learning on the job and learning as I've done in the past few years.

So you've been in this position for about 10 years, but you shared with me that you have not always understood the idea of the science of reading and structured literacy. Can you go back in time and talk to us about what you were doing at first?

Julie Speidel: So one of the pieces that we talked about in our master's program is the importance of not specifically diagnosing, but still assessing our students to figure out what level they're at. In my district where I was a second grade teacher, I was really pushing for getting some sort of assessment in there, and we actually used the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System. I was the leader and was gung-ho getting that into our building.

We assessed our students, but one of the things that we discovered was it was so overwhelming. I mean, you would sit with some kids for 10 minutes trying to figure out their right exact level!

Anna Geiger: Or longer.

Julie Speidel: Right! And what are the rest of the kids doing during that time? Not learning. It is not a valuable use of their time at all.

We got in their LLI program to do leveled text and working with it and using the three-queing system like, "Look at the first letter, think about the picture, what are you reading? What would make sense in this sentence?" Those were our go-tos; that's what we were working through.

Then when I came to the Cudahy District, I was like, "Yes, I know Fountas & Pinnell. I got to go to Chicago and I did their training with LLI, I met them, and I am totally on board, I know what to do, this is familiar."

So when I first came, that's where we were at. Our district had a hodgepodge of phonics programs. They were teaching phonics, but they were not teaching it consistently. We had five elementary schools in my district when I started and each school was using something different.

Our school was using, and we had somebody who was trained, on Wilson. They had brought in Fundations, and so I was intervening with that right away. That's structured literacy right there to an extent, because that's Orton-Gillingham based.

I'm reading these things and I'm like, "Oh, CK at the end of a word is because of the short vowel?" I mean, light bulbs were going off for me because growing up, I went to my lower elementary years in Florida and it was a big phonics state and a big push. Having those pieces, I knew how important it was.

I tried to get kids to sound out words and things, but then going to the training with Fountas & Pinnell, I mean, we had a consulting firm come in and they're like, "Know better, do better." They just kept saying that over and over again.

I think it was last month that I came across that it was actually Maya Angelou's quote, and it's, "Do the best you can until you know better. And then when you know better, do better." That very much resonated with me.

Even back then I was like, "Oh, this three-cueing system, this is the bomb. You've got to try this. This is the better." And it's not the better.

Anna Geiger: It sounds like from what you said that your master's program got the importance of assessment, but they were teaching you to use the wrong tools, and then you use the wrong tools thinking that those were useful because many of us thought that those levels meant something and now we find out they're basically arbitrary.

In your training with Fountas & Pinnell, did they talk a lot about teaching phonics to kids or were they more about using context and pictures and the first letter?

Julie Speidel: There was a lot of word-part things. There were games and things that went with the programs, but it wasn't very much honed in on a certain skill or a certain phonics pattern or something along those lines where they're going to be having that direct practice with it afterwards or within the text.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. So it was more embedded or haphazard?

Julie Speidel: Yes.

Anna Geiger: Which feels... That's the way that I did it for a long time too, and to me that felt like the better way. It felt more meaningful and for me it was nice. I felt like I had this freedom to know my students and to do what was needed at the time, but like you, I didn't really.

Even though I also learned with phonics, I didn't know all those phonics patterns because I had no program that was teaching them to me, and I had not learned them in college or graduate school. It's interesting how programs can also teach teachers, like you said, and Fundations was helping.

Now you were the specialist, what about in Tier 1? What kind of phonics instruction were the kids getting then?

Julie Speidel: In phonics, it was all over the place originally.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Julie Speidel: When I first came, they had Journeys and everybody was using their own phonics program. We had that for two years, I believe, and it was heavily focused on the Core standards, the Common Core standards.

Then we went through the process of adopting Benchmark Literacy, and that did have a phonics component. As specialists, we said, "Okay, we're getting this program and everybody is using this phonics program." The tool we started using was the easyCBM.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Julie Speidel: Then we eventually moved over to AIMSweb. We would do all of these early education assessments and early literacy assessments, and we would just be like, "Okay, here's where they are, here's where they're going," and kind of tracking that piece.

We weren't seeing growth. As a Tier 3 interventionist, I was seeing kids continue through the intensive intervention, or they would be referred for special education. We followed the protocols, the letter of the law, how many interventions to do, and we just weren't seeing the growth. I was doing LLI with them, and I was finding those pieces were missing.

Then that's when I started getting into David Kilpatrick and reading about the importance of phonemic awareness.

So then I said to my principal that as a district, we weren't aligned. Our schools were kind of an island, and so I said, "I want to try this." I would see growth in the kids in my small groups, but then it wasn't consistent back into the Tier 1 classroom, so the growth still wasn't happening.

In February 2021, I actually looked back in my notes from our meeting agendas, and we said that we need to have more direct instruction in our early literacy. We started to dig into it and kind of came across some webinars and things like that that. We were looking at this going, "Oh my gosh!" Our mind was blown.

I got really irritated and frustrated with my master's program because I was listening to the dates in these things and we're talking like 2000, 1999, the Simple View of Reading, I believe that's the '80s. I was just like, "Why didn't they teach me this?"

Anna Geiger: Yeah, we all feel that way.

Julie Speidel: So then I went down a rabbit hole of science of reading and dug in and took everything I could. I came across your program, your blogs, and that summer I took your Teaching Every Reader course.

Then our director of instruction at the time, she reached out to the Department of Instruction to see where the state was going and got connected with a consulting company called Schools Cubed and Pati Montgomery.

They came in and did an assessment, an audit, of what our classrooms were doing, and how they were teaching, and how we could do better, and then we signed a contract to work with them for three years on improving and switching over to that structured literacy piece that the science of reading shows is more effective.

It was a ton of heavy lifting that first year.

Anna Geiger: I know you mentioned in your notes before we were talking about how you don't want to make teachers feel like what they've been doing all this time has been wrong. You want to support them in moving forward, but you don't want to put a heavy burden on teachers because of course not everything was wrong, but also there were some practices that need improvement. Do you have any advice for someone who's working with teachers and trying to help them make the shift in a supportive way versus an accusatory way?

Julie Speidel: I have made many mistakes in how I went about doing that, and the best information on that that I can offer is listen to your teachers and present the information and listen to what they're saying back.

There are lots of whys. Have the answers. If you don't know the answer, don't be afraid to say, "Hey, I'm going to go find that out."

The other piece that I got was that this is just a pendulum shift. This is going to go and it's going to be here for a little while, and then I'm going to have to go back to a different way of teaching. I would bring it back to that, and this is where I'm not quite sure of my numbers, about 75% of kids are going to learn to read no matter how you teach them.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, I think it's lower. I think you're referring to Nancy Young's Ladder of Reading and Writing, and I think it could be up to 50%, maybe 40-50%. But you're right that some kids, even if you use balanced literacy, they're going to be fine. Now, they could be better, but they're going to appear just fine. But to your point, many kids won't. A large percentage of kids must have this structured approach or they're just not going to be good readers and spellers.

Julie Speidel: Right. So why not change this practice? I mean, it's not a pendulum shift, it's an actual way of teaching that makes sense, and something that I don't want to go away from until I know better again.

Anna Geiger: You've already talked a little bit about what was happening already. It was kind of haphazard, different programs for different teachers in one school, no phonics program. Can you compare that to what's happening in classrooms now? And also talk a little bit about your data and how that's shifted?

Julie Speidel: Every teacher is teaching the phonics to fidelity, and that is insured by the specialists in the building coming in and doing observations and providing feedback.

In our buildings, it's not like observations in the past where your principal would come in and he would let you know, "Hey, I'm coming in to see you. I'm going to be observing this. Where's your lesson plan?" All of those things. The specialists and my principal were part of almost every planning session initially, and the first two years it kind of got a little busier when we merged schools and we went from a school of like 130 to a school of almost 300.

It's not just the phonics and the phonemic awareness piece. Our lesson plans include all of those five pillars from what a lesson needs for that structured literacy. Those pieces are all there.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. For someone listening, that would be, you're also teaching comprehension, building fluency, and teaching vocabulary.

When I visited a school in your district, I did see that. We got to go to different classrooms and see phonemic awareness being taught, we saw phonics lessons. We saw phoneme-grapheme mapping, which is application of phonics skills. We saw a teacher explicitly teaching vocabulary and another teacher teaching comprehension. It was really neat.

I love how you talked about how the visits to the classrooms are different now. It seems to me that the previous visits, and I know because I've had them as a teacher, were more almost like a pop quiz or a test, whereas now they're more of a coaching session. I'm assuming the teachers are interested in your feedback, and it's more of almost a problem-solving situation where you're working together to help fix any issues that there might be. Would you agree?

Julie Speidel: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. That's personally how I run our sessions. I want them to come to me and say, "This is not working." I mean, I am curious to see how this shift would've gone in my first two years of teaching or my first two years as a coach versus having almost been there eight years. I mean, there's a lot of trust building. You talk about building trust with students in your classroom. It was building that trust with the teachers and letting them know that I'm in this too.

I guess that would be part of my advice is you have to make yourself vulnerable and show them that this is a struggle for you too. You don't know everything, and it's all a collaboration. There's no hierarchy.

However, they do still do that. They're always like, "Oh, Ms. Speidel is here! The police are coming to check to make sure I'm doing it right."

I think some of that goes away when you're in the classroom so much. I was in and out of there every day, whether it was coming to get students to take them to do

intervention, and I would always stay for an extra 30 seconds to see or if it was interacting with the lesson. I knew what the lesson was because I was part of the planning process.

The other piece that I would suggest if you're making the shift, and I apologize, this is kind of going all over squirrel moment in my brain.

Anna Geiger: No problem.

Julie Speidel: Is that first year I didn't try to tackle everything. My first year I really focused in on how to improve the phonics component, putting together something that allowed for that extra meaningful practice as a class.

We decided that our best route of instruction was for everybody to use the same materials as we created slideshows, and then we would put together practice grids of the letters. They would go through and say all the different letter names and then do the sounds, and then you could say, call on certain groups to do that.

It was very engaging and quick and you could isolate, "I know these three kids are struggling with a certain sound, I want to have just these three kids go and see if I can hear them doing it."

Then we also did the same thing for our high frequency words, spiraling the ones we're practicing, and having the new ones in there.

We have district routines now for how to teach our high frequency words. We have district routines for how to teach our vocabulary and those kinds of things, so putting those in place. That first year we did that, we got those in place.

Then we also worked on, it's called the six-step lesson plan. It was designed for a small group situation where you introduce one new letter, you review three letters, and you practice those, and then it kind of scaffolds and goes... So then once you have your phonics skill, then you introduce the high frequency words, and then you go into the decodable that practices the phonics skill that you did and work through those pieces.

We kind of took that. We use that in our small group, and we used that for kindergarten when they were ready for a book, first grade, and second grade. We worked really hard to make sure that those pieces were in place. Our first year we didn't have good decodables, so Schools Cubed recommended we purchase the Super Readers, Challenge Readers from Voyager Sopris, The Power Readers.

Anna Geiger: Yes, and they're very inexpensive.

Julie Speidel: Yes. And the primary phonics ones.

My school had some extra funding through state funds and federal funds, and I did research and we got in some other decodables. I created so much that first year, basically like a card catalog of phonics skills for all of the extra titles that we got. Teachers could come and pull books because they knew, "Oh, we're working on EIGH. I need a book that practices that." They would go to the spreadsheet and find it, they'd come to my room and check out the books for their small group, and things like that. You have to have the resources available.

Anna Geiger: When I look at how you've worked to build trust and help support your teachers as you do this, here are some things I noted. First of all, there's very much a team mindset. It's not you at the top saying, "You've got to do this. Now I'm checking on you." It's more, "I'm learning this with you and here are the things I've learned. I didn't always know these things and here's why we're going to do them."

You talked about the importance of why, not just giving instructions.

You also have a humble and vulnerable perspective in terms of admitting past mistakes. "We all have things that we wish we'd done differently as teachers, and we need to be able to accept that and be open about that. But also now we know better, so let me share with you the tools that will help you implement this approach."

And you've got that lesson plan, which sounds to me like a pattern for explicit instruction because so many of us didn't really know what that was, didn't really understand what it means, to be explicit in our teaching, and then to fill in that review. It's scaffolded practice.

You give them what they need to do that, but then also you're there to help them as

they figure this out. I like how you said you were in their classrooms often, and hopefully that was a comfort to them versus a scary feeling. And the more you build that relationship, the more that can be not a scary thing but, "Oh, good, she's here to help and give me feedback."

You talked about when you shared with them feedback, you start with the positive. We all know how important that is. Teaching is such a personal thing. We really need that for someone to start with a positive and acknowledge what we're doing. Teaching is wonderful, but really tough, even on good days. There are just so many things that go into it. I love that you're able to start that way with your teachers.

As we get closer to wrapping this up, the teachers prior to this were doing more of their own thing kind of, but now there were a lot more expectations from the district and support from you in terms of, "We're all doing this." How did that go over, and how have the teachers feelings toward this explicit structured instruction changed over time? Are there any stories you could share or any comments about how the teachers feel about this and what they've seen?

Julie Speidel: Yeah, so we've actually had that conversation, and I can specifically think of sitting down and the faces of these teachers saying how overwhelmed and burnt out that they felt initially. At the same time though, they wouldn't go back and do it differently because by basically being thrown in the pool, you learn to swim. If it had kind of been rolled out a little more gradually, they may not have bought in as quickly because they could still kind of do their own thing and be wishy-washy with it.

Is there a better way to do it? There might've been. We could have maybe in that first year just focused in on that small group. Maybe that's the piece that we should have done.

But as I said, the teachers said, "I don't know if I would've done it differently."

Other teachers sitting around were going, "You know what? I think you're right." They were kind of feeling that same thing.

I think having the level of support that they had from myself and the other specialists in the school I think was tantamount as well.

The fact that the principals were involved and that the principals were part of the trainings and the principals were part of the walkthroughs, that was huge. That puts your principal to them in an approachable light because they're in there just as frequently, not doing those official pop quiz type observations. It was very informal.

We had the opportunity to talk through these observations and what we were seeing, what's working, what's not working, how can we tweak this? Then having the specialists go back to the teachers and having those grade level meetings. I think that has been very helpful.

Anna Geiger: A lot of people now are talking about how can we make changes and implement the science of reading and structured literacy? So many kids are failing, but it's a hard thing to do because just kind of jumping in can turn some people off, and it can be overwhelming.

But you have a success story where you did that. You had the specialists come in and teachers knew we're just going to do this now. There was lots and lots of support, but it was hard at first. What are teachers saying about it now a couple years later? Do they compare the way they used to teach with how they teach now and what do they think?

Julie Speidel: They're seeing the difference in their students.

One of the big pieces that we worked on with our younger grades is that oral language development, getting them to talk about what they're reading, talk about the phonics skills, talk about the rules, talk about the vocabulary. We can see the progression in our students.

It's crazy because I'll walk in, and I'll be doing an observation and be like, am I watching a YouTube video of a class doing this? You watch these exemplar YouTube videos of kids saying, "I heard you say that the word soar means to fly high above." And they're doing it! They're practicing it, they're responding, and it's sticking with them.

Walking down the hall to kindergarten I hear, "Ms. Smith, we're having a crop of fresh vegetables for our snack today!" And your heart just goes, yes! You're just so thrilled. In that sense, we're seeing that happening drastically.

We're also seeing... You had asked about the data side earlier. We're seeing kids that

are not stuck in intensive intervention. They're moving back into the classroom. I don't have specific data on this, but I would say I probably referred two to three students a year around that second and third grade level, as they had had the opportunity to go through the different interventions by that point.

In the past three years, there has been one student that I would say needs some special education testing and referral. Even though three to one seems very small, it's still huge.

The other piece is kids would just continually be in those interventions because they weren't getting it. Now they do their structured intervention with us in the Tier 3 level, but what they're doing in the classroom is supported by that.

It's so much extra practice that just from this year to next year, in second grade, we started the year I think with four or five small groups for intensive interventions in second grade. Not that they were below the 25th percentile, they were just below the 50th percentile.

Anna Geiger: Gotcha.

Julie Speidel: We started with four of those. Moving into third grade for next year, we have none.

Anna Geiger: Oh, wow! That's so exciting!

Julie Speidel: For our first graders, we use the CORE phonics screener, so we know which skills that they're missing, which ones that they need to work on that have been previously taught. And so in our intensive intervention, let's say we'll work on short U, and we will use the decodable from the classroom, and we have that six-step lesson plan that we format. They practice the skill, they practice the high frequency words, they practice reading the text multiple times, and they do that with us for 15 minutes. Then they also do it in their classroom with their classroom teacher for 15 minutes. They practice writing the words and things like that.

It's repetition of these skills and just kind of moving that needle slowly initially so that when we get to those upper levels, we're finding that we don't need as much support.

Anna Geiger: You're taking care of most of it in the early grades, which is what we're supposed to do.

Julie Speidel: Yeah. We're doing it in kindergarten too like, "What letters do they know? What letters don't they know? How can we work on this? How can we improve it with their handwriting? How can we tie it all together?"

I think I referenced purposeful practice. "If this is what I'm teaching, how can I practice this multiple times in multiple ways, what can I connect together so that it makes sense?"

Anna Geiger: We covered a lot of things. We talked about your journey about how there was a lot of hodgepodge things going on. You brought in outside support, you dove right in. It was hard at first, but there was lots of support from the reading specialists.

As the years have gone by, the teachers have really seen a huge change in their students. You have fewer kids that are stuck in intervention, I should say. You're taking care of what they needs in intervention versus kind of wondering what to do next.

For me, that's been a huge difference between the idea of balanced and structured literacy is, "Oh, now I understand the big picture."

I also understand the use of a universal screener and then a diagnostic. I know how to pin down what's the problem, and I know what to do to fix it. And I have a system, like your school does, for helping kids get what they need when they need it, but then move them out so they don't have to be stuck in this extra support forever because we can take care of it.

Are there any final thoughts that you have or resources that you would send people to, whether classroom teachers or reading specialists, to learn more things that you found really helpful?

Julie Speidel: Yeah, I would definitely say as a team, I think that they would very much benefit from doing the "Shifting the Balance" book together, because I think it really

portrays what balanced literacy is and what structured literacy is, and seeing that we're not throwing the baby out with the bathwater. There are things that are the same, and they're easy shifts. There is no set way of how to do this, and it's going to be a struggle.

For phonemic awareness, David Kilpatrick's "Equipped for Reading Success," that book to me was very helpful.

I don't mean to be a plug for your program, but that Teaching Every Reader course, it was very helpful.

Surprisingly, Stanislaus-

Anna Geiger: Dehaene, I think it's Dehaene. I think I heard him pronounce it that way. It's tricky.

Julie Speidel: A neurobiologist talking about how your brain... I find him very engaging. Other people are probably like, "He's so dry," but I'm just a nerd. We were actually showing some of his clips to the teachers now on how is this working? Trying to get them still to understand and buy in.

Anita Archer has been huge with that vocabulary piece and the student engagement.

Then I did the first portion of LETRS, and that was very eye-opening. It's very similar to what our state is mandating that 4K through third grade teachers and principals have to go through mandatory training, and the program that we're using is similar, but those pieces are very eye-opening.

Anna Geiger: Well, I will be sure to link all those things in the show notes. Is it okay if people send me questions that I pass them on to you and then you can help a teacher?

Julie Speidel: Absolutely.

Anna Geiger: That'd be great because I'm sure a lot of people have more questions

about the specific things that you were doing that we didn't get into. Also, especially someone in a reading specialist position that's trying to support their staff, that can be a tricky thing.

Thanks so much for sharing your story. I know this is going to help a lot of teachers.

Julie Speidel: Well, thank you for giving me the opportunity to do this.

Anna Geiger: This is actually the second in a four-part series talking about the work that a school district has done to move from balanced to structured literacy. That is Cudahy in Wisconsin. Last week I talked to Candice Johnson, this week it was Julie. Next week will be another reading specialist from the school. Then finally, in the fourth week, we'll talk to Pati Montgomery, leader of Schools Cubed.

With that, I want you to check out the show notes, and you can get all the links to the resources that Julie mentioned. You can find those at reachallreaders.com/episode185. 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.