

Glean Education's Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast Episode #13 - Leslie Zoroya (LA County Office of Education)

Leslie Zoroya:

Yeah. A couple of years ago, Emily Hanford's work for APM reports came out and that was really instrumental in launching this initiative. We had known that there were reading issues in LA county and we know that so many kids are not taught how to read based on signs of reading and that there are all kinds of sketchy practices going on out of the world. We read these articles and we pulled all of the data for LA county and we realized that we just had hundreds of schools that were struggling with reading. We decided we needed to plant a flag. We needed to take a stance and say that Lacos position is that teaching, reading foundational skills through the science of approach is what we are going to put our money on.

Speaker 2:

The results they've been immediate. We had one of the biggest shifts in the state.

Speaker 3:

It's almost magical when it all comes together. And I think to myself, this is what education is about.

Speaker 4: There were inequities everywhere. My students in south Texas ultimately taught me more than I taught them.

Speaker 5: Over 40% of our students were leaving third grade with less than proficient reading skills and that was just something we had to stop.

Speaker 6: The bottom line is that we can prevent reading failure. We can change the trajectory of these students lives and I just want to shout from rooftops it can be done.

Jessica Hamman: From Glean Education, this is Ed Leaders in Literacy. A podcast series that features educators and administrators who have made hard decisions about instruction, curriculum, intervention, and school systems to close the achievement gap and build equity by improving literacy. First, a word from our sponsors.

Speaker 8: Go ahead and state your name and title and what you about enjoy about working here.

Kimmy: My name is Kimmy and I am the learning and engagement specialist here at Heggerty. I love working here because I am surrounded by colleagues who are passionate about the science of reading, passionate about seeing kids learn how to read and get all the skills that they need.

Jessica Hamman:

Heggerty's daily phonemic awareness curriculum is used by over 450 school districts nationwide. Learn how you can get started at heggerty.org. That's H-E-G-G-E-R-T-Y dot O-R-G. I'm Jessica Hamman, founder of Glean Education and on the show today is Leslie Zoroya, reading and language arts coordinator at the Los Angeles county office of education. Leslie supports the 81 school districts in LA county with literacy training and technical assistance. She provides literacy professional development, onsite coaching, online courses, and hosts the leading literacy podcast. She also spent five years working on a special literacy project in the LA COE juvenile court schools, implementing reading intervention programs at 17 probation camps and starting dorm school and classroom libraries for students. She wrote curriculum, coached teachers and mentored three new literacy based programs in the division. Leslie is also the coordinator of the Los Angeles county spelling bee. She began the competition 15 years ago and has grown the program to be a well known and beloved yearly event in the county. Hey Leslie, nice to see you. Thank you for joining us.

Leslie Zoroya: Thanks So much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Jessica Hamman:

You work for the Los Angeles county office of education, which is the largest county office in all of education. For our listeners outside of California who don't know what county office of education is, can you tell us a bit about the work you do as a part of the COE and what a COE is?

Sure. A county office of education is usually an entity that oversees primarily the fiscal operation of the school districts within that county. But we also have other divisions and I belong to the division of curriculum and instructional services. In that we have units that address different areas of the curriculum. My part is as the reading language arts coordinator and my primary role is really as a support provider to all things literacy for K12. I do a lot of professional development. I do coaching. I work with principals and district leaders. I provide personalized technical assistance and I also serve as a liaison for state initiatives.

Leslie Zoroya:

A lot of things that are happening in the state of California don't filter down necessarily to the district level. I serve on a state committee for language arts and we try to disseminate information through that. And then of course like you mentioned the spelling bee, I host some large scale events, student events, conferences, that kind of thing. In a county of 1.3 million students, it's a myriad of roles and responsibilities and I really do feel the weight of it. I really do want every single child in our county to get the best literacy instruction that they can receive and to know and love reading and writing and the power of that. It's a big job. The work is never done.

Jessica Hamman:

How did you get involved in education to begin with what's the start of your story?

Leslie Zoroya:

Well, I would say I was a reader from the get go. I grew up in a crazy dysfunctional household in a small town in Indiana. I found that the local public library was my Haven. I spent all summer sitting in

the public library. I kind of always knew I would be a teacher. I was one of those bossy little kids who bossed all our friends around and I always had to play the teacher. I was the first in my family to go to college and there was just something that I knew the importance of literacy early on. I became a middle school teacher. Middle school felt like the right place for me. I think you have to be a little perpetually 12 to survive in middle school and I think I'm a little bit that way.

Leslie Zoroya:

I became a middle school teacher and the thing that I found there is that a lot of the kids that I was teaching in middle school could not read well. They had a lot of reading issues and I became a squeaky wheel. My principal was really annoyed with me because at every staff meeting I would raise my hand and say, "when are we going to talk about the fact that the kids can't read? Why are we talking about the dance on Friday when the kids can't read?" I was the bane of his existence. But eventually one of the elective wheel teachers retired and I said to him, "can I fill that spot and teach reading?" And he said, "yes." So I took that spot. I knew nothing about how to teach reading. I was a secondary teacher trained as a secondary teacher.

Leslie Zoroya:

I had to learn and I eventually went back and got a reading credential and learned how to teach reading, but I was making it up. It really just highlighted for me the fact that we had no not been trained correctly in how to teach reading. Most secondary teachers know very little about reading in terms of early foundational reading skills. And then I also just felt like it was a very loose structure of literacy. There was no rhyme or reason to it. I did that for a few years. And then I got the opportunity to come to the

county office on a grant. This was many years ago. I won't say how many because it ages me, but it was a long time ago and it was a secondary literacy grant. And it was the first time that any money had ever been allocated for secondary literacy. They were looking for folks to come and work on this grant and I got an opportunity to do that. That was sort of the start of my journey at the county office. I have been there ever since and in a variety of different roles.

Jessica Hamman:

How exciting. I love that you're talking about secondary literacy because a lot of times we have a focus on primary. Foundational skills in primary education, but there's so much need in the middle school and secondary level too.

Leslie Zoroya:

Yeah. Absolutely. The thing that I feel for teachers in that particular area is that if you have not had any direct training in those issues, how to address the older struggling reader, it's really tough. You really sort of feel like, well, I don't know what to do and so a lot of teachers just sort of keep plugging along and, and no intervention really happens. It's continues to be a big issue.

Jessica Hamman:

Was the answer going back and getting those learning as a teacher about the foundational skills and then bringing those back and not assuming students had it? What is the answer for those middle and high school struggling students and the teachers who serve them?

Leslie Zoroya:

I would say yes, every teacher of literacy needs to understand how foundational skills work and how someone learns to read. I had a really interesting experience recently. In the last couple of years a security guard at our offices came to me and asked me to help him with reading. He had asked around and said, "who could teach me to read here?" And they sent him my way. I met with him weekly to help him learn to read after his shift. He would come in and sit with me. He could read, but he couldn't decode multisyllabic words. It's exactly the same things that our older struggling readers struggle with. I did the rewards program with him. It's Anita Archer's program rewards.

Leslie Zoroya:

I did that with him for 45 minute it's once a week and then I had him read out loud with me. We read a book together, we talked about it, and then we worked on these discreet skills and he really did. He was really making excellent progress and then COVID hit. I haven't seen him since COVID, we've all been working at home. But that experience of teaching an adult who, oh my gosh, was so brave to come to me and to say, can you help me with reading? It was just the most fabulous experience for me, let alone for him. But it was a really great way to highlight the fact that these are the same issues that our middle and high school kids are facing. If we do not intervene, those issues are compounded. You know how it is, the Matthew effect. Be better if you get better and you get worse if you don't.

Jessica Hamman:

I love that story and it makes me think of another area that you had worked in which is working in the Los Angeles county juvenile court schools. Most likely with middle and high school and upper students as well. Can you tell us a little bit about that experience and how you got involved in that area?

I was on a team that was organized by LACO to reorganize and revitalize instruction in our county court schools. In the state of California, when a student is arrested for something, they go to a juvenile hall and they stay there until their case is heard. And then if they are sentenced to time, then they serve their time at a juvenile facility that's run by probation. Probation runs those operations, but LACO is responsible for their schooling within those settings. On this project, we decided to completely overhaul the entire program. We implemented reading intervention classes and teachers needed so much support. They had been doing really just packet instruction. There was a lot of focus on keeping the kids quiet and maintaining control of the classroom. We really to sort of start over. It really was like building a school from the ground up.

Leslie Zoroya:

We had to start over with the teachers and then the kids had so many issues. They were severely behind. Most of them had interrupted schooling. They had addiction, poverty, homelessness. A lot of them were in foster youth. It was every kind of trauma that you could possibly imagine these kids had been through. We really had to just sort of start from the beginning. It was an amazing, amazing experience for me as an educator because it completely gave me exposure to every aspect of running a school and experience in those areas. It was quite amazing.

Jessica Hamman:

Was there anything that surprised you out of those years of working with incarcerated youth.

Yes. Everything. Everything surprised me because I realized that our students were the same as any other high school student. Some of them had tattoos and looked scarier. People would always say to me, are you scared to go in there? I would say, no, they're just kids. They are just kids. Most of that persona was an act of survival. They really were scared, insecure, traumatized. Breaking through all of those issues was really the key. We found that they wanted to learn. They wanted to be successful. They really loved one on one time. Any time that they got to spend time with a teacher or another adult, they flourished getting that time and attention. I really felt like they were sort of at the end of the day, amazing humans because they had had come through things that I don't know if I could have come through.

Leslie Zoroya:

They were still there to talk about it and they still cared about learning. I think first and foremost, it highlighted the importance of attending to the social, emotional stuff. I think we know that now. The relationships and the social emotional piece is first. No learning gets through that barrier. It's the gatekeeper to learning. We also found that the relationships were huge. Kids really cared about fairness. Fairness was the big thing. We capitalized on that and we tried to talk about fairness and loyalty. They were very much about what was fair and what was loyal. Those kinds of things really appealed to them. And then we tested every single kid. We used read 180, scholastic's read 180 as our primary. Is it still Scholastic? I think it might be something else now, as our primary intervention.

Leslie Zoroya:

And then we also infused literacy into the rest of the day. We had kids build bookshelves in the shop. They had a shop class. We tried

to have kids take ownership over this library project by, they built the bookshelves that we put in the dorm. And then we put those dorm libraries in and probation said to us they'll be destroyed in a week. I don't know why you're bothering. I trained the kids to be dorm librarians. I went down to the dorms and I said, okay, look, this is your job. You're going to take care of these books. You're going to check them out. You created a system. It took a while and I removed books that were tagged or ripped or destroyed because I didn't want them to see that. I wanted them to see that we take care of books and all of that.

Leslie Zoroya:

Over time, we did take out some stacks of books, but over time it shifted. The culture shifted. I would go into the dorm and see stacks of books next to their beds.

Jessica Hamman: Oh, I love it.

Leslie Zoroya:

I know. It really just very exciting. And then we also had time built into the school day where they could read, at SSR time, so they could read. Because these were kids that had never experienced reading as a pleasure and seeing themselves as proficient readers. They had never had that. A lot of them had never had anyone read to them when they were little. We bought all kinds of books. Some of the books that they loved were kid books because they had never experienced those. Diary a Wimpy Kid was huge. But then we had kids who read Twilight and Harry Potter and all of the traditional literature that middle and high school kids love, but a lot of them really to struggled.

We tried to make it okay to read whatever you could read. Just read. They really did learn to enjoy books and to find themselves in books. That was really one of the primary goals was to teach them to read, to make sure that every kid there could read so that they could finish their schooling and be able to go out into the world when they left our setting and have opportunities to go to college or to go to a career or wherever their journey took them.

Jessica Hamman:

Besides you as an instructor there, were the other instructors prepared to teach literacy in these prison schools and what kind supports did you have for them to learn how to teach literacy effectively?

Leslie Zoroya:

We really had to start over with the teachers. A lot of it was coaching. I was there five years along with other people. This was not just me. I'm not a lone ranger by anyway, this was an entire team of folk that work together. We wrote curriculum, we coached teachers and I think the first thing was the same thing we had to do with kids, which was to attend to the teacher's emotional wellbeing. We had mandates that we had to do so there was other things behind this initiative that made it mandated. There's a tendency to want to go in and sort of just push everything. Here's what you're going to do and we have to do it and you must do it.

Leslie Zoroya:

But if you don't attend to the teacher's wellbeing and how they're doing, it was very stressful. It was very stressful for them. It was

stressful for everyone. We tried to attend to the teachers, tried to deal with morale. We tried to be uplifting. And then we just did a ton of coaching and training. Relationships were big. I would say that one of the things that we focused on the most was about goals and outcomes. They really did not have learning targets for their daily lessons. They were not used to doing that. We talked a lot about learning targets and making it very clear for kids. What do I need to learn today? How will I know that I did that? It was not only important for the teachers so that they could have the correct supports. If you don't know what your learning target is, how do you create supports for kids around that?

Leslie Zoroya:

It's really hard to do that. It was important for the teachers, but it was also important for the students because kids really wanted to know, especially these boys, they wanted to know, what do you want me to do today? And how do I know that I did that? And accomplishing things, they were very into getting certificates and prizes and stickers, they loved all of that. It's because they'd never really experienced that. They needed a lot of love. They needed a lot of affirmation. Having a learning target not only help the teacher prepare for instruction, but help the kid really know what am I supposed to do today? And then did I accomplish that? If they did accomplish that, they loved knowing that they accomplished that. Every little accomplishment for them was really huge.

Leslie Zoroya:

We spent, oh my gosh, like three years working on learning and language objectives and just hammering it all the time and just talking about it and sharing people's objectives and how did it work and what happened with that objective and just really spending a long time making sure that that was solid. And then there were

other things that we did to try and bring relevant reading. That really mattered. We're not going to do something, forgive me, but boring, same old, same old. We had to jazz up the curriculum to get these kids interested in it. We had to up the rigor. There was a lot of issues with expectations for what the kids could do because their skills were low. There was kind of an issue with low rigor. We had to talk to them about the rigor can still be high, but we can put in some scaffolds to make it accessible for kids.

Leslie Zoroya:

Spent a ton of time around that. And then LACO eventually turned all of these schools into what's called road to success academies. They went through a whole process to be certified. It was a whole program that LACO created around project based learning led by Diana Velazquez who was amazing. It was a five or six year initiative and the kids learned to do project based learning. It was amazing work. It was really building schools all over again from the ground up. We started with one facility where there had been some issues and there were some mandates and then we ended up taking it system wide and changed all of the schools. It was great training ground for me as an educator to just see every aspect of school environment and how to, how to basically build a school from the ground up.

Jessica Hamman:

So exciting and I'm sure it fed a lot of the work that you're doing now. One thing is I noticed that you're doing something called a getting reading right initiative and I'd love to hear what that's all about.

Yeah. A couple of years ago, Emily Hanford's work for APM reports came out and that was really instrumental in launching this initiative. Her articles and audio documentary, Hard Words and What the Words Say, were really life changing for us. We had known that there were reading issues in LA county and we know that so many kids are not taught how to read based on the science of reading and that there are all kinds of sketchy practices going on out in the world. We read these articles, they came across our desks and we pulled all of the data for LA county. We realized that we just had hundreds of schools that were struggling with reading. We decided we needed to plant a flag. We needed to take a stance and say that Lacos position is that teaching reading found skills through the science of reading approach is what we are going to put our money on and we're going to train about it.

Leslie Zoroya:

We really felt like the goal of the project was not to go in and change everyone's curriculum, but more to build teacher knowledge in all aspects of foundational reading skills so that they could make the correct decisions and they could look at their own curriculum and they could look at their own instruction and be able to know if they are doing what they need to do to get kids reading proficiently. The goal was building teacher knowledge and we looked at both language comprehension, decoding and sight word and we pulled together a consortium of teachers. We had an informational meeting in the spring and we said, Hey, you want to come and learn with us? And they did. We had about a 150 teachers that signed up and we said, we're going to meet with you monthly and we're going to talk about drill downs on discrete foundational reading skills, which we have been doing. We're in month five now.

We've been meeting with them monthly and we've been doing these discrete drill downs each month. We give lots of resources, especially for teaching in the online environment. We have been trying to just get either create resources or find resources for them to teach each of these foundational skills so that they have lots of materials to access. And then I think one of the things that has been big is we give a self assessment in each of those foundational discrete skills so that teachers can think about their own knowledge in that area and they can do some evaluation of both their own program, in terms of their instructional sequence, and their curriculum. To look at, do I really have enough to teach this phonemic awareness section? Am I spending enough time doing it? Because I think that is one of the missing pieces in early reading instruction is, we're not really thinking deeply about our own instruction.

Leslie Zoroya:

We're just sort of teaching the program and going along and then we get our scores and our scores say that half the kids are not reading well and what do we do? We just keep going. We're not really stopping to say, what is not working here and where are we missing the mark? Are we skipping sections? I do think as teachers we're really picky and choosy. We like to go, oh, I don't feel like doing that routine today. Or I don't have time so I'm going to skip that. With early foundational reading skills, there is a scope and sequence and when you skip that, the kids who really needed that, we all know that there are some kids that are going to read no matter what we do. What we provide or not provide, but for most kids they need to and explicit instruction.

We really are asking teachers to look deeply at that. To not only understand each of these foundational reading skills strands, but to look at their own. Look in the mirror and look at their classroom and really think about where do I need to supplement? Where do I need to add more? What am I missing? And to make some adjustments because doing the same thing over and over that we've been doing is not working. Our reading scores in California show that. It's not working for kids of color, especially, and kids in poverty. So that's what we've been doing. We're building a website right now with all of the resources. This has been a pilot project with these 150 teachers this year. We're putting all of it into an online course. Each of the foundational drill downs will be a module. We're working on putting those together.

Leslie Zoroya:

And then we're taking all of this statewide. We're opening it up to our other county offices to join with us to do this. We've had a lot of interest. We're having a meeting in January of the interested parties to come together with us to do this work across the state because we really feel that this is our charge. We must do this. I'm willing to share our initiative with anybody who wants to listen and you take it as far as we can take it because kids lives hang in the balance. I've seen it firsthand of what happens when kids can't read. They end up on the streets. They end up incarcerated. They end up in poverty and it is a life or death situation. We don't really think about it in that term when we're sitting in front of a five year old, but it is sort of true and I've seen both ends of this now. I just feel like as I'm getting later into my career, before I go, I need to make sure that we are just really digging in and getting this done.

Jessica Hamman:

Making that training accessible is so important in terms of leveling the playing field for teachers. There's an equity issue on the teacher level too because people opt in to very, very expensive trainings if they're able. But if they're not, they shouldn't be left out of these training opportunities. I love that mission that you have to bring the other state county offices of education on board and have a common language for the training that you're delivering and then increase accessibility and building equity through that. That is thrilling. That is so exciting.

Leslie Zoroya:

We think so. We're really excited.

Jessica Hamman:

I think it's fabulous. On the topic of equity, you mentioned that it can be a life or death issue. It is a social justice issue in making sure that teachers can adequately teach literacy. How do we get educators to better understand what's at stake?

Leslie Zoroya:

Well, it's hard. It's exactly the question, right? I've been leading a statewide book club right now on Ibram Kendi's book, how to be an anti-racist. I started these cohorts in LA county with district leaders a while ago. One of the reasons I decided to choose this book is because Kendi forces the reader to really confront policy. His whole point in his book is to look at policies that are racist and that you become an anti-racist by looking at policy. It's not about being nice or being mean. It's not about behaviors, it's about policies. The book really struck me. I am using it to work on issues of literacy through policy. I ask educators to take a hard look at their

schools as we read this book and to find the inequities in policies and practices and do something about it.

Leslie Zoroya:

It comes down to the fact that reading instruction is based on pedagogy and policy. We don't really think of it in terms of that, but it really is. The curriculum and the policies that your district adopts are really sort of the policy that is adopted. How you choose to deliver that instruction really matters. We know this and solving inequities begins with looking at every single policy. There's a really great article called peeling back the wallpaper. You can just Google it and it comes right up. It's about a high school that takes a look at every single policy in their system. They kind of peel back the layers of all of their policies to see who's participating in leadership. Who's in AP classes? They just looked at every single aspect of their school program for inequities.

Leslie Zoroya:

That has stayed with me. I read it a couple years ago and I continue to think about that. It's the same with Emily's work, Hamford work. It's the things that stay with you. And so that peeling back the wallpaper really forced me to say, what are we doing to help schools peel back the wallpaper in their literacy instruction? How are they looking at which kids are performing and achieving and which kids are not. That was kind of my emphasis in approaching it from an equity angle. And then I think we're also focusing in LA county a lot on culturally responsive teaching. It's kind of gone by the wayside in the last 10 years. There have been other things that have come and gone, initiatives, but this issue of equity really relates to culturally responsive teaching.

We're working a lot on that, on building capacity around that. Recently, I'm working on another project with UCLA Riverside county office of ed, the California department ed, and the center for powerful public schools, and we've spent the last nine months of COVID working on a document called supporting the African American learner, a guide to transforming belief systems and practices for Black students. This came out of work that UCLA did, a report that they published in October of last year called, beyond the schoolhouse policy report. They looked at 14 school districts in LA county that had high populations of African-American students and they looked at those schools and they looked at what was working and not working for Black kids. That report really prompted us to say, what are we doing for African-American students in LA county?

Leslie Zoroya:

My colleague, Dr. Katherine Edwards, who is our equity director at LACO and I really decided to take this on. And we said, this is not an area. I looked at my own literacy trainings. I have not done anything focused specifically on Black students. When you look at California's data, the top three groups in California that struggle are English learners, students with disabilities and African American students. It bears out every time. It's those three groups. We see a lot of work around of sch learners. We've been doing that work for 35, 40 years. There's a lot of work in special ed. There has been nothing around the needs of Black students. And so my colleague Kathryn and I, we sat in her office before COVID and we said, what can we do? We were talking about we can host a conference, we can do all these things, but is that going to be lasting change?

What can we do that's more actionable. Our eyes landed on the English learner roadmap. We had been training on that. We talked about writing a document. And so this is the document we've been working on for nine months. We asked some other organizations, anybody interested in working with us for free and surprisingly this amazing group of educators came together and it's done. We just finished it. It's going to be published in January or February. It's in copy editing and getting publishable and looking pretty. But we're really proud of it because we really aim to change the fact that there has been no focus on Black students. And there are things that you can do.

Leslie Zoroya:

And culturally responsive teaching is chock-full of things that help all students of color. We're going to roll out our supporting the African American learner document and that's coming with a website and all kind of training that we're creating right now. And then we're going to do some more focus on just helping teachers understand, how do you make that actionable in the classroom? We throw around a lot of terms like this, culturally responsive teaching, but what does it really look like? What does it mean? What does it mean in terms of literacy instruction and all of that?

Jessica Hamman:

I think that's so important because clearly educators are interested in supporting their students, but the everyday work of teaching has students in front of them and all these theories are good and well, but what happens in that school day. We need to know it needs to be actionable. We need to know what steps to take. I think that's something times why teachers fall back on programs because it gives them something to do. It gives them the next steps. I commend you

for building something that's focused on action and on next steps because it's so important to build awareness. That is the first step. But then we also need to know where to go next.

Leslie Zoroya:

Yeah. It's the nitty gritty. It's knowing your student's culture and using books and authors and topics that reflect their experience so they can see themselves and having them show their learning in different ways. We don't all have to write an essay every time. A little bit of [inaudible 00:34:17]. Throwing in some universal design for learning strategies can really be powerful in helping kids with different cultures and just incorporating cultural norms and knowing what those are in your students and having kids feel really connected to their learning and feeling like you know that you see them.

Leslie Zoroya:

I think a lot of kids feel unseen and they don't see themselves reflected in the curriculum and in learning experiences. We're kind of starting with that, but we're just, I don't know, we're trying to hit literacy on every level we can think of. We've got our little podcast that we do, we have a lot of online stuff, but I'm constantly spinning in my head of what else can we be doing? Our county is so huge and so I consistently feel like it's never enough. But we're just always trying to come up with what's the next thing we can do that might help someone in another way. That's been our focus.

Jessica Hamman:

Well, thank you for all this amazing work you've done on behalf of teachers and the students that they serve. Thank you for that.

Leslie Zoroya: Thank you for having me today. I really appreciate it was fun to talk

with you.

Jessica Hamman: This was such a pleasure and keep doing the good work you're

doing and I'll be following closely.

Leslie Zoroya: Thanks a lot.

Jessica Hamman: Thank you, Leslie. To learn more about Leslie Zoroya and her work

at that Los Angeles county office of education, you can visit their website at lacoe.edu and listen to her podcast leading literacy, by going to Lacoe.edu, heading to curriculum instruction, then

reading language arts, then leading literacy. Thank you for listening to our ed leaders in literacy podcast to find links to the articles and

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Cherise.