



## Glean Education's Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast Episode #18 - Nita Cherise (Glean Education)

Male: The results, they've been immediate, and we had one of the biggest shifts in the state.

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

Male: There were inequities everywhere. My students in South Texas ultimately taught me more than I taught them.

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

Female: 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 a rooftop, it can be done.

Announcer: 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.

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

Kemi : My name is Kemi, 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.

Announcer: Heggerty's Daily Phonemic Awareness curriculum is used by over 450 school district nationwide. Learn how you can get started at [heggerty.org](http://heggerty.org). That's H-E-G-G-E-R-T-Y dot O-R-G.

Jessica Hamman: I'm Jessica Hamman, founder of Glean Education, and on the show today is Nita Cherise. She has worked in education for over 17 years and has served in a variety of roles within and outside of the classroom, including literacy specialist, academic dean, and assistant principal in Marrero, Louisiana in the Greater New Orleans area.



She also has extensive experience in teacher training, professional development, and instructional coaching.

Jessica Hamman: Her passion is literacy education and she is a firm believer that our children's success in school is directly related to receiving strong literacy instruction in the primary grades. Today, we're here to chat with Nita about her life's work in education as a school leader, teacher trainer, and I would like to add also the podcast producer for this very podcast, and a friend of ours at Glean Education. Welcome, Nita. It has been a very long time that we've wanted to have you on the show, and we are thrilled to bring you from behind the curtain.

Nita Cherise: Yeah. I have to say it feels really weird. Because the whole time I'm sitting here, I'm thinking, okay, don't be long winded. Don't breathe a lot, because you want to be able to edit this. I cannot get that thought out of my head. All good.

Jessica Hamman: The reason why it was so obvious to have you on this podcast is that every time we meet for a production meeting, we just deep into discussion about... There's about 50 minutes of discussion for every 10 minutes of work. I thought we got to get this on tape, because our collaboration is so fun and exciting, but also your depth of knowledge about literacy and training and this area is so large and so deep. I wanted to make sure that we share it with our audience. I'm excited to have you here today.



Nita Cherise: I'm excited to be here.

Jessica Hamman: Take us back to the start of your work in education, how you got in it, and how you found yourself as a teacher.

Nita Cherise: I guess you could say it's a family business. I come from a long line of teachers. My dad's a teacher. Both of his parents were teachers. Some of his siblings are teachers. It's just the thing, your teachers, your preachers, or you're both. My dad is actually both. It was kind of like it was in my blood. I'd always had a talent for explaining things. I remember lining up the encyclopedia. I was in third grade, and I made sure that all the books were in order, and that's how I taught my brothers their letter sounds, because it was like my ABC chart.

Nita Cherise: No one told me to do that. I just got it into my head, like they need to learn this, but I also just liked that they were listening. It's like I am in charge and I taught them their letter sounds. I would like to say that I gave them that first foundational literacy instruction. You're welcome.

Jessica Hamman: There was just this natural interest. Where did you go from there? Where did it take you?



Nita Cherise: Okay. Well, let's see, teaching my brothers and like other kids, we loved playing school. It wasn't fun probably for the other kids because I took it really seriously and actually gave real grades and wanted to talk to parents.

Jessica Hamman: You were actually always naturally an administrator as well.

Nita Cherise: I would like to think that I'm always a teacher at heart, even when I was an administrator, but I guess you've uncovered my deep dark secret. I've been an administrator all this time. When I started college, it was just kind of like, of course, I'm going to major in education. When you're growing up, family members and friends of family members notice things, and they tell you things and you just kind of take it in. I was good at it, and I've always really been into reading. I'm from Louisiana, so southern Christian home.

Nita Cherise: We went to a large megachurch type place. I went to that school for a while, as well as a school that was affiliated with another church. But in third grade, I believe it was, I was pulled out and homeschooled. I was homeschooled, and I was homeschooled on the Abeka school program. Its roots are Southern Baptist. It was more faith-based. It wasn't like a mistrust of schools. It was basically just we want our kids to be schooled in this way, and that's the decision that they made.



Nita Cherise: I can say that, I'm going to only speak for myself, but it's not one that I would've made and probably should have been at school with other people, but it's the way it happened. Even with all of that, I knew that I wanted to be a teacher. I went to the University of New Orleans, got my education there, and started teaching in Jefferson Parish. I started in pre-K and loved it. No one could ever have convinced me that I would ever leave pre-K. I just loved it, and it was just fun. Hurricane Katrina hit.

Nita Cherise: It upset a lot of different things, and I found myself in East Baton Rouge Parish. I was recommended for a kindergarten position. And after meeting with the principal, she said, "No, I think that you should teach first grade." I wanted to protest that, but the storm had happened two weeks prior and I needed to have a job to continue my certification. I was terrified because I'm like, these kids can read. These kids can read and there are grades given. I was just a little intimidated. Pre-K and K were so different.

Nita Cherise: But when I taught first grade, I'd always had a love of literacy, but I was thrown into the deep end of, what does it look like? What does the instruction look like? Like all parishes in all schools, there's a program and I followed the program, but I found that I was really drawn to the ones where phonics was the base, because that's how I learned. I can still picture the charts, Th, as in thick, it was a little skinny man and Th as in thick was a bigger man. I can picture that now. It was black and white. No frills, but I learned how to read.



Nita Cherise: Even when there were gaps in the curriculum that I didn't even realize were gaps yet, I just thought, "Well, you'd never taught first grade before, so that's why this isn't making sense to you." I just kind of kept it moving because I kind of felt like I had something to prove. I just instructed them the way that I learned, and I unknowingly was doing the right thing. I knew that I was because they were reading. Most of them were reading. The ones that weren't, there were probably like other areas there that I wasn't learning about, how to identify that.

Nita Cherise: What do you do now? First grade is rough. First grade teachers deserve all of the praise because it is really rough. You're expected to have those kids reading for sure by the time to go to second grade.

Jessica Hamman: That must have been really fascinating to have been homeschooled and then start your career in traditional schooling.

Nita Cherise: It was, because I taught the lower grades and I was in school in the lower grades. It was nostalgic, because it had been a long time though since I had been in school. I was homeschooled on the Abeka program from eighth grade to my senior year, and then college. Coming back around, I was like, oh, cubby holes and lunch boxes. I loved it. What was different from me and what made me seem like an alien to all of the other teachers around me was that my bubble was showing. I was looking for the romance.



Nita Cherise: Part of this is also because you haven't been in school in years, so you're really like putting the lunchbox experience on a pedestal. It's just a lunch box, but I was like [inaudible 00:09:26] The kids were just like, "Can you open my straw please?" Stop staring off into the distance and give me my lunch box. It was culture shock. I had lots of people ask me like, "Where are you from?" They're like, "But where have you been?" At home.

Jessica Hamman: Sheltered is another way to say it, right? Because your parents made a decision to keep you guys home and create this kind of sphere they wanted you to grow up in academically and socially.

Nita Cherise: Yeah, that was perfectly said.

Jessica Hamman: Tell me more, those were the first couple of teaching experiences you had. How did you start rising to school leadership and what was the path there that you took?

Nita Cherise: After the Katrina year, I was actually living in Baton Rouge. I returned to Jefferson Parish and got hired on at Joshua Butler Elementary, and that place is where the bulk of my career was. I was there for 10 years, and I learned so much there. But I have to say that the leader that shaped me from the beginning and who I still think about like even now, today, her name is Denise Rehm. She's still currently the principal at Butler. She's wonderful, and she is the





one who turned to me and said, "You need to think about leadership."

Nita Cherise: And I said no. I would blow her off every time she said that, because I was like, "Nope, because I see the way you run around here." The reading specialist, she had been there for years, and she was ready to retire. You just kind of get that feeling like, I think I'd like to try something new. I replaced her as reading specialist. I should also say that when I was hired on, the Reading First grant was everywhere, like as a part of No Child Left Behind. I really do have to credit all of the PD that I got. I was really learning.

Nita Cherise: These are the components of reading, and this is how you do it, and this is what we're going to do, and having that 120 minutes reading block at the beginning of every class. You have to have a time when it's whole group. There must be times when it's small group. And when small group is happening, other things should be happening too. I'd always loved literacy, but that is where there was a system and I loved that because I like rules.

Jessica Hamman: Did you see a direct impact in your students? Did you see growth after the Reading First grants were implemented to teach the teachers and change practice?

Nita Cherise: Absolutely. I know that initially it was probably just I was a new teacher. I saw the rainbows and everything, but then as I actually started to know what I was talking about, I'm like, oh yeah, this is



really, really working. Because funnily enough, when I started at Butler Elementary in fall '06, it was the same semester that I started going for my master's and my reading specialist certificate. Everything that I was getting in school was being confirmed by my professor. Of course, and she was wonderful. Her name was Dr. Glenda Hambrey at Xavier University of Louisiana.

Nita Cherise: I don't think she's there anymore, but I learned so much from her. It just dovetailed really nicely to be able to live out what I was teaching. I evolved into that teacher that was like, what are the skills that this theme is supposed to teach? And then I'm going to go choose my own books. What led to that was they're five. And if you are not bringing the funny and bringing the entertainment, they're going to go to sleep, or you're going to be writing some sort of behavior note because they're bored. They will tell you that they are bored, because they don't have any tact.

Nita Cherise: They're going to just be like, "This is boring. I want to snack." You had to bring it. There were just some books where I was so bored. I was so bored. I remember I stopped in the middle of a book and got another book. When I tell you that for weeks after, I felt like those children would get to a point in their career where it's like, "I don't know the answer to the is because Ms. Clark didn't finish that book on day three, week two of theme seven."

Jessica Hamman: It totally pinpoints the psychological nature and the burden of teaching, and it also pinpoints sometimes the problem with the materials that we have. They should be tools and vehicles and not



something that keeps you weighed down or steers you in the wrong direction. I think what I'm hearing is, as you got more experienced, you were able to take your knowledge and say, "No, this doesn't do the trick for my kids."

Jessica Hamman: Were you able to find that the materials you had and the curriculum you had really supported your students and allowed them to see themselves in the curriculum too? I remember this is something that you mentioned in an earlier conversation that you a lot of times had to work to make the content culturally responsive. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Nita Cherise: Yes, yes, I did. While there were books that represented black kids and brown kids and things like that, it wasn't nearly as much as I know that I would find now. But what I found that I had to do was I don't see anything that represents not just black children, but these black children that live in Westwego or in Louisiana. There's different cultures and just different things that I know that they're not seeing. I can't say that I was an expert on it, but what I did start doing is what most teachers started doing.

Nita Cherise: The flip books are maybe made with pictures of the students. We didn't even know that that's what CRT was. It was just, hey, they really seem to be more into me when they see themselves all over this classroom. Now that I look back, as a matter of fact, one of the episodes that we released a couple of months ago...



Jessica Hamman: Lauren Mascareñez.

Nita Cherise: Yes. Well, I love all the episodes really, but I love that one because I was like, "Yeah, I did that." Have their work on the wall as much as possible. All the other little posters are cute, but have their work on the wall. I knew they need to see themselves, because they don't see themselves anywhere else. They need to see that.

Jessica Hamman: You were starting to move up. You were a teacher, then you're starting to move through and become an administrator. What did you see as an administrator that made you interested in the trajectory you're on now in terms of being a trainer as well? You've passed through classroom instruction and school leadership, and then you left school leadership and started working as a consultant and a trainer through Black Teacher Collaborative and through other companies as well.

Jessica Hamman: I'd love to hear a little more about that. Tell me about the journey to training as well.

Nita Cherise: Yeah. Well, when I became reading specialists after spending six years in the classroom at Butler, but then I think like maybe nine years total in the classroom, one part of being the reading specialist was not only conducting reading interventions with the kids and doing the testing, but you had to train a lot too. I conducted my first professional development session when I was still in the



classroom. It was my last year as a kindergarten teacher. I had become a Debbie Diller groupie. I don't know if you're familiar with Debbie Diller.

Nita Cherise: She was a teacher out of Texas, and this woman is like the HGTV of classroom environment, how to set up your room. It wasn't just about like looking pretty. It was all in this service of instruction, especially when you are not at a dream school where you have all of the space. I read her book, and I remember I was hooked. My principal sent me to Houston to go to her seminar, which was like two or three days. I didn't realize how big time I was. I stayed in the hotel where the conference was happening. That's usually the most expensive hotel.

Nita Cherise: Thank you, Ms. Rehm. That was probably a lot. But I also was responsible for coming back and turning it around. And that's what I did. Those three PD days that you have in the ramp up of school starting again, my principal set up like breakout rooms. We all met as a faculty to talk about all of the things, and then everyone had to go to a different session and it was held in a classroom. My classroom was literally set up the way that I had learned. I taught everybody how to... I did a session on like, this is how your writing station can look and you know.

Nita Cherise: This is how to make use of a shelf. I love the rolling shelves, but on the back you staple a pocket chart. It was very simple stuff, the things that you don't always just think about. It was interior design meets literacy structure, and I loved it. I think I was kind of



comfortable in that because I was in my own classroom, and it just felt like a bunch of teachers stopped by on their break. I was just talking. I'm like holding court and talking, I can do that.

Nita Cherise: But my first session, that was like reading specialists and we're in the library where all of the things took place and I PowerPoint. I was very nervous, but I did something that I've been doing ever since and also should have tipped me off that I need to be doing something else was I would just pretend to be somebody else. I didn't tell anybody that. I probably would've been evaluated. I presented as myself, but I made up a backstory. My name is Lisa, and I travel around the country and I give this specific session. I would just tell myself that, and then just do it to them.

Nita Cherise: To them, I was Nita, but inside I was like, "Oh no, I am Lisa, and I'm a pro. I just got raise because I'm so good." I'm sort of like adding on to her story.

Jessica Hamman: I feel like sometimes that those are the things we need to do to make ourselves convinced that we're the experts that other people believe we are, right?

Nita Cherise: We actually are like kind of hesitant about saying it.



Jessica Hamman: Yes. I think it's super interesting actually, and I don't mean to get overly psychological, but I think actually it speaks to a larger issue of what I've felt as a classroom teacher is that there is this veil that we're asked as educators to kind of put up over ourselves. We are actually not always asked to bring our own selves to the classroom or to the principalship or to the superintendentship. I think that that's really. In this move to cultural responsive instruction, we're saying like the kids have to be there. We want to acknowledge. We want to affirm them.

Jessica Hamman: It just kind of dawned on me that there's a real space for us to acknowledge and affirm the real full lives of teachers and administrators too, and say bring it. Bring what you are, all of it, the messiness and the professionalism because that actually is the whole package.

Nita Cherise: You're absolutely right. I mean, there was a time in this country where teachers... They could dictate where you lived. It's been regimented from the beginning, especially when there were more women who were teachers.

Jessica Hamman: Where are you driven next? Where do you see things going for you?

Nita Cherise: Well, I right now am working on a pilot. I really, really, really want to write for TV. If it's not the ultimate goal, because there are so many things that I'm interested in that I enjoy doing, I feel like my



ultimate goal is to be able to do all of those things and be paid well for them. I want to write for television, but I really do love podcasting and editing. Even though with every new episode, there's always it of anxiety, which is something that I always feel, even before things that I've done a million times before. Once I'm into it, it's like, I remember, you like this.

Nita Cherise: This is not scary. You enjoy doing, and I really do enjoy doing it. [Inaudible 00:21:41] It's about literacy and all these people in all different parts of the country doing amazing things. I really would like to continue to edit and produce podcasts. Also, I enjoy voiceovers. I voiced a movie a few years ago that went to the Slamdance Fest. It's a short film called August directed by Caitlyn Greene. Google it and watch it. I enjoy that experience so much. I want to do all those things, but I'm enjoying working with you.

Nita Cherise: In doing this, I'm learning a lot, and I'm getting to hear about all of these ed leaders of literacy and it's fascinating. I am truly enjoying it. I truly am.

Jessica Hamman: Very cool. Well, you're a gift to any area you settle into. Just keep up the good work and thanks for being you and thanks for working with us.

Nita Cherise: Thank you.





Jessica Hamman: Did you like hearing about Nita Cherise? You can find her @NitaCherise on all the socials, and you can listen to her amazing editing work on our Ed Leaders In Literacy Podcast.

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