

# Episode 47 - Rosalie Sumsion

[00:00:00] **Rafael Otto:** This is the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. Today, I have the pleasure of speaking with Rosalie Sumsion, a teacher at McBride Elementary in the St. Helens school district. She is a reading specialist working with small groups of readers throughout her day, and she is also part of the early school success team. This is a team of teachers working in collaboration with staff at Children's Institute to wrestle with big problems or big challenges within their school and within their districts. Some of those are focused on social-emotional learning and working on ways to make sure that every student feels great when they come to school, and is successful.

Rosalie, welcome to the podcast.

[00:00:41] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here.

[00:00:43] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah. It's great to have you here. I love talking with teachers and I wonder if you could just start by telling me the story of why you became a teacher.

[00:00:51] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Okay. So honestly, I didn't. That was not my plan. I did not want to become a teacher.

[00:00:56] **Rafael Otto:** That... that happens, sometimes...

[00:00:59] **Rosalie Sumsion:** So, my mother was a teacher and she taught second grade. She was a lovely, amazing teacher. She'd come home every day around 4:30 or 5, and she would just lie on the couch. She'd watch M\*A\*S\*H-

[00:01:13] **Rafael Otto:** She was like, I'm done. I'm done, I need a break.

[00:01:15] **Rosalie Sumsion:** She's done.

But then she'd kind of get her second wind and, you know, do her thing and... she loved her job. She just was always doing fun things with her kids. So, she was totally into it. But I was a musician, and I played the piano and I wanted to become a piano teacher. And I actually did two or three years in piano pedagogy. But then I just had a big change of focus or whatever. I realized that my heart was in school.

I love school. I love what it stands for, and I still have a few piano students on the side. I love that too. But I just love the idea of, school is community and it's an amazing place for kids to grow and learn and I'm really happy to be a part of that.

[00:01:56] **Rafael Otto:** Well, I'm glad you're still playing and teaching a little piano as well.

[00:02:00] **Rosalie Sumsion:** It's so fun!

[00:02:01] **Rafael Otto:** Tell me about your school community. What's it like at McBride?

[00:02:04] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Oh, sure. We live in a beautiful community. We're just northwest of Portland. It's still a very small town feel though here. We're just right on the Columbia River. We've got about 500 students in our school. Little less than 500. We have families that have been here for a hundred years. There's a lot of rich, beautiful history here in St. Helens, and we've got families that moved here last year. We've got students from many places in the world. We have a student who is from Russia. We have a lot of students who are Spanish speakers. So, we've got a beautiful mix of wonderful students. They're just really great kids to work with and a lovely community. Lots of support from parents and our PTL, parent-teacher organization.

[00:02:52] **Rafael Otto:** That sounds wonderful. I find that kids and students are often a source of inspiration. And I'm wondering if you can share something that's inspiring about the kids that you work with, or is there a story you can share?

[00:03:06] **Rosalie Sumsion:** There is a lot of inspiring things about kids. One thing that I'm so impressed with is the way they persevere. The way they just, they work and work and work. And reading is my jam. It's a pretty big task for a young student. There's a lot of cognitive stuff going on just to read, you know, something like "The Cat Sat on the Mat."

So, when they stick with it, I'm just super proud of them. They really do... so I, I, feel like that sense of sticking with it, perseverance. One of our students moved here and he had not been in school for like two years, due to whatever, and he's a fifth grader. So, this was his basically, kind of his first year of school and he's learning to read. He's doing really great. He's just resilient, amazingly resilient. That inspires me every day. I just feel like they're doing it and they make me want to be a better teacher for them. But the other thing that inspires me is their sense of friendship. You know, not all students are kind every minute of their day. But most of the students, they're kind most of the time.

So that makes me feel like if they can get along, then adults can get along, too. It's very sweet, very special.

[00:04:14] **Rafael Otto:** What does that look like in terms of your role as a reading specialist? When you're working with someone who hasn't been in school for a couple of years, and I'm assuming you've got a range of abilities in your classroom and in your groups that you work with.

How do you handle that? How do you manage that?

[00:04:30] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Oh, yeah. So, I have the luxury, I guess, because I am doing small groups, intervention groups. I tailor the curriculum to where they are. If they're still learning sounds, that's

where we meet them. If they're just, still learning basic phonics, combinations, whatever, you know, that's where we meet them.

So, it's really great to have them have that opportunity. In the classroom, teachers do that as well, but they have a lot more students. So, the ability to pull them in small groups and have them with peers who are working on the same skills, that's what it looks like. Where they can be successful every day. They come out every day, they practice something, and they were able to do it every single time. And so, it's like magic, I feel like.

[00:05:12] **Rafael Otto:** Teaching is like magic sometimes, isn't it?

[00:05:16] **Rosalie Sumsion:** It's a lot of work though, but that's what happens for most students. You know, sometimes there are students who, despite our best efforts, they still struggle. It doesn't come as quickly, but even with those, they still learn and I love that. They may not be grade level, but they're still learning and growing. So that feels good.

[00:05:37] **Rafael Otto:** And that's the important part, right? They come out with a sense of accomplishment, and they can keep moving forward.

[00:05:41] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Absolutely.

[00:05:42] **Rafael Otto:** I wanted to ask you about the Early School Success Project. This is a Children's Institute project. We are

partnered with St. Helens and with your elementary school. Talk about early school success, the role, and what it's like being a part of that team?

[00:05:58] **Rosalie Sumsion:** It's actually been a really good experience. I've enjoyed that. We have, I'm going to say about four or five teachers from our school, as well as the same amount from other schools in our district. So, I think our team is probably 12 to 15 people total. We... our administrators are part of that team as well, but the people from the Children's Institute they've been really good about coming in kind of low- key. Sometimes when you do a big project, people come in and like we're doing it this way and it's a really big change for everyone. But I felt like with them, they came in and they asked us questions. They were pretty observant, and they asked us what we were noticing and what we were wondering.

So, it wasn't like a big come in and super huge change. It was more gradual. I think they took the time to build a good foundation and I just really appreciate that with them. So, what it was like working with them or is like, we're still working with them. They seem pretty relationship- oriented too.

So, they spent a little bit of time getting to know us personally and that felt really good. They did some team building - not too much, but just the right amount. Sometimes with team building it's like, no

more games, we just want to work now. But they felt like they just had a pretty good idea of what we needed to get going as a team.

So, I feel like their job with us is they are helping us to help ourselves. And they've had a lot of structures, a lot of organizational features like Fishbone and empathy interviews and a lot of, I don't know, things like that... Jam board or putting things in categories. And it's been really helpful to us to have them guide us through the process 'cause we're kind of busy teaching. And to have them help us with it has been just really wonderful, really helpful.

[00:07:47] **Rafael Otto:** Just kind of busy teaching day to day, right?

[00:07:51] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Yeah. Yeah, I think they're pretty realistic about the amount of change that we can do as a huge organization. Like the amount of change to shift things even just a little bit. So I liked their sense of realism with us.

[00:08:05] **Rafael Otto:** Well, that's an important idea because part of what you're working on is you're trying to change things within your school and within your district. And I think of it as improving the learning experience for young kids. And part of that is making sure that the preschool experience is connected to what happens in kindergarten and first grade, that kind of idea. But there's this talk about the change process, right?

And so, can you talk about what that process all entails? I think you mentioned some of the tools that the ESS team uses. But tell me what that process of changing things within your schools has been like?

[00:08:41] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Yeah, I hope we can capture everything they did. But one of the first things they did when they came in was, they encouraged us or maybe warned us don't jump to solutions too quickly. A lot of people do that. I mean, and myself included, they said take some time to really analyze, and I don't want to say the problem because it might not necessarily... we might not see it as a problem. But just take some time and really ask some questions, take a really good look at what is going on. So I liked that kind of go slow to go fast. So don't jump to solutions right away was the really important part that I learned from them. So they helped us to analyze what was going on in our school. We did empathy interviews-

[00:09:27] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah. Tell me more about that. 'Cause that was kind of the key piece of the process, right?

[00:09:31] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Yeah. Yeah, it really was. I loved the empathy interviews. So, we have data you could get from a survey or whatever, and we have, oh, data from our student test scores. We have numbers for data, but I really love the idea of having anecdotal data or just the actual thoughts and words of people.



So, the empathy interviews were with students, they were with parents, and they were with teachers. So each one of us did two or three interviews. We had specific questions to ask them and we wrote down what they said. And then we took a look at our responses, and they were actually pretty enlightening for us. I have some if you want to hear one.

[00:10:10] **Rafael Otto:** I would love to.

[00:10:11] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Yeah, these are pretty good. So, the questions that, um, Institute helped us formulate our questions. One of them was like, tell me about starting a new grade. And we learned that a lot of our students were nervous to start a new grade. And the parents as well, they were nervous too.

And that was actually a little surprising to me because... and it shouldn't be, 'cause when I thought back about my own children, I have four children. When they started school, they actually were a little nervous, even though they knew it was going to happen. But I think I just needed that reminder of what a change it is to go to school and all of those feelings that come when you start a new grade and have a new teacher.

[00:10:54] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:10:55] **Rosalie Sumsion:** One of the questions was, think about a time when you were little and tell me something you remember learning. And most of our responses were about, oh, the projects,

the projects "We made pumpkin pie one day." So, it kind of brought to mind like, yeah, kids need hands-on real things and all that.

A third question was, tell me about a time when a teacher taught something that you really understood. So, this student was young, and her answer was, "I understand numbers and letters, and I really like them," which, you know, made my heart happy. They liked the letters. My teacher helped me learn them. And I practice with alpha friends. I really know them. And at that point, she started showing me the motions with hands, like "S" is like a little snake moving up or swims in the water. So even as she spoke, I could tell like, yeah, she's really internalized these sounds 'cause she's making all the little notions that go with it. Just made me happy to see that. I do one more?

[00:11:52] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah, go ahead, please.

[00:11:54] **Rosalie Sumsion:** So one of the parents. We asked the parents to tell about a time that a teacher taught something that their child understood. This one made me so happy, I'll just read it to you. She said, "Last year, my older son was enrolled in Mr. So-and-so's class and this is a fifth-grade classroom. I enrolled him back in school after trying online school, which didn't work out for us at all. Mr. So-and-so really spoke his language. He could empathize with my son who has a mild hearing loss and ADHD. My son felt understood, this teacher was really gentle with him and knew how to connect."

So, I love that. I actually shared that with the teacher. It just felt really good to know that teachers are connecting and that parents are noticing these connections. And we'll say felt good for that child to have a teacher who really got it, who had a teacher who was, you know, had his back and could understand him. So, empathy interviews are wonderful. We gleaned a lot of information from them.

[00:12:51] **Rafael Otto:** What makes them different from other kinds of interviews? What's the empathy part? Talk about that for me.

[00:12:57] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Yeah, that's a really good question. So, they were slower. It actually took us a little bit of time and the Institute coached us to induce some follow-up questions with people, tell me more. So, I really gave myself the luxury of taking time and really hearing people, and it felt good.

It felt really good to me, but I suspect it it felt good to the students, who love to be heard. And I think it felt really good to parents and the teachers as well. So, I think that's where the empathy felt good, because we really listened to them. It was more than just an assignment to tick off, squares on a box. It felt really authentic to me, it was authentic.

Didn't just feel authentic. It was authentic to me. We really cared about what they said, and we plan to act upon the things that they told us. I think they felt heard. The empathy, like I could feel the

anxiety and nervousness of those parents as they moved from grade to grade, starting a new grade, helped me remember, yup, this is really a big deal to go to a new grade, so...

[00:14:01] **Rafael Otto:** Helped with that level of connection. And I would imagine it helped with, there was a, an impact on relationship building.

[00:14:08] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Oh, I agree. I agree. I absolutely agree with that. Yeah, I still see some of those kids they interviewed in the hall. It was like, "Hi, friend!" You know?

[00:14:20] **Rafael Otto:** That's great!

[00:14:20] **Rosalie Sumsion:** I think it feels good to any human being to really be heard. It's just such a luxury in this world

[00:14:25] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah. And then to take what you've learned and take what you've heard and try to use that information to make changes within your school. That's a powerful step.

[00:14:36] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Yeah. Yeah, it was so, okay. I actually used the concept of empathy interviews in a different project. So, we wanted to do a pledge, a school pledge. It was something that meant a lot to us at McBride. So, I kind of looked around at other schools and looked at their pledges and I was just going to like, pick a pledge. But then I remembered how awesome those empathy interviews were. So we gathered a group of students and

we asked them questions about what it meant to be a Mustang, and why we come to school. The questions I asked them were, why do we come to school? How do you change the world? How do we treat others? And what does it mean to be a Mustang?

Because we felt like those are all things that would be important for our pledge.

[00:15:24] **Rafael Otto:** That's a great set of questions.

[00:15:26] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Yeah, it was so fun. I learned a lot. We had a team of six students K through five and we just met one afternoon, and we took notes. The kids took notes, answers to those questions.

Do you want to hear what they said?

[00:15:40] **Rafael Otto:** I do. And I want to hear what students said about how they want to change the world.

[00:15:44] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Oh, okay. Excellent. Coming to that page. Yeah, because that is really something that they latch onto. They said fighting for the good, sacrificing your time, little things count, treat others the way you want to be treated, don't be a bully, be nice to everyone... yeah. Yeah. Those are just really cute responses.

[00:16:07] **Rafael Otto:** Those are all great suggestions.

[00:16:09] **Rosalie Sumsion:** They talked about being a friend. I thought, yeah, that, that's how you change the world. I asked them why being a friend was important and they said it gives you mental stability.

[00:16:19] **Rafael Otto:** That's a big idea.

[00:16:20] **Rosalie Sumsion:** That is a super big idea. So, I loved it. So...

[00:16:24] **Rafael Otto:** What were some of the other pieces that you wanted to share? Were there some other things that stood out?

[00:16:28] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Yeah. So learning, they said it helps your brain, helps you get a job, like they're pretty forward thinkers they are. Okay, they said, "Well, you won't be dumb, don't be dumb." I love this one. We like to work hard. Isn't that sweet?

[00:16:44] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:16:44] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Yeah. That work is not a bad thing. Work is a good thing. And they also brought up playing at recess helps us have a fresh brain. So, I feel like whatever they're learning, social, emotional learning that their teachers are doing in the classroom, is really carrying through to them. Answers like, "mental stability" and all that sort of thing. They have a pretty good sense that they can change the future. Like a sense of agency in

their lives that they're capable and their future is very, very bright. I love that.

[00:17:13] **Rafael Otto:** Talk about where that comes from. Does that come from the school culture? Does it come from how teachers are interacting with them? What's the source of that agency?

[00:17:23] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Pretty hard to pinpoint that, I have some ideas though. I feel like, okay, number one, their parents. They come with a lot of these ideas. Like I do want to learn. I feel like I can be a learner. I also feel like our school culture is all about learning and helping each other. So, we have those standards. I think a lot of schools say this, be safe, be responsible, be respectful, be a learner. Those are all things that we have talked about in school forever since I have worked here at this school, this idea that you can impact. We've done some work with, like learning targets. A teacher will say, "Today we'll learn about the letter combination AR says 'ar,' and at the end of the class, you'll be able to read these words" sort of thing. So, a child can know what they're learning and know when they've mastered it.

So, I think that also helps students learn to become capable agents of change in their lives. And we do a lot of work with problem solving when students have emotional challenges or relationship problems with other students. Teachers take the time to talk to students like, what was the problem? How can you make it better? What can you do next time? So, it does take extra time to

do that, but I feel like it's helping students see that they are masters of their own faith, that they can make changes in their lives.

[00:18:45] **Rafael Otto:** You mentioned that you created a, a pledge from some of this work. Can you share that with me?

[00:18:51] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Absolutely. Okay. One thing that came up in our empathy interviews is alignment from grade to grade. Like kids don't know what to expect when they go to the next grade. Well we thought, oh, if we're saying our pledge every day, that will be at least one thing that will be the same from K through six.

[00:19:05] **Rafael Otto:** Does that alignment include preschool or where does that fit in?

[00:19:09] **Rosalie Sumsion:** I actually don't know if preschool is saying the pledge, but they're hearing it. So, um...

[00:19:13] **Rafael Otto:** okay.

[00:19:15] **Rosalie Sumsion:** It's a lot to say. So, okay. I just have to have a disclaimer though, like, I base this a lot, you know, I took what the kids said, but I based it... I took a look at other pledges in the schools around the internet and I based this a lot on a pledge that I found from a school in Texas.



So I don't want to claim that these are my words. But we took their words and we adapted them to our school. They told us that their pledge was not copyrighted. So...

[00:19:39] **Rafael Otto:** We'll give a shout out to the school in Texas.

[00:19:41] **Rosalie Sumsion:** So, the first thing is I am a McBride Mustang and of course we're building our brand here at Mustang. We all have t-shirts, and it feels good to belong to something big. So that's our big thing we must make. So, I am a McBride Mustang. I am an important person. I am safe, respectful, responsible, and kind. I give my best effort to become a lifelong learner. And what begins here, changes the world. So, I love the part about kindness. That was something they insisted on putting in and I feel like, yes, most things are kind to each other. I love the part about what begins to change the world, because they do have a strong desire to make this world a better place.

[00:20:22] **Rafael Otto:** And such a great way to end, end the pledge, I think.

[00:20:26] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Yes. It's hopeful and heartwarming.

[00:20:28] **Rafael Otto:** What are some of the other pieces that your school and your district is trying to work on? I know you're focused on reading and literacy. I know social, emotional learning is really important. What are some of the other things that you're,

you're wrestling with right now and trying to, know, think about changing?

[00:20:46] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Right. We are doing some work on alignment with the standards. I think all schools are always working on that. That is something that's important to us. Like, we need to meet more in grade level teams and vertical teams and take a look at reading standards and math standards. Hopefully soon we'll be adopting a new reading core curriculum, which can help us with some of those pieces with that. But we don't want to wait until that. We want to start right away with that. So, we've got some instructional coaches in our district. And they are fantastic and we're starting some of that work right now with them. So that definitely is a great need that we have. But we've got resources and we've got ideas and we're working on that as well.

I think that we were inspired by, I think it was Tillamook School. One of the best things about this and Children's Institute, they shared some of the work from other schools. So, we were inspired by some of their work and so we're taking a look at some of the small things that we want to do. I think, you know, I don't want to spill the beans because we haven't done a lot of work on it yet. But in the way that we have students, we used to do this thing called turn and talk, partner talk. We're going to try to fine tune that to make it a little more academic. But I don't know exactly what we'll do. We've got some ideas, but we're going to implement one small change at a time as we work on aligning our curriculum.

[00:22:11] **Rafael Otto:** And that is, I think, an important idea is to, you mentioned it earlier, but to not try and do too much.

[00:22:18] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Yes.

[00:22:18] **Rafael Otto:** All at once, right? Starting with some of these things that are a little bit more manageable, maybe are smaller ideas, making that kind of change happen. And then having that, have a greater influence within your school.

Is that, is that how you think about it?

[00:22:32] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Absolutely. Nobody wants to be overwhelmed. There's a lot going on, but this work is really important and it will go forward. We're all really committed teachers. Nobody comes to school and says, uh, you know, I don't want to do, I want to do a bad job or whatever. We come to school every day and we want to be the best teachers we can be so our students can be really smart and really educated. Reading is super important. Math is super important. We're all really committed to that. So anything we can do to make it better, small or big, we are committed to doing.

[00:23:02] **Rafael Otto:** I have one more question for you.

[00:23:04] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Yeah.

[00:23:05] **Rafael Otto:** Can you tell me about your vision for your school and the children that they teach?

[00:23:11] **Rosalie Sumsion:** My vision, personally, is vision of excellence for our students. It's a vision of hope and a vision of success for our students. There's a lot going on in the world right now and I want them to know that they are going to be okay at all aspects of their lives. Academically, emotionally, that the world is hopeful, and the world is very good and they are capable. They're very strong and very capable students. I want them to see themselves as workers, to know that working is awesome. You feel good when you accomplish a task. So, I guess in a nutshell, my vision is of excellent, hardworking, problem-solving, resilient students.

And I want that for every student that I see every day.

[00:24:01] **Rafael Otto:** I know I said I had one more question for you, but let me ask you one more. It's a great vision and what do you need, or what do you think it will take to get there?

[00:24:10] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Oh, okay. Personally, I think that I need patience with my students. I need to keep that vision forefront in my mind. And one thing that helps me do that is... so I see students that I taught maybe five years ago and now they're a fifth grader and I look back and I'm like, oh, back when they're in kindergarten, I just thought, will they ever learn their sounds and now they are

reading. I just need to keep myself grounded and just to have that patience and then the knowledge that, as we work, kids can learn.

I know I'm not expressing that very well, but just that desire and drive. What we probably need from districts or from state legislatures or whatever, things that are really helpful are keeping class sizes manageable and reasonable. Things that we need from parents are just seeing basic things like, love your child, have a good bedtime, and read to your child every night, those sorts of things. They seem like simple things, but they're so important and they make a huge, huge difference.

We need leadership. Things like what the Children's Institute is doing. They're helping us manage the change and they provide great leadership for us. We need a curriculum that matches the standards and is easy for teachers to pick up and use, and we need support staff. We've got great support staff. We've got structural assistants who are working really hard and we can always use more qualified and amazing support staff. There are a lot of needs to help children be successful. So anything is appreciated.

[00:25:51] **Rafael Otto:** Well, thank you so much, Rosalie. It's been a pleasure speaking with you today. And I wish you the best success in your teaching and in your school community.

[00:25:59] **Rosalie Sumsion:** Great. Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure to talk with you this afternoon.