



## Triple R Teaching

In today's episode we have the joy of hearing from Dr. Chase Young, a professor at Sam Houston State University. His primary research includes reading fluency, supporting struggling readers, and integrating technology in elementary literacy instruction. Today we focus primarily on how to implement Reader's Theater in the classroom, and I think you're really going to enjoy this entertaining interview.

**Anna Geiger:** Hello everybody! Today we have a special guest, Dr. Chase Young, from Sam Houston State University, who has not only been a professor but also was a classroom teacher and a reading specialist. He is going to share with us today some things he's learned about building fluency. Welcome, Dr. Young!

**Dr. Chase Young:** Thank you so much for having me, it's always awesome to be able to talk to teachers, especially through these podcasts.

**Anna Geiger:** Can you tell us a little bit about what got you into education, your experience as a teacher, and what brought you to where you are today?

**Dr. Chase Young:** Yeah, it's actually kind of funny. When I was fifteen I wanted to find a job where you didn't have to bus tables, and that led me to the only other job and that was daycare. So I spent six years just playing dodgeball with kids, and I realized that that was probably something I wanted to do, even though I started as a computer scientist major, but that didn't go well. I lasted about a semester, and finally switched to my true calling, to be a teacher, and things went great from there.

I started teaching in second grade, and I student taught in first grade, but I taught second grade most of the time, although I did teach third grade.

What got me into it is that it's the greatest job in the world. I can't imagine what other people do with their lives, to be honest with you.

**Anna Geiger:** Yeah, yeah.

**Dr. Chase Young:** So the reason I continued my education is because when I started teaching second grade I realized I really didn't know how to teach kids how to read, even though I had gone to school.

**Anna Geiger:** Familiar story.

**Dr. Chase Young:** Yeah, and that was a very, very important thing! So I continued on and got a master's in reading, because honestly I didn't know what I was doing. I think a lot of us can look back at that first class we taught and go, gosh, I'm so sorry, people, I am so sorry. They all have lawsuits on their hands, and I hope the statute of limitations is up.

So I got better, and after I got better I got to learn the foundations and how to do that, and then I started to do some free wheeling and put my own spin on things, and it's what I've been doing ever since.

**Anna Geiger:** Were you first a classroom teacher and then a reading specialist, or how did that go?

**Dr. Chase Young:** Yeah, yeah, so I was a classroom teacher, and then one of the schools asked me to be the reading specialist, so I stepped into that role for two years, and I loved it. My passion is working with kids who find it difficult to learn. You have those kids that walk in and it's like, okay, well you don't need me at all, but that's all I worked with and it was fantastic because I was able to test out new strategies and mash certain strategies together to see if I could get more synergistic effects.

But unfortunately there's no recess as a reading specialist, and I missed the classroom culture of having the classroom. We called ourselves the Younganites, and we were a special people. We had our own customs and rituals and things, and I didn't have that as the reading specialist, so I actually went back and taught in the classroom for a few more years.

**Anna Geiger:** Okay, and then what led you into higher education?

**Dr. Chase Young:** Well I started my PhD program at the University of North Texas because I just wanted to be the most amazing second grade teacher that anyone had ever seen, and apparently that's really not why people get their PhDs. I remember the first article I was assigned, I didn't even understand one of the words in the title, epistemology. So I thought, I'm going to keep doing this, I'm just going to be the greatest second grade teacher, but about halfway through the program I'm like, wow, this is actually cool because now I get to develop and research and move the field forward and share with teachers and impact their students that way.

I started it and I was like, if I don't like it the first year then I'm going back to the classroom, but then I found out this thing where you can eat lunch for an hour and a half, and you can go places, and I was like, this is a pretty sweet gig.

But I do spend, not as much anymore, I've been pretty busy, but I spend a lot of time in classrooms. Most of the research I do is actually in schools, so I still interact with kids on a regular basis, I assess them, I train the teachers in any of the methods we're using, I go into their classrooms and observe, and I try to stay active in the schools.

**Anna Geiger:** Awesome. Well, I know that you were co-author of the book *Artfully Teaching the Science of Reading* with Dr. Rasinski, and he recommended that I talk to you because he said you've got quite a lot to share about fluency. So could you talk to us about your experience researching fluency and what you've learned and how teachers can apply that?

**Dr. Chase Young:** Yeah, sure, absolutely. I think that one of the most important things that I think about in reading fluency is the theory that supports it, and one of the major theories is the theory of automaticity. That theory essentially says that the more automatic in decoding a reader becomes, the more cognitive energy is freed for them to think about the meaning of the text, and other high order processes. So that fancy term, theory of automaticity, really just manifests itself as practice, reading practice, making sure that we get our students to recognize words more quickly and automatically so that they can focus on what they're actually reading.

Then the other research that stemmed from that was the method of repeated readings, and I know Tim talked about it on the other episode, but that's essentially where you read something over and over. He had also mentioned, why in the world would anyone want to read something over and over? And that's where we start thinking about authenticity and a creative way to have students read something repeatedly to become more automatic in their word recognition.

There's a lot of ways that you can do that, and how I met Tim, actually, I hunted him down at a professional development in 2008. I was a fan boy, I couldn't wait! We were at intermission and I just pretty much tackled him and cornered him and I was like, "Hey, I've been using your stuff, man."

He was like, "Really, what in particular?"

I was like, "We've been doing Reader's Theater this year and it's awesome, the kids love it!"

And he was like, "Yeah, tell me more, do you have data?"

I was like, "Yes, yes I do."

So we actually ended up writing up an article for reading teachers, the first article I ever wrote, and people familiar with academia will find this hilarious, but I got the email back from The Reading Teacher that said, "Hey, we can't accept it at this time but we invite you to revise and resubmit."

And I was like, "Ah, they didn't want it," but Tim's like, "No, that's great, they never accept it right off, don't worry about it."

**Anna Geiger:** Okay.

**Dr. Chase Young:** So what made it publishable was the framework we used for Reader's Theater, and if you don't mind I wouldn't mind explaining that a little bit. I know Tim touched on it, but didn't really go in depth on how we implemented it, if that's all right.

**Anna Geiger:** Yeah, I'd love to hear about that.

**Dr. Chase Young:** Okay, great, great. So we use a weekly format, a Monday through Friday type thing, and we use it consistently throughout the year. I'll say that up front

because the research we've done has always been a longer duration. Don't expect great results if you do Reader's Theater on a Valentine's Day or one at Christmas.

So the weekly format we use is like this. We have all these scripts, and I have a ton on my website, over two hundred, and then a link to the question I always get, "Does it come in Spanish?" Yes, there's about 150 of them that are also in Spanish linked on the site.

**Anna Geiger:** Awesome, great.

**Dr. Chase Young:** So we select four or five scripts based on the number of students that you have in the class, different scripts so they're not all practicing the same one, and they're usually based on popular children's books, or some are nonfiction, some are fiction, some are poetry, some are written by my students as parodies of other texts.

So what they get to do is they get to sit down, and I read each script, and they think about which one they like the most, and that's how the groups are formed.

I'll say, "Okay, well who wants to be in the Paper Bag Princess?"

And it's like, "I want to be in Paper Bag Princess," so then their groups are formed that way, based on interest.

Those texts are typically selected, well, I don't select them based on difficulty or text complexity, I select them based on interest, what I think my students will like, because we will have a week long of practice, so challenging texts are absolutely welcome in this framework.

So after they choose their text they go back and they read it over and then take it home and they decide, what part might I want to be? So really they come back on Tuesday and the focus is first to choose a part. There is crying, there is always crying the first couple of weeks, because they didn't get what they wanted, and that's sad. But I always recommend rock, paper, scissors, not only because it's effective, but it's also fun.

Once they have their parts the main focus on Tuesday, the second day, is phonics and decoding, making sure that they're able to recognize the words, working through any of the difficult vowel patterns, which is usually what trips them up. Multi-syllabic words, words they haven't seen before, we work through those and make sure that they can break them down, put them back together, and pronounce them correctly. So that whole goal is about decoding, word recognition, and accuracy.

So then they get to rehearse. They rehearse, they go through it.

Because you have multiple scripts I always recommend that you use a timer instead of saying, "Okay, everybody read it three times." Well, kids are going to get done before the others, and then they come up to you, as always, and go, "What do I do now?" I'm like, oh my gosh. So I usually use the DMV strategy and just tell them to learn how to wait, or you can use a timer and just say, "Hey, for the next five minutes you guys are going to be rehearsing, when the timer's up put your Reader's Theater scripts away and go."

**Anna Geiger:** Okay.

**Dr. Chase Young:** So then they take it home and they practice recognizing the words, and then they bring it back, and on Wednesday we start focusing on reading expression. So we start talking about the meaning of the text and the author's purpose, and how to match the expression appropriately to the meaning of the text. And there's some coaching involved in that, like, "Hey, maybe try to read it like this, it makes sense because the character's scared, or whatever."

Then they take it home, they practice with a watermelon or a dog or a parent, or whatever, and they bring it back. Caveat, they don't always bring it back so have extra copies, or just be frustrated, up to you, "Why didn't you bring it back?!" Or you just have folders, "Hey this script's over here, go grab it," because typically the kids that don't bring it back are the ones that truly need more practice.

**Anna Geiger:** Yes.

**Dr. Chase Young:** Then on Thursday they do a practice performance, and the teacher roves and listens for any difficulties that students may have. So they practice for that five minutes, and then on Fridays they get to perform.

They can perform for each other, since they're all in different scripts, or they can perform for different classes, or they can perform for parents who are welcome to come in. You can slyly catch that parent you wanted to conference with that's been avoiding you. You can announce going to other classes, but sometimes we just bust in, and if you're really lacking an audience, the front office people can never leave, so there you go. They are always a captive audience.

So essentially we go through that weekly format and they get new scripts every single week, so they get exposed to a lot of different texts, a lot of different words, and they seem to really enjoy it.

Two things that I really love about it as well is because it doesn't take very long. I always did it in the morning, they'd walk in, get their folders, get their scripts out, and go sit down and practice. I'm still imbibing coffee trying to figure out what's going on in the day, and it gives me a little bit of extra time. Plus, they get in that routine and that's what it is, they come in, they practice, it's five minutes.

And the other thing I love about it is that because they have so much support, and because you provided so much support, they are reading challenging texts, especially those that are typically defined as struggling readers. They, for the first time, get to stand next to their peers, read out loud to the class, and sound like a great reader, and it's motivating, and it's confidence building, and it's awesome!

**Anna Geiger:** That sounds incredible, and I would love to see it in action sometime.

I'm going to ask some questions that I know other teachers will ask about what you just said, so first of all, what grades would you recommend this for? I know you did it with second grade, how young should you start, and I'm sure any grade level would work past that.

**Dr. Chase Young:** Yeah. So if we look at Charles's work, the fluency stage is right around the first and second grade, which is the prime time for this. However, I have gone and done trainings at schools where they're like, "We really want to go younger," and I've done it. First grade works really great too, we just use shorter poems and things like that, where we just make the text a little bit smaller, maybe using silly poetry like, "Mary had a little pet, its fur was black as night. It followed her school one day, which gave the kids a fright. It made the teachers shout and scream, it gave them such a scare. For Mary didn't have a lamb, she had a grizzly bear." So you just pick, narrator one reads the first line, narrator two reads the second line, so they can actually handle those kinds of text.

**Anna Geiger:** That's smart, that's smart.

**Dr. Chase Young:** So this one school asked me to do it in pre-K, and man, I was exhausted, but it worked. I wrote a script specifically for pre-K that's pretty much just the alphabet, it's like, "A, B, C, cat," and then somebody goes, "Meow."

**Anna Geiger:** Oh that's so cool, I love it!

**Dr. Chase Young:** So it may not produce the same results it does in first and up, but if they want to participate, they sure can, because it's a fun activity.

**Anna Geiger:** Can you talk to me, you said I think it was the second day where you're working on phonics and decoding, is that you moving around the classroom and just helping kids who are stuck as they're trying to sound out all the words, or how does that work?

**Dr. Chase Young:** Yeah, yeah, there's several ways that we can approach it. Sometimes they highlight the words that they're having trouble with and they work with their group. Also, these texts are great for your small group time, so you're calling groups by Reader's Theater instead of reading a level, or skills necessary, or whatever, but you can actually work through those texts. You can select the texts based on particular phonics patterns if you'd like. You can turn anything into a script, I mean a Wikipedia page, you just throw narrators on it, any sort of trade book, decodable text, whatever it is that you're working with in the classroom can easily become a script.

**Anna Geiger:** Well that brings me to another question, which is kind of a sticky one, which is-

**Dr. Chase Young:** Oh I like it.

**Anna Geiger:** So there's a lot of talk about decodable text, which I am a fan of decodable text, wasn't always, used to be very balanced literacy, just leveled books. But I have some partner plays and Reader's Theater scripts and I have people ask me, "Well, couldn't you make them decodable for first grade?" Which I could work on that,



but what's your thought on that, do they have to be decodable if that's pretty much what they're using so far for reading, and why or why not?

**Dr. Chase Young:** I think the quality of the Reader's Theater script is very important because the whole purpose is to entertain an audience, and I haven't found a lot of great entertaining decodable texts, you know what I'm saying?

**Anna Geiger:** Yeah, I'm with you.

**Dr. Chase Young:** So some of the scripts you'll find on my site are actually, I mean there's hundreds of them, and they're pretty much all trade books, Scary Stories from Alvin Schwartz, things like that, so you won't find a whole lot of those decodables on there. But if that's your thing, feel free to make your own, and send them to me and I'll post them.

**Anna Geiger:** Well, you were saying you did this at the beginning of the day, so was it always the very first thing that you would do and that was the beginning of your reading day, and how long would that take total-ish?

**Dr. Chase Young:** So on the first day it would take a little bit over five minutes because I'm reading the scripts. If the scripts were long I would just read the first paragraph and leave a cliff hanger and be like, "Oh yeah, and then this is what happens," and then they can decide based on that.

Performance day, it really depends on the length of the scripts, because you're going to listen to all of them. So sometimes it would be up to twenty minutes, but most times it ranged between five and ten minutes a day.

The first study we did was to compare these groups, and I had to audit what I was doing in the classroom. I was like, what am I doing that I don't think works for five minutes? I've got to find something, and I think I dumped daily oral language, those little half sheets.

**Anna Geiger:** Yeah, I did that once upon time.

**Dr. Chase Young:** I'm like, yeah, we're done with that. And we compared these groups, and the fluency gains were incredible in the Reader's Theater treatment versus the control. Everything else was pretty similar, but the fluency gains were outrageous.

**Anna Geiger:** Now how did you measure those?

**Dr. Chase Young:** So we measured words correct per minute, and also reading expression using the multidimensional fluency scale. So there was about a 20% increase in the treatment group on reading expression, and there was double the norm expectations of growth in words correct per minute in the treatment.

So we've continued to study, and I don't want to get into the research yet while you're still asking questions about the practical side, but I'll get into that afterwards.

**Anna Geiger:** Sure, well maybe you could talk a little bit, for people who maybe haven't heard of Reader's Theater, how simple it is. I think people hear theater and they might think, oh that sounds like a lot of work.

**Dr. Chase Young:** We need to build a stage, and costume design. No! Reader's Theater is supposed to be very basic. They get a text, they rehearse it, they perform it. We don't want them to memorize it, if they're memorizing it then the texts are too easy. We don't do props, we don't wear costumes, it is literally entertaining people with their voice, and the text that was selected.

So that's as basic as it is, and it doesn't take long, and we've seen a lot of great growth, and qualitatively too, kids just, they dig it!

You may be thinking about those students that may not participate. Well, I did this for ten years and didn't have a single kid not participate. One year I had three students with autism that all participated. We had some students that just, the reading was their greatest struggle, so I spent more time with them. Tutoring time turned into let's prep for your Reader's Theater time. If you want to make it work, you can, it's really, really simple.

**Anna Geiger:** So I'd love to hear about the research then and what you've learned.

**Dr. Chase Young:** Okay, cool. So we did a study not too long ago, because we know there are many studies out there that says that it builds fluency, word recognition, automaticity, words correct per minute, and expression. So we set up this study with a few hundred kids in Texas. We actually had a lot more, but it was August 24th, 2017 we were supposed to start it, and that's when Harvey hit, so a lot of those schools that were actually signed up to participate didn't open again for a very long time. So we saw just a few hundred, and we implemented the Reader's Theater treatment, versus their typical school instruction. We did it for eighteen weeks, and we used the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, the fourth edition, which is a standardized, really well established, valid and reliable instrument for pre and post testing on decoding, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

**Anna Geiger:** Okay.

**Dr. Chase Young:** Then we did this magical process called propensity score matching, which is actually just to match the groups, treatment versus control. So we lose some of the student's data, but we get a one-to-one match on, we have a boy who scored this on the pre-test, who is Hispanic, who is whatever, matched with someone in the control. The whole idea is to measure apples to apples.

So we balance the groups the best that we can so that we can be more confident in our results, and essentially we found out in vocabulary and decoding, it was pretty much the same growth. So that was cool, we were like, all right, well we're in step.

But when we looked at reading comprehension, the treatment group significantly outperformed the control group on the reading comprehension measure, and we could be pretty confident in that because of the tests that we used and the statistics, the matching that we used on the analysis. So we could say, this Reader's Theater treatment really worked similarly in vocabulary and decoding, but also better for reading comprehension.

**Anna Geiger:** Why do you think that is?

**Dr. Chase Young:** So that's funny, speculatively, and also based on some of the research, there is a very strong connection between reading prosody, which is the nerd word for reading expression, and reading comprehension. Theoretically it makes sense as well because if you're reading something and you're reading it with expression that matches the meaning, it indicates that you understand what you're reading. So with the emphasis on thinking about what the text means and being able to process that, and then essentially convey that meaning with your voice, there really was a very strong

focus, implicitly even, on reading comprehension.

**Anna Geiger:** That's really cool. Okay, what else did you find?

**Dr. Chase Young:** Oh gosh, so we go further. So we publish that study, and I'm mucking with the data. I don't know how I thought of this, but what I did is I separated, I had the control and the treatment, and I separated each by gender. And I was like, I wonder what the differential effects of Reader's Theater are on gender, based on gender?

We know that there is a gap that starts early in life where boys trail girls in literacy, and it's decades old, it's historic, as long as I can look back. And so we compared the growth in the treatment and the control groups by gender.

The control group for decoding, it started with the boys lower than girls, and they grew, but it ended with the same gap, boys lower than girls. It was the same for vocabulary, and the same for reading comprehension.

But we looked in the treatment group, and we saw that gap in the beginning where boys were below the girls on all three measures, but then we saw, after the post test, that in the treatment group the boys, on all three measures, ended up outperforming the girls. And we were like, what?! This is crazy! So then we just pulled out the boys and compared them, and the boys significantly outperformed the boys in the control.

So this Reader's Theater thing had a VERY positive impact on boys and I was like, oh my gosh, I could retire, this is an awesome finding. It's not THE answer, but it is an answer, but the problem is we didn't know why.

I'd sit down with my research team, it's me and Tim Rasinski and Trisha Durham and Linda Miller and Forrest Lane, and some other people, and we go, "Why is this happening?"

So we did a true mixed method study out of need and surveyed the boys. We sent out these surveys that we developed about how do you feel about Reader's Theater? Do you like it? Do you think it makes you a better reader? Things like that.

We did this qualitative analysis and found out the boys really liked it because of the collaborative nature, they liked entertaining their friends, a lot of the scripts we were using were humorous as well, they liked the comedy, and they just overall enjoyed it. It was a lot of movement and noise, and they liked that aspect.

Those were the major reasons why they really preferred this way of practicing reading. I remember, I tell this all the time, but I love this answer. One of the questions asked the boy, "Does Reader's Theater make you a better reader?"

And he said, "No, because it's fun."

**Anna Geiger:** Interesting, interesting.

**Dr. Chase Young:** Yeah. So those were some of the reasons that we found that this had a profound impact on boys and could be one of many ways that we can help close that gap, not just through Reader's Theater, but other reading activities that incorporate the collaboration, the noise, the movement, the comedy.

**Anna Geiger:** When I think about all the benefits, first of all, it doesn't take long, that's a huge deal. Second, not only are kids practicing reading, but they're also practicing being in front of people and speaking out loud by themselves, which is a really big deal for a lot of things. And then so interesting that all the work they do transfers to other texts, which is what you find when you're assessing them.

**Dr. Chase Young:** Yes, mm-hmm.

**Anna Geiger:** Is there anything else you want to share with us about your research or Reader's Theater in general?

**Dr. Chase Young:** I think it's important that we remember that we are those wonderful scientists who are also artists and we take what we know about Reader's Theater and we can do other things.

For example, we could use that same format with completely different approaches like

poetry slams. Students choose poems individually, or maybe in pairs that they co-read, and go through the same Monday through Friday type format where they're thinking about overall meaning, the word decoding, reading expression, the practicing. Then instead it's like a poetry slam, and everybody wears black and berets and they snap, clap, and drink coffee. I wouldn't put caffeine in any of their coffee, but you can really make that happen.

Another thing that I recently started using is something I call TAD Talks, and it's weird, it's just a spinoff of TED Talks, but it doesn't stand for anything.

**Anna Geiger:** Okay.

**Dr. Chase Young:** So don't ask what T-A-D means, it's just TAD Talks. And what I have them do is we find really strange, interesting things to present to the class. They put together PowerPoints, or whatever, and they rehearse in a weekly format much like that.

The texts are very important, because people have to want to listen. It's maybe not for everybody in the class, but I recommend it for your struggling readers as an extra thing that they can do.

But I use clickbait, like the stuff you see on your social media feeds, like strange state laws. So they go up there and they present why you can't wear blue shoes on Fridays in St. Louis, or whatever, or they just have a list of them and they've practiced it, or the most dangerous cities, we all click on that one, it's like, where does my city fall? The top ten most dangerous cities, or the top ten most active cities.

So all of my texts are literally coming from all that clickbait, and then they rehearse it and they stand up and they give their TAD Talk, and students really love it because it's wildly interesting information.

There are endless things you can do with this framework of starting with the decoding, and automaticity, and moving into understanding the story so that you can convey the meaning with appropriate expression. You can do that with pretty much anything.

**Anna Geiger:** Well, I would really like to see you in action, I'm sure this is so much fun. My own kids would love it. Thank you so much for taking time to talk, I know people are

really going to appreciate this, and I have a lot to say to people who question whether Reader's Theater is backed by research, I've got lots to say.

**Dr. Chase Young:** Oh, well there's plenty of that on my website too under downloads.

**Anna Geiger:** Awesome, great.

**Dr. Chase Young:** Anna, it's great talking to you! We did this very quickly, nobody knows that you emailed me like two days ago and here we are!

**Anna Geiger:** Yeah, I know, you're very efficient.

**Dr. Chase Young:** That's awesome.

**Anna Geiger:** Thanks so much.

**Dr. Chase Young:** Yeah, thank you.

**Anna Geiger:** You can find the show notes for this episode at [themeasuredmom.com/episode101](http://themeasuredmom.com/episode101). Talk to you next time!