Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here from The Measured Mom, and today I'm interviewing Dr. Richard Gentry in part two of our spelling series.

In his 40-plus year career, he's written spelling curricula, he's written 18 books, and all of this with dyslexia. We won't talk a lot about dyslexia in this episode, but he gave a wonderful interview on Melissa and Lori Love Literacy about dyslexia, which I'll be sure to link to in the show notes so that you can learn how he was able to overcome that and accomplish these many great things and do so many things for teachers and students.

In this interview, we start by talking about the stages of spelling development. We also talk about things to avoid and things to do when teaching spelling. Then we conclude by talking about what to do for kids who are struggling with their spelling words. Here we go!

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Dr. Gentry!

Richard Gentry: Hello! I'm delighted to be here.

Anna Geiger: Well, thank you so much. You've written SO much about spelling, and I know you have a lot to share, but before we get into that, could you tell us a little bit about what brought you to education and all the things that you've done in your long career?

Richard Gentry: Oh, sure. It's interesting, my mother was my first grade teacher and she is the person who taught me to read. She's the one who really inspired me to go into reading education. I think it's one of the best gifts anyone can give a child, the gift of literacy.

My journey began at the University of North Carolina as an elementary education major. Then I went to the University of Virginia and did a PhD in reading education. For 16

years, I directed the Reading Center at Western Carolina University in North Carolina. I ended up with two full-time jobs, one as a university professor, but then I was doing consulting work and doing publication.

And so I took a big risk. I gave up the university position and became self-employed as a researcher, writer, and educational consultant. It's been real exciting. I've traveled all over, been to every state except Alaska, and internationally. And all to share literacy, which I think is one of the best gifts that a parent or a teacher or an educator can give a child.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, well, agreed, 100%. And did you say you've been to every state except Alaska? Is that what you said?

Richard Gentry: That's right.

Anna Geiger: We took a trip there with our kids this summer actually, because that is one of the three or four states that I have not been to yet, and it was wonderful. So if you haven't been there yet, you'll definitely have to make a plan.

Richard Gentry: Oh, it's on my list for sure.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, it's incredible. Let's get back to spelling. I know you can talk to us about what research says about spelling development.

Richard Gentry: Yeah, it's really amazing now. All of a sudden, we have learned so much in the last three decades from the latest research in cognitive psychology and in an explosion of research in neuroscience. What we've learned about reading is that neuroscience says that spelling is at the very core of the reading brain circuitry. That's true both for the early phases of beginning readers and writers, but also for kids who are in grade two and beyond and even adults.

It's really interesting. We have something called brain words according to neuroscience in the left hemisphere of the brain, where for most people the reading circuitry is organized.

It is these brain words, these visual images of the spelling, that actually connect to the words that are already in your spoken language. So you use this alphabetic code. When you see the words on the page, it maps to or connects to that same word in your spoken vocabulary where you already have the word's meaning and its pronunciation.

So with spelling, it's just so important, and interestingly, and we'll get into that, it's not been recognized in teacher education how very important it is. We've gotten away from teaching spelling. As we move into our discussion, I'm sure we'll talk about that, how things are changing about that.

Anna Geiger: It sounds like you're talking about orthographic mapping just now, right?

Richard Gentry: Yes. Yeah, orthographic mapping is exactly it, and what that means, orthography, that's spelling. You map to the spelling, to the sounds. For example, a word like cat has three sounds, /k/ /ă/ /t/. Beginners have to learn to orthographically map the letters that they see in the code to the sound, and then they recognize that that word, C-A-T, is the word that they have in their spoken vocabulary. It's a wonderful process.

Anna Geiger: Like you said, it starts with the vision, starts with seeing the letters, but then this combining all these pieces together in our brain is not a memorization process exactly, but it's a connection of all the pieces that go together, right, that's stored?

Richard Gentry: That's exactly right, and it's interesting that you say it's not a memorization process because some of the things that we have been doing, in the classroom or when we teach, have been treating words as if you just had to memorize the spelling.

But that's not how it works. You really literally have to explicitly teach kids how to do that orthographic mapping using the alphabet code and their knowledge of the alphabet to connect to the words in their brains, which we call brain words.

Anna Geiger: Right, and of course at the end we can certainly talk more about that book, which is excellent and explains that in more detail.

When I think about Linnea Ehri's phases of word recognition, I also think about the spelling stages, which I think I read in a book of yours years ago, lots of years ago in a

different book.

Richard Gentry: I've been around a long time.

Anna Geiger: So have I. So yeah, that was a long time ago, and it was interesting to me at a recent presentation I went to about orthographic mapping, how they explain that Linnea's phases and then the phases of spelling development, they all kind of line up.

Maybe you could walk us through a little bit about how you would describe the phases of spelling development?

Richard Gentry: Okay, they almost perfectly line up. It's interesting.

Linnea Ehri and myself and other colleagues at the University of Virginia and elsewhere who were working with developmental phases of spelling started two lines of research. This research even precedes us. It's research that began in the early '70s, and by the '90s, we see that we came to the same conclusion. That is that both automatic word reading and use of invented spelling unfold or develop in five phases. It was amazing, two different lines of research and they connected with the same phases.

Let me just describe briefly each phase. The first phase is phase zero. It's called non-alphabetic spelling, and it's zero because really, there's no spelling there. It's what one would expect with a non-reader in preschool. It's simply scribbling. It's called non-alphabetic because there are no alphabetic letters. Phase zero, non-alphabetic spelling, is expected no later than the end of preschool or beginning of kindergarten.

Kids then move into, or hopefully are expected to move into, phase one, which is called pre-alphabetic spelling. Pre meaning before, before they know how to use an alphabetic system. Of course all alphabetic systems work by matching, or the English alphabet system works by matching, the letters to sounds and words.

So in this pre-alphabetic stage, kids might draw a picture and maybe a grocery list, and they might tell you what they're trying to write, maybe eggs, fish, milk, but the letters aren't going to correspond to sounds. If you see them writing this way in phase one, it's going to look like random letters. That's expected no later than the first half of kindergarten.

By the end of kindergarten though, kids are being taught how to match the letters to sounds, and so you're going to begin to see in their spelling part of the letters representing sounds. For example, a word like eggs might be spelled with an E. We call it partial alphabetic spelling because part of the sounds are represented.

It's a really fun process to watch. Literally, Anna, the invented spelling is a window into the brain because it can show how kids are developing into, eventually by the end of first grade, independent readers and writers.

Now the next phase is a giant cognitive leap. They go from partial representation of sounds to what's called phase three, full alphabetic. Full alphabetic means they are spelling all of the sounds and words, but the spellings aren't based on the English orthographic or spelling system. It's easy for you to read it, but it doesn't look like English spelling. For example, eagle might be spelled E-G-L. It has all the sounds, but you don't have the vowels in every syllable.

It's what enables the teacher or parent to recognize what needs to be taught. Especially in that first half of first grade, we do a lot of direct instruction and phonics with things like the CVC short vowel patterns, the long vowel patterns like the E marker pattern, another long vowel pattern called an open syllable like a vowel by itself at the end of the syllable in words like no.

There is major instruction in the first half of first grade teaching these English patterns, so that by the second half of first grade they're beginning to use these patterns that they've been taught.

We call that next phase, phase four, consolidated automatic, because what happens is that the kids have enough of these words that they have learned how to spell automatically. By the end of first grade, there should be about 300 words and syllable patterns that they've learned to spell automatically. That's when the independent reading and writing clicks in, and we're hoping that's going to happen as kids move into second grade.

Really it's just a wonderful process to watch, and you can see it in their invented spelling.

You can also connect it with the automatic word reading as children are going through these same phases. By the end of first grade they are moving into automatic word reading where they have as many as 300 plus words that they can recognize automatically. Once that happens, they can begin to be independent readers.

Anna Geiger: I find this so fascinating because, for example, the Simple View of Reading and Scarborough's Reading Rope are very well aligned, but they were developed independently, based on research. It sounds like what you're saying to me too is that Ehri's phases and the spelling phases were developed independently based on research, but came up with pretty much the same thing. Would that be accurate?

Richard Gentry: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Anna Geiger: So looking back at how we've taught spelling in the past, I know when I taught spelling, it was very traditional. It was the, "Here's your list, practice them with your parents." I did do some word study, but it was still very implicit. There wasn't a lot of explicit teaching of the pattern. Maybe you could talk about, from your perspective, some things that maybe we've gotten wrong with teaching spelling? And what we need to do to move forward?

Richard Gentry: One of the major things that we got wrong is that we weren't teaching it, we were assigning it, or expecting the parents to teach it, so I'm glad you recognize that that's just one of the mistakes that we made in the past.

For three decades, we were not paying attention to the science, and the real reason for that was something called whole language/balanced literacy. That theory of reading, unlike the Reading Rope theory, suggested that learning to spell was as easy as learning to speak. Teachers were told, "Well, you don't really need to teach spelling." So the first big mistake that we made, in my view, is that we stopped teaching spelling explicitly.

Then the second big problem is that we didn't give teachers the resources they need to teach spelling. Spelling is very complex. English spelling is very complex. I just mentioned briefly some of the very specific kinds of things that we have to teach in first grade, the six syllable patterns. There's a lot to it, and you can't just wing it if you're a teacher. You really need resources.

That's why I've spent my career developing research-based spelling books. It's a curriculum of the words and patterns that kids would need at a particular grade level or

particular time in their literacy development.

So it really gets down to that we've shoved spelling onto the back burner and what we really need to do is make sure we bring it back.

Anna Geiger: I think that comes back to a lack of knowledge for teachers and it's not their fault exactly, but for one thing, a lot of us don't understand the complexity of the English language because we did not learn that. Also not understanding how spelling works; that it's not just, like you said, it's not a visual memorization of all the letters in order. We need to understand why things are spelled a certain way. Without the teachers understanding that, it's hard to know what to do.

We know that a big mistake we've made is not teaching spelling explicitly, expecting kids to just learn the words. So what does it look like to teach spelling explicitly?

Richard Gentry: Well, first of all, you need three things. You need a curriculum, what words and syllable patterns to teach at each grade level, and that's why, again, I've spent decades developing research-based spelling books.

Another thing that you need is time in the language arts block. What the research is saying today is that in a two-hour language arts block, what we would need is at least 20 minutes each day of explicit spelling instruction.

Then you need the research-based strategies that engage kids.

Anna, let's talk about some of the things that don't work. One of the things, and you brought it up at the very beginning of our session today, one of the things that doesn't work is sending lists home to parents to teach or for the kids to memorize on Thursday night before the test. That's not teaching spelling, that's assigning spelling.

Writing the words 20 times is another one. You've seen kids do that. It becomes a mechanical thing. They're not making the connection of the letters to the sounds or the spelling or the syllable patterns, that doesn't work.

Another is thinking that if kids read, then they will magically pick up spelling by

osmosis. This is part of that whole language/balanced literacy theory, that spelling was as easy as learning to speak, and if we just give them great children's literature and put them in a comfortable environment with books all around, they're just going to pick up English spelling. We now know from neuroscience and cognitive psychology that it doesn't work that way.

Another is using boring worksheets from the internet. The problem with that is that there's no consistency; it's just haphazard, hit or miss. It's not a good way for teachers who are struggling to find resources to get them.

Then using word sorting alone. Over the last three decades there has been something called Words Their Way, and that program grew out of whole language. Words Their Way, meaning if they just played games and did word sorting alone then they would discover on their own how spelling works. The problem with that is that it's minimal guidance, as opposed to explicit instruction.

Then another thing that didn't work was replacing spelling instruction with test prep. Now this one gets me because when I travel I talk with teachers, and almost invariably in some districts, especially struggling districts, the teachers will say, "Well, my administrators say we don't need to teach spelling. You can't do a Friday spelling post-test. They've replaced it with test preparation."

The problem with that is if you can't spell, you're not going to be a very good reader. If you can spell the word, you can read it. It's really one of those things that doesn't work that we need to worry about.

So what DOES work? Structured literacy instruction. Not minimal guidance or discovery learning, but rather explicit instruction.

What does work? You need a well-designed curriculum. In first grade, Anna, that means it's generally explicitly teaching 300+ words, and that includes those syllable patterns. Once you learn cat, you are able to, by the end of first grade, spell mat, cat, fat, and sat, so that it grows to about 300 words.

In grade two and beyond, it might be an evidence-based spelling book as part of the well-designed curriculum.

A third thing you need is active engagement of the child, such as when she invents a spelling in her own mind, or engagement by taking a pre-test and then having the child, not you, correct it. Having the child self-correct engages the child mentally with looking at the spelling.

But then the fourth thing you need is feedback from the teacher, so when that child self-corrects, then the teacher's going to be there to give feedback and actively be a part of that self-correcting analysis.

Then, finally, something that is very important is called interleaved practice and mixing together various multisensory activities of working with the week's words. You don't do the same thing day after day after day after day, but mix up a lot of different kinds of multisensory activities.

One practice activity is something called the look, say, see, write, check technique that kids can use where they're using different senses to map the letters to the syllables or the sounds in the word.

Anna Geiger: Wonderful. I'm going to try to summarize what you just said, and you can see what I forget.

When you talked about things to avoid, one would be just assigning the words for the week and that's it. Then just letting go because we're too busy to teach it or we think that we are.

Another one would be collecting random worksheets. There's not a problem necessarily with a worksheet, but when you're just randomly choosing worksheets here and there that don't go together, and they're not building on each other, that can be kind of a waste of time.

Then also using word sorts in a way that relies on kids figuring out the pattern themselves instead of explicitly teaching the pattern before they begin.

Then ways to do spelling properly would be to have a scope and sequence, which may come with a good curriculum that gives you words to work on each week.

Also explicitly teaching those phonics patterns.

Then I like what you said about the pre-test. In the past, sometimes I've seen it be used where the kids just take the pre-test, the teacher takes it and grades it, and then if they got the words right, they don't have to take the Friday test. That's just how it works instead of providing feedback and all the words right after the test and explaining why words are spelled in a particular way, so this is useful for the students in the moment.

Richard Gentry: Absolutely. And having the child self-correct, that self-correction of the pre-test is very important.

Anna Geiger: So let's say the teacher understands a structured approach, they're teaching those phonics patterns explicitly, they're giving practice, they're having students break the words apart into sounds and spell each sound, but they have kids who are struggling. Are there specific things they can do to help those kids kind of get closer to catching up or to retain those spellings?

Richard Gentry: There are two major things. The first thing is that teachers have to meet the kid where they are developmentally. For example, there are a lot of kids who are fourth graders who are designated as dyslexic, who are spelling on a first grade level.

Well you can't just give them fewer fourth grade words and expect it to work. You've got to go back and do individualized or small group instruction with the basic words, phonics patterns, and syllable patterns that one would have been expected to learn in first grade. I think it's very important that we recognize that.

I think it's also very important that we recognize that what we're doing with dyslexia in schools today varies according to the district, and we really need to work on a better way of diagnosing dyslexia. It depends on what district you're in whether your child might have access to someone who's properly trained to set up the individual program or diagnose for dyslexia.

I have so many parents who contact me, and they are very frustrated because their kid has been in a particular program at school, getting help for one or two or three years. They show me what they're doing, and they're really not focusing on what the child needs in terms of explicit instruction in handwriting and spelling.

Anna Geiger: So we need to back up to where they are and make sure that instruction is explicit. Often that just means lots more repetitions, lots more breaking it down, and just moving at what feels like a slower pace to master those spellings.

Richard Gentry: Right, and sometimes fewer words. But again, being sure that they are fewer words at that child's developmental level.

Anna Geiger: Wonderful.

Before we close out, can you maybe talk to us a little about some of the work you've done? Any books that you have in the works? Or other things that are new that you can share with our listeners?

Richard Gentry: Oh, I'd be delighted! Well I have 18 books over my 40-plus year career, and I'm very, very excited about my most recent book which is called "Brain Words." It is a cutting-edge book for the science of reading movement. A wonderful thing about it is it's not 400 pages written for scientists, but we specifically translate the very complex neuroscience and science into layman's language. The book was written for teachers and parents.

The other big project that I have that's recent is a new spelling series, 1st-6th grade spelling books with Zaner-Bloser. It's called "Spelling Connections: A Word Study Approach."

Thank you for allowing me to mention these books that I'm really excited about. I think they're both cutting-edge and very important for helping kids move forward.

Anna Geiger: Thanks for all that you've done and continue to do in your career. I'll be sure to link to all those things in the show notes. Thanks again for talking today!

Richard Gentry: Oh, I'm privileged to be here! And thank you! Thank you for amplifying the voices of teachers and parents. You're doing a great job out there making a difference.

Anna Geiger: Thank you.

Thank you so much for listening. You can find the show notes at themeasuredmom.com/episode152. Talk to you next time!

Closing: That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, themeasuredmom.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.