Triple R Teaching

Today's episode is a real treat. You get to listen to my conversation with Dr. Susan Neuman.

I reached out to Dr. Neuman because I love her book, "All About Words," that she wrote with Tanya Wright. It's all about teaching vocabulary to young children, and so I reached out to her to talk about that and then I realized that she has done so much more than write that book. She's the editor of three volumes of the "Handbook of Early Literacy Research" published by Guilford. She has written many other books. She's a specialist in early literacy development. She even served as the U.S. Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education.

What an incredible career she's had, and yet she was so kind to sit down and talk with me. I know you'll get a lot out of our conversation about how the science of reading applies to preschool.

Anna Geiger: Welcome Dr. Neuman!

Susan Neuman: Well, it's nice to be with you!

Anna Geiger: Thanks so much for agreeing to talk with me today about early learning and the things you've learned over the years.

You have quite a background. Could you walk us through what got you into education and up until what you're doing now?

Susan Neuman: Sure. I began in education, not necessarily because I planned to be a teacher. I really did not plan to be a teacher so much as someone who was really interested in issues of poverty, issues that I felt education could address.

My central focus initially was how do we get people out of poverty? How do we ensure that so many of our children who are not successful can be more successful? That brought me into becoming a teacher.

I was a fifth grade teacher, I began there in a high poverty school district, and I ended up feeling like I was not doing very much good for these kids. I loved them to death, I gave them a lot of emotional and social support, but I felt that I wasn't developing the kinds of teaching mechanisms that could really enable them to be successful.

I also recognized that at fifth grade, these children were already so far behind. My highest learners were on the second grade level, and frankly, as a new teacher, I just didn't know what to do. I mean, I was beside myself in trying to figure out what I could actually do to support them.

So I went back to school and I became a reading specialist. I enjoyed that, working with small groups, helping children become better readers, but then again, I was stymied by the fact that many times when you're a reading specialist, you take children out of the room, out of the particular context, then put them back in the room and they end up doing just as poorly as if I had never taken them out.

So my frustration continued. That wasn't the route I wanted to take. I went back to graduate school and eventually got my PhD and said, "How could I do research that was applied, that could really help children more directly than what I felt I was doing initially?" And so I got into higher education, first at Eastern Connecticut State University, then at Temple University, then the University of Michigan.

Then I went to government and I became Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education under George W. Bush. There I learned a different set of skills. I learned how we can begin to really focus on equity issues related to creating federal guidelines and recommendations that could really ensure children's success.

Then I went back to the university and now I'm at NYU and enjoying my years doing research and doing teaching as well.

Anna Geiger: So what are your areas of research right now and what type of classes do you teach?

Susan Neuman: I teach in early childhood. My focus is on helping teachers or prospective teachers learn how children learn in these very early years.

One of the things I focus on, and sometimes I feel successful and not successful, is I feel to be a good early childhood teachers, you have to get in the mindset of the child. You have to understand what being a child is like. As a result, I think what we begin to do is we develop interactions and programs that are more sensitive to the very young child at all ages from infancy through Pre-K. That's what I primarily do.

I do a good deal of research also looking at screen media and how screen media can affect young children as well as programming and what programming might best support young children.

My focus is trying to create strategies, both in communities and in schools, on how we can best help our children.

Anna Geiger: That's so interesting. That wasn't on our list of things to talk about, but I'm really curious, what kind of things have you found in terms of your research around screens and teaching with those?

Susan Neuman: Well, we learned that some screening of educational programming can actually be very efficacious for young children. They learn vocabulary, they learn skills, they concentrate. It's almost, if you have really good educational media, it's almost explicit instruction in small bits, if you can keep it at small bits.

For example, we only have children watch about three minutes at most. That's all their attention can really take, and we look through eye tracking so we can actually gauge their attention much better. You can see when their attention starts falling, and that means that their comprehension is also falling.

We're finding that certain media, think something like "Between the Lions" bits, a couple of bits really can be very helpful in terms of giving children the strategies, but also the visual images, of certain vocabulary words that can actually be very helpful for them.

Anna Geiger: So it's helpful in small doses.

Susan Neuman: Very small doses. I mean, again, we're talking three minutes at most because then their attention really drops off dramatically.

Anna Geiger: That might be useful for a teacher to know if I want to show a little clip to teach my class something, I'm going to keep it really brief.

Susan Neuman: Exactly. Let me just add one more thing. We're finding that children who have a little bit of letter name knowledge, they actually develop some basic print knowledge when that print is on-screen and it can be really helpful for young children. Programs like Noggin's, "What's the Word" for example, have words on top of the screen. We find that children can actually begin to develop some print concepts and orthographic mapping on the basis of very, very brief images on screen.

Anna Geiger: Wonderful. Well that's good to know.

I wanted to talk to you a little bit because you've done so much work in this area and edited handbooks about early literacy and so on, about play-based learning, because I don't really know much about it. I hear people talk about it just in conversation. I hear people say, and I don't know if this is connected, but I'll hear people say, "These are the ways I'm teaching my three year old her letters," and someone else says, "Let them play. Everything should be play-based."

What exactly does play-based mean? What does research say about that?

Susan Neuman: Well I think it means many things, so I think there's not one definition. There are some curricula that just essentially have children going into settings and play. They get to choose their play, they get to review their play, plan, and do review. HighScope, for example, is a play-based curriculum. Basically, it believes that children learn through play and teacher interaction while children are engaged in play is a very good thing.

But there are programs that are playful learning and that tends to be a little bit different. That could be a guided play-based program. In other words, the teacher would have some goals in mind and those particular goals would be defined or identified or engaged with through play.

This is very different than just allowing children to play. The teacher might have objectives. They may have specific vocabulary words they want the children to learn. They might have specific goals to determine whether or not the child has learned. It's guided in ways that really provide a careful scaffolding of what children should learn.

I'm a fan of guided learning. I'm not a fan of total play-based learning because I think in many of our schools, we need to have some guidance and standards and goals. Those goals really help us see teaching in early childhood in a very different way than in kindergarten or first grade. It really is child-led, but also guided by the teacher so that the teacher can say by the end of that guided play that the children learned certain concepts of skills.

Anna Geiger: So you would say that it's okay for teachers to have an objective for children to learn the alphabet, for example, but the way we go about it might be different than we would in kindergarten and first grade. Is that kind of what you're saying?

Susan Neuman: Definitely. Again, we have to get in the mindset of the child, and when we think of the child, they're not sitting around wanting to learn about A or /a/. They're sitting around learning, trying to actively engage in their world, so how can I take that engagement and those wonderful curiosities and how can I meld it in a way that helps children learn their letters and their sounds, but in a meaningful way?

Anna Geiger: Another thing I hear people talk a lot about is if someone is trying to teach something to someone who's young, people will say, "Well, that's not developmentally appropriate." Is that concept supported by research? And what does that... I don't think everybody agrees what that means either, but what would that mean?

Susan Neuman: Right. I wrote a book on that.

Anna Geiger: Oh, okay!

Susan Neuman: We focused on language and literacy learning and developmentally appropriate practice. I think originally what developmentally appropriate practice was designed to do is say, "Look, we can give two year olds flashcards and they will learn their letters because they like us and they're trying to please us, so they'll learn those

letters. But is that necessarily appropriate for a two-year-old?" In other words, should they be engaged in playful learning? Should they be engaged with other children and learn social interactional skills? What is the best thing we should do at what age?

I'm a fan of saying that two year olds should learn about how to engage with others, cooperate, share, and investigate in interesting and exciting ways. I'm all for that. I'm not all for flashcards at that level. In fact, frankly, I would never want children to be using flashcards, period.

So I think developmentally appropriate was a concept. It was not an exact definition, but it basically said kids develop differently. Some kids learn to walk very early on, others take more time. Let's understand that children's development is not one thing and that there are variances across different children based on different experiences.

Let's also recognize that while some children can do some things early, do we really need to have them read at age two? No, we don't. There are other more important skills, frankly, that need to be developed during those years.

Then finally, the third part of developmentally appropriate practice is let's recognize that certain cultures have certain feelings about things. For example, some cultures don't expect parents to teach. They expect children to go to school and be taught, and so the parents' job would be to love and nurture their child, but not necessarily to help them with homework or anything like that. Different cultures would have different requirements or different sensibilities that might affect developmentally appropriate practice, and we need to take into account all of those things when we think about that concept.

Anna Geiger: Thank you for explaining that, that helps a lot. When I think about people kind of tossing that around, do you think they think there's a list somewhere of things that are appropriate by grade level? Is that what they're trying to say? Because it feels like some people have decided this age is not appropriate for that and this age is not appropriate for that. Is there any sort of research at all to back that up?

Susan Neuman: No. In fact, one of the things that we found, which was really disturbing, is that some teachers began to take letters down and numbers down in their Pre-K classrooms because they said it was not appropriate. Who says that? Kids LOVE to learn their letters. They love to sing the alphabet song! In other words, there's no hard and fast rule on what is developmentally appropriate or not. I think the term has been misused very often and often as an excuse for not teaching.

In my view, early childhood teachers should teach content in developmentally appropriate ways, should have objectives, all of the things that we would expect our other teachers to have, but we do it in a way that is appropriate for the child and the child's age.

Anna Geiger: So when you talk about developmentally appropriate, you're talking less about content and more about approach. Would that be true?

Susan Neuman: That's right. That's very much it. I think that these young children come to school and they're filled with interest in learning about science concepts. I could teach pretty sophisticated concepts to young children, very young children, but do it in a way that is really meaningful to them. Get outside, explore their world, look at those beautiful colors, and then understand what those color names are, not by sitting in a class and learning what is yellow and what is blue.

Anna Geiger: So it really requires a teacher to be really conscious of the things she wants her students to learn, and then have flexible plans for teaching those things. Would that make sense?

Susan Neuman: Yes. Flexible plans that vary according to the development or where the child is.

One of the most challenging things that teachers will find is even in a Pre-K class, there are children who have not had many experiences in book reading or experiences in a whole bunch of things that other kids will already have, and there will be a diverse set of skills and strategies that these kids have. Trying to find activities that meet the needs of these different children is sometimes a real challenge.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, it's the art of teaching that you just learn over time.

Susan Neuman: Yeah, it's the art of teaching.

Anna Geiger: You've written SO many things, which now I need to dive into all of it, but especially what I've loved most recently is your book "All About Words" that you wrote with Tanya Wright. It's a very, very accessible book about building vocabulary and oral language with young kids, and really it goes up to second grade. I recommend

this for anybody. It's a short read and very practical.

Can you talk a little bit about how preschool teachers can build oral language and vocabulary, maybe some of the more appropriate ways?

Susan Neuman: Yeah, sure. One of the things I'd like to just start out with saying is that oral language and vocabulary in my world are slightly different.

When you and I talk to young children, we will try to use colloquial language for the most part. We may enter into a couple of sophisticated words like, "That's gigantic!" But our goal in oral language development is to create a conversation, an ongoing conversation, with children. As a result, we'll often use common language, common terms, to expand and enhance that conversation.

But vocabulary development is often the language of schooling. Some of our children will come to school and they'll have a rich oral language, but they won't necessarily have had experiences with books and with other opportunities to learn more the language of schooling, which is more formal, sometimes a greater concept load, and more dense in materials.

Therefore we started a program that is called WOW, and the reason we did that is we wanted the children to come to school and say, "Wow!" It's actually the World of Words. Basically what we did is we said, "Children learn vocabulary best when things are connected. They have to be connected to children's worlds." In other words, when children learn about weather, they can learn so much about weather when we give them books that focus on different kinds of weather, so that they see repeated words in different contexts again and again.

"All About Words" is really about helping children begin to develop concepts that are related to common groupings of words. What we know is that when that begins to happen, children develop categories, and categories are the foundation of conceptual learning or comprehension.

In our work, what we've moved to is how do we teach vocabulary in very visual ways? Because children are visual and their long-term memory is developed when we teach them something that is very visual that then becomes part of their long-term memory. We group things in ways that make sense for children, and we have interesting topics.

One of our topics, for example, is called wild weather. It's not just weather, it's not just rain, it's blizzards and it's all sorts of interesting things. Children are just fascinated, and what they do is they begin to understand the difference between wild weather, like a blizzard, and when it's just snowing. They begin to develop differences in concepts and those concepts will enable them to go to third grade and fourth grade and really develop the kind of comprehension and background knowledge that they will need in order to be successful.

So we've been very successful in teaching vocabulary very early on, again, in very developmental ways through books and talking and experiences.

Anna Geiger: In your book you talk about text sets, and I really love that idea where you put together a set of books, fiction and nonfiction both, on a particular topic. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Susan Neuman: So we've grouped these books. We have five books in a text set, and the text set often begins with predictable books.

Predictable books are very easy for children to remember. For example, if I do "Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?" Most of the children, if I'm in Pre-K, will say, "Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see? I see a green frog looking at me!" They'll memorize it. They just do it. They will use their entire body to express themselves. Young children are very physical.

What we do is we begin with predictable books because what we're trying to convey to children is that I'm not reading TO children, I'm reading WITH children. Your collective responses are a part of the reading experience, and I want you to experience it.

So we begin with very predictable books, and they become mnemonic devices for young children. They will remember it. I'll say to my students, "Eating once, eating twice, eating chicken soup with rice," and they will still remember it. It might've occurred when they were five years old, but those books, again, are very memorable.

Then we'll move to what we call a narrative nonfiction. Narrative nonfiction are storybooks that have a good beginning, middle, and end, yet they'll often have the same vocabulary that the predictable book had. So children have a mindset already for what those words are, and then they're applying it now to a story, which is a little bit more complex than a predictable book. What we'll do is we'll recall and we'll engage

them with lots of interactive talk.

Then our final book in this text set is an informational book. This is a book that is strictly informational and will likely have more dense material and a higher concept load, but it will have the same vocabulary that they've heard from predictable book to narrative book now to informational, so they're successful.

They have mastered these words again and again in very different contexts, in very different genres. What they're learning is the differences in genre features, but they're also learning the differences in words, and as they experience those words, it's going deeper and deeper and deeper into long-term memory.

Anna Geiger: Right, so instead of just reading a book on weather today and a book on community helpers tomorrow, we read a set of books over time.

In the back of your book "All About Words," there are some examples of text sets. Teachers can choose those books of different genres and then you've got a list of topic words, challenge words, and supportive words.

Can you talk about the difference between the vocabulary types?

Susan Neuman: So when we talk about text sets and topic words, we're generally trying to focus on nouns because nouns create mental imagery, and I'll often use picture support for those nouns. I'm trying to show children what they are and trying to get them into an image that they can recall. Those words will be the centerpiece of what a text set will have.

Then we focus on supportive words, and supportive words are words that support your ability to talk about something. In other words, one of our topic words might be goldfish, and one of our supportive words might be fishbowl. Where do fish live at home? In a fishbowl. But we're not going to focus too much on that word because it's not very common. They won't see it tons of times, but it helps them and supports them in how they are learning words.

Then our final category is challenge words. Now these are really fun. In our text sets, what we'll also do is we'll say, "Time for a challenge!" The kids will wonder what's the challenge? Then we'll say, "Today we're talking about pets, and we know that pets are

tame and they live with people. I'm going to show you a picture, and you tell me whether it's a pet or not a pet."

This is a word that's newly introduced, and I'll show them a picture of a snake and we'll say, "Is a snake a pet or not a pet?"

Some children will say, "Oh, it's not a pet because it lives outside and pets live inside with people." Other people might say, "I found a garter snake and it's become a pet and I take care of it and it's become tame."

In other words, the challenge word is designed to really engage children in identifying what is or what is not a member of that conceptual grouping or category. What it helps children do is it helps children extend their vocabulary beyond what they have just learned. It not only does that, it concretizes the sense of the category or the concept.

In other words, I can clearly say to a child, "Is a spider an insect?"

And the child will say, "No, a spider is not an insect because an insect has six legs and three body parts and a spider has eight."

Now, you might think that that's very sophisticated, and it is, but we have four year olds who are doing that kind of thinking. One of the things we know is that with developmentally appropriate instruction, we can accelerate learning, but in ways that really engage children in fun activities and thinking.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, and kids like vocabulary. I know my youngest, he's in second grade now, but when I was reading a lot to him before he went to school, and we were reading a bunch of Jack and the beanstalk books. One of the words was bargain, so I taught him the word bargain, and for, I don't know, at least a year afterwards, any time he heard the word bargain, he was like, "Mom! Bargain! I know what that means!" They do notice those things.

Let's switch gears a little bit. We talked a little bit more about comprehension and vocabulary, but what about getting kids ready for the code? Things like learning the alphabet and sounds, maybe even sounding out words, and phonemic awareness. What do you feel is the best way, the best approach, for preschool teachers when it comes to getting kids ready to read or even maybe some of the kids reading? What do you think

about that?

Susan Neuman: We need to teach phonological awareness in those early years, and essentially what that is, and I want to make clear, is that it's not phonics. Phonological awareness is the ability to hear and distinguish sounds in words. When we move toward phonemic awareness, we're interested in having them hear individual sounds in those words.

What we do in preschool is we do an activity every single day that focuses on phonological and phonemic awareness.

First thing, we teach the alphabet. Alphabet skills are really important because they begin to help children identify print in their environment. In other words, it makes them more aware of print in their environment and they love it because they feel... I always say to the children, it's the pledge of allegiance to literacy in schools.

What it means is that we begin with the alphabet song. We teach a few letters at a time. Over a short period of time, children really do know their letters. They know them in sequence and out of sequence.

Teachers are very good at doing the alphabet on the whole. They are not as good about phonological awareness, which is the sound. We do very simple games with children. We begin with just some common books. For example, "I'm Going on a Bear Hunt," where we teach children to just repeat words, "I'm going on a bear hunt. I'm not scared!" And do all sorts of things where they're using their hands and they're using their bodies to segment words in a sentence.

Then we move to rhyming activities, which are so fun. Teachers should be singing to the children and singing with the children every single day and doing some very simple rhyme activities. "I'm going to say two words. The word is bat and bag. Do they rhyme?" The teacher can do some very, very simple activities in rhyming.

Then we encourage segmenting and blending, which is, again, very easy to do. "I'm going to say a word. Let's segment it!" We have teachers who will do something like, "/b/-/ă/-/t/, bat," where we get children to segment and blend words. Teachers should not segment unless they also blend those words together. I encourage teachers to do this for 10 minutes a day, just 10 minutes, but make sure it's in your lesson plan because if you say, "Oh, hey, I'm going to get to it," then it doesn't happen.

I'd encourage them to get rid of some of the boring calendar activities, which take a lot of time in circle time, and I'm not so sure how exciting that is to young children. I think that circle time can be really a time where they talk about scheduling, phonological awareness, and a good shared book reading.

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

How about writing in preschool? Some kids, depending on their spelling development, actually can use a letter or two or more to represent words. What can you tell me about that?

Susan Neuman: Well, children will need to focus on their writing. It's very evident when I go into classrooms what places are focusing on writing and what places are not.

I think some very basic encoding activities are great for these children. For example, "I'm going to say the word 'bad.' Can you write the letter that made that first sound?"

Children should have some practice in writing and just forming the letters. What we do is we focus on uppercase before we focus on lowercase, and the reason is because their hand muscles aren't necessarily well-developed. It's hard for some of these children to write, so the writing shouldn't take tons of times.

Whenever I get a chance to go into a classroom and ask the child to write their name, which is the first thing they should begin to write, they're so delighted. They love it because it's a sign of literacy. Sometimes they fall in love with certain letters and just will write the same letters again and again and again.

I encourage teachers to have a little writing center in their classroom with big fat pencils and maybe markers and paper right there so the children can actually practice their writing.

Anna Geiger: Well, we could just go on and on. There are so many things that you know about, and I wish people could see this because you have such a big smile on your face when you talk about all the things. You're obviously very, very passionate about what you do, which is so wonderful.

I'd like to talk at the end a little bit about some of your favorite things that you've written or shared, but first, you have done some interesting work eliminating book deserts. Can you talk about what that means and what you've done?

Susan Neuman: Well I have to say this is an absolute passion for me. When I first went to Temple University, I took a walk with families and I realized that if I took a walk to their school, I would literally find no books in their environment. There was no print in some areas of poverty in the city.

I began to recognize the difference in some environments compared to others, that some environments were flush with opportunities to read and a library right there and bookstores right there, and other places were just, there was just no opportunity for children to read or see books. The problem is even exacerbated during the summer when Head Starts are closed, when lots of child care programs turn into camps, which are wonderful, but not necessarily print-rich environments. I have worked hard in many different ways to really promote more access to books.

One of the things I've done most recently is really focus on reaching families where they are. Let us understand better where communities do their work, where people in their communities do their work. Some parents, frankly, are a little bit frightened of going to the library. They're worried that they might have library card problems or privacy issues. They worry that it's an institution and they won't know exactly what to do and how to select a book or who to talk to. They're a little bit awed by the librarian who is wonderful and supportive, but still a little bit awed.

As a result, what we've done is we've begun to say, "Instead of expecting families to go to a library or to go to a bookstore, could we bring books to where they are?"

And so we've focused on bringing books and putting books in laundromats, putting books in barbershops, and putting books in homeless shelters and social service communities. We're working now and hopefully we'll get funded to put books in visitation areas for incarcerated parents.

My belief is when children begin to see books early in their world, very early in their environment, there comes to be an expectation that books are part of growing up and part of our lives. When they're beautiful and shiny, they act like toys for children. You'll see if you go into these settings, you'll see that they actually pick them up and bring them to their parents because they want to be read to.

So that's been the greatest emphasis of our work in recent years, really trying to find places so that children are literally surrounded by books in every opportunity they have.

Anna Geiger: That is amazing and very inspiring. Is there a website or an organization that's running this?

Susan Neuman: No, I just work with organizations. Right now I'm working with Barbershop Books. I've been working with Too Small to Fail and First Book. Many of these organizations are trying to bring books to families. And so I've had the... And JetBlue. How could I forget JetBlue organization? Many of the organizations actually have social responsibility offices, and so I've been working with those offices to bring books to many different communities. We've done it all across the country.

Anna Geiger: That's amazing.

All the years that you've been working, what are some of the things that you're most proud of? You've edited so many books and written so many articles. What do you want people to know most, to see most?

Susan Neuman: Well, I want them to be a bit more sensitive and flexible and respectful of families who live in poverty. Their lives are difficult. Many times we've had interventions that actually say, "Be like me, middle class, spending time with our children all the time," and these parents have three jobs sometimes. They're struggling to make their rent and to buy food for their families.

So what I've tried in much of my work is to sensitize people to other ways of thinking. Let's get out of our mindset into the mindset of someone who is living in extreme difficulty. Let's understand that.

The second thing I think I've tried to do is, as I mentioned before, I've tried to often think like a child and design interventions that speak to the child and their interests and their engagement. I am convinced, absolutely convinced, that we underestimate so many of our children's capacities to learn and to think and to explore. I go into these rooms and I see these bright eyes, these beautiful children, and I say, "By giving them an opportunity, just look at what they're capable of!"

I often want to take a snapshot and just show people and try to convince them that we are wasting so much human capital that could be so helpful and so promising in our culture.

I guess those are the things that I've really tried to convey in my research. Sometimes I used to say to my graduate students, "I want to write a research article that will make people cry. It will make people understand that it's not just about numbers, it's about real people experiencing real hardship." Let's understand. Let's be a little bit more thoughtful and understanding.

Anna Geiger: Well, thank you for that and for all the work that you've done.

Do you have any current projects that you would like to share?

Susan Neuman: We're currently in schools in, again, high poverty communities, focusing on knowledge-building curriculum and the promise of engaging children in rich content learning while doing, again, developmentally appropriate activities. That's really, really exciting.

The other thing that we are focusing on is how can we use video and books together as a strategy to help children both find reading more engaging, frankly, and accentuate and accelerate learning. Those are the two projects that we're currently engaged in.

Anna Geiger: Well, wonderful. Thank you so much, and I'll be sure in the show notes to link to as many things of yours that I can find. I know there's quite a lot, that might take a while.

Susan Neuman: Thank you so much.

Anna Geiger: It was such a pleasure to talk to you. And thank you so much for taking the time.

Susan Neuman: Thank you. Take care.