Triple R Teaching

Hello, it's Anna Geiger here from The Measured Mom, and in today's episode I had the privilege of interviewing Dr. Sonia Cabell. She's an Associate Professor of Education and Reading Education/Language Arts in the School of Teacher Education at Florida State University, and research faculty at the Florida Center for Reading Research. As you'll see, she's also a former teacher and a very down-to-earth researcher who really helps teachers understand how to apply what researchers are finding out.

In today's episode, we talk about how to help preschool writers move through the next stage of writing development. I think this is a really important episode for anyone who's teaching beginning writers, whether that's preschool or kindergarten. I know you're going to get a lot out of this in terms of how to figure out what to do in the moment and how to provide high or low-support scaffolds as appropriate. Here we go!

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Dr. Cabell!

Sonia Cabell: Thank you for having me!

Anna Geiger: I got to hear you speak at Plain Talk, and you talked about supporting young writers. It was super interesting because I think this is a question a lot of people have when they're trying to figure out what to do in preschool and kindergarten with beginning writers.

We're going to talk about that today, but before we do, could you introduce yourself and let us know how you got to where you are now?

Sonia Cabell: Sure. I'm Sonia Cabell, and I'm an Associate Professor of Reading Education in the School of Teacher Education and in the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University. I started my career as a second grade teacher in Oklahoma, and then I went on to become a reading coach during the Reading First days in the early 2000s. I was a reading coach in Oklahoma and Virginia. Then I wanted to keep learning, and so I went to the University of Virginia and did my doctoral work there from 2005-2009, and I stayed on as a researcher at the University of Virginia until 2017.

Then I moved to the Florida Center for Reading Research and Florida State University.

Anna Geiger: I think what's really neat about your story that a lot of people, I think, forget, is that you are a researcher, but you were a teacher.

Sonia Cabell: Yeah, I was a second grade teacher.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, and it's really good for people to know that, that not every researcher is someone who's never stepped foot in the classroom. A lot of people tend to think and discount some of that, so thanks for sharing that.

Sonia Cabell: Yeah, I think that researchers, depending on the field that they're in, a lot of psychologists don't have a reading background, but a lot of those of us who are in the School of Education, or the School of Teacher Education, do have a teaching background.

Anna Geiger: It's always nice to have that frame of reference to go back to in your head as you're thinking about recommending things for schools.

Sonia Cabell: Absolutely, and it's important to also be in touch with what teachers and districts are thinking about, what they prioritize, because it is quite different than what researchers prioritize.

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

We're going to focus today on early writing, and I think when we're teaching preschoolers and kindergartners, we might focus more on letter names and sounds, and then the early reading. Why is it important to also address early writing?

Sonia Cabell: Well I like to talk about how writing relates to supporting not only later writing, but also later reading. I talk about it as writing into literacy. I think about how writing can be used as a vehicle for developing the early literacy skills, both the language skills as well as the code-related literacy skills, needed during the early years to set the stage for reading. I think it's a big missed opportunity that it seems like we're not engaging. Research shows that we're not really engaging in writing as much as I

think we should during the earliest years.

Anna Geiger: I wonder if that's partly because it's not as straightforward as a scope and sequence for teaching letters and sounds, and as we'll talk about, it's a lot more nuanced, and a lot more of a teacher really analyzing where a child is at and making instructional decisions. It's not always laid out for you, so I think that might be part of it.

Can you talk to us about the early writing framework which explains how early writing develops?

Sonia Cabell: Sure. I developed this framework, and it was published in a 2013 Reading Teacher article. This is really a framework that is not for teachers to group students and say, "You're a scribbler and you're on letters and letter-like forms," but rather it really was developed for preschool teachers to understand how to support the variation that occurs naturally in their classrooms.

I have four levels here. Two of them are in the pre-alphabetic phase, when you think of Ehri's phases, and two of them are in the partial alphabetic phase.

At level one, children are drawing and scribbling, and at this point, they might think that their drawing is their writing. When you ask them to write, they might draw instead.

Then it turns into drawings that have a scribble next to them, and they point to the scribble mark as the writing, and that's a really great accomplishment. At first they're drawing and scribbling, and that scribbling over time tends to then mirror the language that they're exposed to, the written language they're exposed to, left to right, top to bottom, in English.

Then they move on to writing with letters and letter-like forms. This is where their writing still has no correspondence with the message, with the sounds and the message they're trying to say, but they are using letters that are most familiar to them, and letter-like shapes, and sometimes numbers and dots and things like that too. You'll see letters of their name repeated in their writing. They could be writing long stories, and then when they read it back to you, they're not going to read it back the same way every time. It's going to change.

At those levels, one and two, drawing and scribbling, letters and letter-like forms, they're still in that pre-alphabetic stage, the phase that Ehri talks about, where they really don't yet understand the alphabetic principle.

Then at level three, they're writing with salient and beginning sound. Salient sound is something that sticks out to us, like in the word lava, the /v/ might stick out to us and be salient because it tickles our lip. When you're writing the word elevator, they might write the letter L because they hear the letter L at the beginning, and they often use a strategy, a letter name type of strategy.

When they're writing with these salient and beginning sounds, they're showing that they have grasped the alphabetic principle, that they understand that what I say can be written down using sounds, roughly from left to right, in our language. When they have that, when they understand that our speech stream is made up of sounds that they can write down, that is an amazing accomplishment.

Then they start doing inventive spellings, I call them estimated spellings, because they're not just making them up, they're estimating what they know. Then it becomes more complex, and they move to writing with beginning and ending sounds. Later, beginning, middle, and ending sound of a CVC word, so it grows in sophistication over time.

The early writing framework really blows up what's happening in that preschool period of drawing and scribbling, letters and letter-like forms, writing with salient and beginning sounds, and writing with beginning and ending sounds. The reason I developed that is in order to help the teacher understand where they are, and how do you move them to the next level.

Anna Geiger: Would you say that some students don't necessarily show all these phases because they're not given, or taking, opportunities to write or draw?

Sonia Cabell: Yeah, so it's interesting. Children aren't going to naturally perform however you want them to perform, so even in one given day, they might show you bits and pieces across phases, and I've definitely seen that. They might be in one center where they're scribbling, and then they turn around and they can write their name just fine, and then they're experimenting on a paper where they're doing...

When I talk to teachers about how do you know what level they are, you want to look at several writing samples across a week to see where are they functioning. Go to the

highest level at which that they're functioning and scaffold that. If they do have a grasp of the alphabetic principle, continue to grow that. If their highest level is writing with letter-like forms, scaffold them toward the alphabetic principle. For me, it's really about the scaffolding and the verbal supports that you're providing children, and the conversations that you're having to support them.

Anna Geiger: You've explained how understanding these phases, which as you said, students can be hopping in and out a little bit, but being aware of those phases and what's the furthest, and then seeing when students do something that fits a particular phase, knowing that can help us to know where we're taking them. We have to make decisions about how to get them to the next phase.

Can you give us maybe some specific examples of a particular type of writing that a teacher might see, and then what they should do next?

Sonia Cabell: So my colleague, Stefanie Copp, has been a partner with me in this work, and she's at the University of Lynchburg. We recently have an open access article we put out called "The Rising Star Scaffolding Guide." This provides teachers with a way to think about what children are doing, and the way to think about their moves while writing, and the way to think about the conversation.

There's an example I often use of a child named Juliet, she's actually Stefanie's young daughter, who was really young at the time.

She was asked, "So what are you writing?"

"I'm writing about my mom." Then the child writes a string of letters that are letters largely from in their name.

The teacher thinks about what is the child's level of writing development here? This child was writing with letters and letter-like forms, so the teacher now wants to try to offer a lower support scaffold to help the child do the thinking. Offer a little bit of a scaffold so the child can do the thinking.

So the teacher says, "Okay, the first thing we do when writing a word is think about the sounds we hear. What's the first sound you hear in mom?"

And Juliet says, "I hear /m/," and she writes an A on her paper.

Now the teacher here knows that she needs to continue to scaffold her so that she can write the M, so the teacher says, "You heard /m/, and I did too! What letter makes the /m/ sound? Let's look at the alphabet chart. Is it M or A?" She reduced the choices there. She used a tool, the alphabet chart, and then reduced the choices. Is it an M or is it an A?

Depending on the child, you could reduce those choices even further apart so it's very obvious to the child and then when they say M, you say, "Okay, let's write M."

In that exchange, you see the teacher basically was helping her to think about the sounds they hear because she was not necessarily thinking about the sounds you hear, but she was able to do that with the teacher's support.

Now let me give you another example where the child is further along.

The teacher says, "Can you read me what you're writing so far?"

The child says, "Shark Boy and Lava Girl," from that movie, and it was a letter V that the child wrote.

The teacher looks at the early writing framework and thinks this child is in salient and beginning sounds, so I'm going to continue to provide support, starting with a low level of support so the child has to do the thinking.

The teacher says, "You wrote V for lava. What other sounds do you hear in lava? llllaaaavvvvvaaaa?" You often want the child to say it back too, "Lava, say the word with me."

So now the child wrote LV, and the teacher provides another low support scaffold to help ensure the child got it right. The child is extending from just a V to an LV, that's really great!

The teacher says, "What's the next word you're writing? Remember to stretch it out and write all the sounds you hear."

So the teacher isn't demanding that the word lava be written conventionally yet. The child is not there yet, but she's helping him use his literacy skills and his growing knowledge of the alphabetic principle to write more sounds he's hearing in the other words he's trying to write.

That's the kind of scaffold that I'm talking about. Scaffolding children's code-related literacy skills that can help them. They're doing a lot of the thinking and a lot of the work here, rather than the teacher doing the work and just spelling it for the child, which really won't do much for them. If they have to do the work there, then you can see how that work that they're doing when they're writing can translate into their decoding.

Anna Geiger: Really doing this well requires two things on the part of the teacher. It requires knowledge, like you said, of the early writing framework, and then also a lot of skill, in-the-moment skill, which can be tricky and takes time to develop.

Can you talk a little bit more about the difference between low and high support scaffolds, and maybe some examples?

Sonia Cabell: I would think coaching would be needed, right? Knowledge and coaching, because what I am talking about is in-the-moment. I think there are a lot of in-the-moment supports, both for literacy and for language, that we can give for children.

My colleague, Tricia Zucker, and I just wrote a book called "Strive-for-Five Conversations" that has these same kinds of ideas in it to promote language comprehension. How do you scaffold in the moment, to provide more support or more challenge?

More support can be also thought of as a downward scaffold. Some of those things might be reducing choices, like I showed. There might be a fill-in-the-blank, like I say part of a response and the child fills in the rest. Or really intensely, if the child still doesn't get it, I might just model it. "I hear /m/, and the letter that makes that is the M, I'm going to write an M. Can you write M?" That is a higher support scaffold, but it's also

called a downward scaffold.

The ones that are less supportive and allow the child do more of the thinking are also called upward scaffolds that provide a challenge. Some of those are helping children to continue to think beyond what they're doing. In the realm of language, this would also be asking them an inferential type of question. This would be asking them, pushing them toward more abstract thinking. In code-related ways, this would be having them listen for more of the sounds, having them do more of the task on their own, and supporting only where they need it. The idea here is how can I provide a challenge to the student at the level where they are, that would still provide them with a challenge?

Anna Geiger: Yes. Let's say a preschool teacher is listening to this and is thinking about providing opportunities for their students to write in preschool. Would there be any time where you would say, "We're all doing writing right now," or is this just more as it comes up at centers, or as they just do it in their free time? How do you frame this, or is it just kind of as it comes up?

Sonia Cabell: Well I think that there are many ways you can write in preschool settings that are terrific. What I'm talking about now assumes that there is writing going on, but in a lot of classrooms there isn't writing going on.

There are ways, like you just talked about, to put writing into meaningful and naturalistic kinds of ways, like in centers and things like that.

Susan Neuman and Kathleen Roskos did work in the 90s that showed that just by putting in some of these writing tools and having children engaged more with literacy, with dramatic play centers and things like that, there are benefits. It could be things like taking a prescription in a doctor's center, taking a order in a restaurant center, filling out paperwork when you're going to see the vet, or things like this, so that's one way.

Teachers often have a morning message that they do as a whole group, and that can be an interactive share-the-pen kind of activity, or it could be a teacher-modeling kind of activity.

There's also child-dictated writing, where the child doesn't pick up a pen, but the teacher writes down what the child says, sometimes verbatim. They might put it with quotes and then read it back so that the child knows that what they say can be written down.

There are also writing centers that are devoted to things.

There is also journaling that could go on where all the students, or a small group of students, are writing in their journals and the teacher is circulating.

Writing doesn't have to be just pencil and paper or with markers. It could be with your finger. It can be with magnetic letters. There are a lot of different ways that we can write that doesn't always involve us having the pen or pencil in our hand.

It goes on a continuum of the teacher doing the writing, to sharing the writing, to the child doing the writing. In all of those ways, we can scaffold children's literacy where they are.

Anna Geiger: I guess I'm having a hard time picturing for teachers, like where's the more explicit versus the... You know what I'm saying?

Sonia Cabell: Yeah, I think this is a complement to that explicit instruction.

Even in preschool, the teaching of letter names, letter sounds, phonological awareness, these things need to be explicit. Even with preschoolers, that's the best way to learn letter names and letter sounds for example, not embedding it in shared book reading and things like that, but more explicit.

But that doesn't mean that we don't do it. Embedding it in shared book reading still has its place. It's called print referencing, and you're drawing children's attention to print while reading.

In the same way, this is a complement, the scaffolding that I'm talking about is a complement, to what you're already directly teaching them.

In kindergarten classrooms, there's usually a lot more writing going on, and you can scaffold children. You know what you've taught them, and you hold them accountable

to what you have taught them. You scaffold, "Remember, we learned about this... What was the next... How do we think about this?"

In addition, when you're teaching and doing your phonics instruction, there should be writing going on too. Sometimes they might have a dry erase board where they're writing a word or writing whatever phonics pattern you're teaching them at the time, so they're having practice. That spelling and the code-related skills go hand-in-hand.

I want to be clear, I'm not talking about a whole language or balanced literacy type of approach, that would be devoid, or would reduce the value of phonics. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about you have those things already in place, and now you're using every moment to scaffold their writing through the conversations you're having with them, and the ways that you're helping them through the thinking and moving them forward. I think it's both/and.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, that makes perfect sense. I think to your point, you have to provide opportunities for them to be doing this.

Sonia Cabell: Absolutely.

Anna Geiger: So if all you're doing is dictation and your explicit lessons, but you're not giving them a chance to work on their own writing, then there's no place for you to build on what you've been teaching in an authentic way. Is that what you're saying?

Sonia Cabell: Yes, that's what I'm saying, and it's interesting because I learned this lesson the hard way. I was so excited about the scaffolds that when I started over a decade ago working with classroom teachers to implement this, what I realized was, "Whoa! They are not even doing writing activities, so how is this going to make any sense to them?"

My colleagues, Hope Gerde from Texas A&M University and Gary Bingham from Georgia State University, have been studying preschool writing for a long time and have developed some good writing supports for teachers and training for teachers in how you incorporate writing into your classroom. Their work shows that in preschools, there still is very little writing going on. There's not a lot.

Now we have read-alouds, as I would say an almost ubiquitous practice, but

unfortunately, that's not necessarily true in preschool. My colleague, Beth Phillips, and I are working on a study where observations have taken place in 85 preschool classrooms, and it's shocking that sometimes there's not book reading, which is really, really shocking.

Anna Geiger: That's sad.

Sonia Cabell: I thought it was ubiquitous.

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

Sonia Cabell: You have more and more people reading books with children. A lot of times, they're pointing out the print. My advisor in grad school, my long-term mentor, Dr. Laura Justice from Ohio State University, created that print-referencing strategy. I would say that in curricula that I see, that it's a practice in there, that you point to print, and you draw attention to print. There are important things that happen around the language conversations in book reading, it's really important.

But I would say I'm trying to raise the awareness that also, let's not forget that children naturally also want to write, and how can you make that so it's not just like a drill-kill kind of writing, where they're copying all the time? Because when they're copying, they're not necessarily thinking about the letters and the sounds, or anything like that. They're just copying a form.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. No, I totally understand that, so thank you.

I guess just as a summary, you talked about the early writing framework, and how when teachers understand how the phases of writing kind of progress, then they can look at a child's writing and know, "I know where I want to take them, so what can I say that's going to take them there?" Then if I think they need a lot of support, I'm going to give a lot of support, but I'm not going to start there. I'm going to start by giving just a little bit of support to begin with. Then in order for students to have these opportunities, and for me to respond, they have to have opportunities to do authentic writing, which could be in response to something I've read to them. It could be, for preschool, working at centers. But it needs to be in addition to the explicit instruction that I'm giving,

Sonia Cabell: Right. These aren't necessarily all either/or things again. They need to

be writing for meaningful purposes because that matters also to their motivation as to why am I doing this? But they also need explicit and systematic instruction, so it's not that we throw away one.

I think sometimes there's a straw man created, where people think like, "Oh, if it's explicit and systematic, then it's going to be drill skill, kill, and it is not meaningful." I think that those are weak arguments personally, because I think that I've never seen a...

I think that as a teacher, we want to make things meaningful for children and learning meaningful for children. I would encourage teachers to continue to grow their own knowledge, and then take from their resources in books that they have, and really critically think about those and how they want to move forward.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, that makes perfect sense. It just requires that knowledge to begin with, so you have a filter.

You've mentioned your book that you recently published, "Strive-for-Five." Can you talk to us quickly about that and any other projects that we might have to look forward to?

Sonia Cabell: Yeah. "Strive-for-Five Conversations," the lead author is Tricia Zucker, who has been my friend and colleague for about 20 years. We met in 2004, and we taught together. She was the best kindergarten teacher I ever saw. I was her reading coach. She was the person who was like, "Sonia, come in here and model this for me."

I was like, "You don't need any help!"

She and I did our doctoral work together, so we've been kind of tied by an invisible string our whole lives, we like that Taylor Swift song. We do research together, and we wrote this book together that was born out of a lot of the research that we've done, both independently and together.

The Strive-for-Five idea is you go for five turns: I say something, you say something, I say something, you say something, I say something.

That Strive-for-Five term was really coined by David Dickinson, who was a professor at Vanderbilt University for many years. He's retired now, but he's an emeritus professor there. He championed this Strive-for-Five phrase.

The idea is that sticking with a child for five turns can really grow their language. A lot of times, the teacher says something, the child says something, and the teacher says, "Good job."

Anna Geiger: Yeah, exactly.

Sonia Cabell: And then I move to the next child. Or I ask a question, the child answers incorrectly, and I move to the next child. But what if you just kept with that one child for a few more turns, and scaffolded and supported them, either challenged them by asking another open-ended question, or supported them further by reducing choices to guide them towards the correct answer, versus kind of giving up on them.

We don't even realize, like as a teacher I didn't even realize I was doing this, switching to the next child, but that's the most common pattern in the classroom. What we're talking about is a marginal shift in what teachers are already doing throughout their day, which is having conversations. We're not saying that they're not having five-turn conversations. What we're saying is just think about how you could be even more deliberate in how you're scaffolding children's language and knowledge during conversations.

We tie Strive-for-Five conversations to Scarborough's Reading Rope that Hollis Scarborough developed, which incidentally, I got to see her original drawings of that, the other day in Pennsylvania...

Anna Geiger: Oh, really? How Cool!

Sonia Cabell: ...and I got to spend some time with Hollis too. That Reading Rope has been so instrumental, I think, in helping the field see how reading works. We have a chapter on each of the sections of the language comprehension portion.

Anna Geiger: Okay, okay.

Sonia Cabell: You can also build children's language in having these conversations within the context of their writing too, having conversations about their writing, so we're excited about that.

If listeners are interested in birth to five, my colleagues and I through NAEYC, in 2022, led by Tanya Wright, myself, Nell Duke, and Mariana Souto-Manning, we wrote a book for birth to five, "Literacy Learning for Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers." We have chapters in there on the alphabet and phonological awareness. We combine those chapters actually to help teachers see that phonological awareness is important because you have to tie it with alphabet knowledge in order for them to break the code. We have writing, comprehension, and texts to teach, so we have that book that came out in 2022.

Then in 2023, those people who are more interested in maybe what the research says directly, through Guilford Press, I was the lead editor on a volume that was also edited by Susan Neuman and Nicole Patton Terry, called the "Handbook on the Science of Early Literacy."

Anna Geiger: Yeah. All those books you mentioned, I do have, I'm still working through all of them.

Sonia Cabell: Oh, you do? Oh, thank you!

Anna Geiger: Yeah, I've spent a lot of time in the handbook with the chapter about the alphabet with Shayne Piasta, but I know there's so much more, so many books to read!

Sonia Cabell: Shayne is, to me, one of the go-to people for knowing what we know about the evidence on the alphabet.

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

Sonia Cabell: Yeah, she's a go-to in many, many ways, but that's just one of her expertise areas.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, she has great way of explaining what we know for sure, and what we're still waiting to know for sure. Yeah, she's my go-to expert for that too.

Well, thank you so much. I'll be sure to link to all the books that you mentioned and any articles that I find by you.

Is there anything in the works that you're excited about?

Sonia Cabell: Well, I'm always excited about my work; I do love what I do! I think some of the projects that I'm working on in terms of research really have to do with understanding even more the conversations that are going on. I'm looking at conversations in preschool and in kindergarten, and the back-and-forth exchanges, understanding where teachers' conversations are naturally richer. I do have some evidence from one of my prior studies that teachers seem to have these naturally richer conversations in science settings, so I'm exploring that further. I'm really excited about the research that I'm doing.

In terms of books for practitioners, I've got some things in my mind that aren't really ready to talk about yet.

Anna Geiger: Not ready to talk about, all right! Well I'm going to put a bug in your ear to think about a writing one. That's needed.

Sonia Cabell: Thank you.

Anna Geiger: Well, thank you so much, Dr. Cabell! This was great, and I know that people are going to get a lot of out of our conversation, so thanks so much for joining me.

Sonia Cabell: Thank you for having me! I really appreciate it.

Anna Geiger: You can find the show notes for today's episode at themeasuredmom.com/episode162. 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.