Triple R Teaching

Hello, my name is Anna Geiger, and thank you for joining me for this live presentation. You are watching, if you're watching on Facebook, the recording of Episode 35 of the Triple R Teaching podcast, and we're going to talk about the history of the reading wars in America. Now why is this important? It's because this lays the foundation for the discussion we're about to be having in the next number of episodes all about the science of reading. We'll talk about what that is and why it's important or not important, and what does it have to do with you and your teaching?

Really, the discussion always tends to start with phonics, for better or for worse. Some people will tell you that the science of reading is not all about phonics, and they're absolutely right. It is not all about phonics, and we'll get into that in a later episode, but phonics tends to be the place where we have our big discussions and disagreements in America when it comes to teaching reading.

Why is that? Well, it has to do with a lot of things.

Let's start with this quote from David and Meredith Liben in their book, "Know Better, Do Better". "The disagreements over the rightful role, intensity of focus, and approach within the phonics universe is a central part of the reading wars." The reason is because phonics just happens to be kind of controversial, and that's because the discussion leads us to so many controversial questions, like how structured should the teaching of young children be? How much should children practice new skills? How and what should we assess, and who's accountable for children learning to read? These are all questions that come up a lot when we're talking about phonics, it's really the perfect storm!

Now I'm going to share this timeline with you; we're going to talk about the history of the reading wars in America. If you don't like history, I'll do my very best to make it interesting for you.

So, back in the 1800s, phonics instruction in America, or reading instruction, was whole-word and phonics-based. They used these little readers, often called the McGuffey Readers, and I think there were some other ones that were popular as well. The kids would be sitting in their little rows or their individual desks, and they would learn to read with these books that focused heavily on either single words, or words you

could sound out, so it was a combination. Regardless, you might look at it and think it was pretty boring, because it did tend to look that way. It was a lot of drilling, a lot of reciting, and a lot of the kids just sitting there and responding to the teacher.

There was a reformer in America who didn't like what it looked like. His name was Horace Mann, and he was an American education reformer committed to public education. He did a lot of really great things! One thing he did was advocate that we support kids with positive reinforcement instead of corporal punishment, so he tried to get spanking and things like that out of schools. He also advocated training women to become educators, and as a sidelight, he did not think that slavery should be a part of the new territories.

We would say that a lot of things he did were positive things, but he had some interesting ideas about the alphabet. Here's a quote from Horace Mann himself, "Children would find it far more interesting and pleasurable to memorize words and read short sentences and stories without having to bother to learn the names of letters." He called the alphabet method "repulsive and soul-deadening to children."

That is so interesting to me, and I have to think that a lot of that is because of the way that teaching was done in those days. I know a lot of those early schools were called "blab schools", where the kids just recited, recited, recited. There wasn't a lot of give and take, there wasn't a lot of discussion, it was just the kids having to recite.

You could look at that and it might be pretty boring; it might look like drill and kill. That's how Horace Mann felt, and so he said, "We need to focus instead on whole words and sentences."

So he was kind of the father in America of the look-say method, which became really popular in the '30s through the '60s. I'm sure most of us have heard of the Dick and Jane books, maybe you even learned to read with those yourself. Dick and Jane books depend on kids learning a lot of words as wholes, so they just repeat those words over and over, lots of sight words.

The problem was that with the look-say method, it seemed that a lot of kids really weren't learning to read as well as you would hope. In 1955, Rudolf Flesch published his book, "Why Johnny Can't Read", and wow, did that ignite the reading wars big time! He said that kids weren't learning to read in America because we were not teaching phonics systematically. Instead, we were just kind of hoping kids would pick things up as they read these whole words. That book was on the bestseller list for 37 weeks in a row, and you could say that the publication of that book ignited the reading wars in America.

I had heard of it, I can't say I've actually read the whole thing, but I know that its tone got a lot of people angry. There were teachers that didn't like the book, and it just caused a lot of trouble in terms of discussion, troubling discussions with people getting upset.

There was a researcher in the '60s who said, "It's time that I sit down and do something about this." Her name was Jeanne Chall, and she was a psychologist, writer, and literacy researcher for many years, I think it was like 50 years. She sat down and she studied a lot of research so she could create a summary of it.

I'm going to switch to my face now, I'm going to show you that book. I have this from the library right now, I do not own this myself, but it's called "Learning to Read: The Great Debate" by Jeanne Chall, published in 1967. I want to read to you something from the front of the book about what it is that she was doing. She analyzed 67 research studies comparing different approaches to beginning reading, interviewed 25 proponents of various approaches, analyzed widely-used basal reading programs, observed how reading is taught in over 300 classrooms in the U.S., England, and Scotland, and talked with teachers and school administrators about the issues in the debate. Here's what she came up with: she said that systematic, sequential phonics instruction is best. It produced better outcomes in word recognition in the early grades, and even helped reading comprehension improve up to fourth grade. So that's what Jeanne Chall came up with, and her work is still considered very important to what we know about teaching kids to read.

Now, you'd think that after she published this, maybe there would be more of a move toward phonics-based instruction in the U.S., and certainly that was continuing in some places, but what really happened in the '70s was the whole language movement.

I'm going to switch back to my screen here and show you that. Okay, so that came from two men primarily. Frank Smith was a professor of psychology of the University of Victoria in British Columbia, and Ken Goodman was a professor of education at the University of Arizona. When we think of whole language, we think a lot of Ken Goodman. He called reading a "psycholinguistic guessing game". In other words, he said that when kids read words, they're not attending to all the individual letters, but they're thinking about context. They're thinking about word meaning, like semantics, grammar, which is syntax, and some of the parts of the letters, and putting that all together as they read words.

A big part of the whole language movement is the belief that learning to read is very much like learning to speak. So if we surround kids with lots of quality literature, lots of

print on the walls, lots of reading aloud of good books, and just give them things to read, they will pick up all the things they need to know and will learn to read.

So that's the whole language movement, it's really an embracing of a joyful approach, and it's calling for a nurturing environment versus a drill, drill, drill environment.

Right away, you can see that the whole language movement has some assumptions about what it means to teach reading using phonics. Many whole language advocates would have said to you that teaching phonics is boring amd whole language is fun, and so there was this tension here.

It kind of grabbed on in California, because there, the whole language movement was embraced by many of the schools. When something gets embraced in California, the textbook companies hear it, and it starts spreading, right? California's got a lot of people, a lot of people to buy their books. There were a lot of schools during that time in America that used the whole language method. Certainly not all, but it was definitely rising in popularity.

Someone, Stacy, is commenting and telling us that she was taught with the whole language approach and struggled with reading until fourth grade. Yeah, that's very interesting, we're going to get into the discussion of that in later episodes.

So the issue was that a lot of people were feeling the same thing that Stacy just said, that many kids were not learning to read as well as they could.

While the whole language movement was spreading, something important was happening in the background, and that was important research related to the science of reading. I find it really important to tell you this right now because I know a lot of people are wondering if the science of reading is brand new. It isn't! There's been lots of research done over many years, a lot of it done way back in the '80s and '90s, and we're just starting to find out about it more in the mainstream. So in the background, while whole language was spreading, research was being done.

In the year 1997, that's when Congress got together this group of people and said, "We want you to study the relevant research when it comes to teaching reading. We want you to evaluate the existing research and evidence to find the best ways of teaching kids to read."

And so this group of people went together and did this, and it took them three years. In the year 2000, they issued their report, and here are some of their main recommendations. The National Reading Panel recommended explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, systematic phonics instruction, methods to improve fluency, and ways to enhance reading comprehension.

Balanced literacy came about around the year 2000, and that was as a response to the National Reading Panel's report.

Now, a little bit of context here for myself personally, I graduated from undergrad in 1999. You can do the math, but I'll tell you real quick that I'm 43. Then in the year 2000, I started my master's degree program, and concluded that around 2006- there was a move, so it took a little longer than it was supposed to. I was instructed in the balanced literacy approach in graduate school, and that is what I used as a classroom teacher.

If you want to know what it is, you could talk to 20 people and probably hear 20 different things! Balanced literacy isn't that well-defined, but we'll get to that in future episodes. The main idea, though, of balanced literacy is that it's taking the best of both sides, so it's taking the joyful approach to teaching reading, literacy-rich whole language approach, and also incorporating focused phonics lessons.

Now, what do those phonics lessons look like, and how much of the reading process are they? That's going to really depend on where you are, and we'll get to that coming up. But for now, I just want you to understand, this is how balanced literacy got its birth.

If we're going to talk about balanced literacy and the people today that we consider being kind of the forerunners of balanced literacy, I think of Lucy Calkins and then Fountas and Pinnell. All of these women together have created some of the most popular reading programs in America today, and we would call those balanced literacy.

Well, in the year 2008, the science of reading that had started happening years ago, began to get more attention because of some books that were published. Those books were "Proust and the Squid", "Reading in the Brain", and more recently in 2017, Mark Seidenberg's book "Language at the Speed of Sight".

The science of reading started to get my attention first in 2014, because that was shortly after I started blogging, and someone commented on one of my blog posts. She

said that the thing I was talking about wasn't backed in research. I heard her say it, and it didn't make any sense to me! This was something I'd just learned recently, and I knew lots of people using it successfully! I saw success with it, and what she was telling me didn't make sense, and I did not engage very far in a discussion with her. Thinking about it now, there's a lot different that I would've said with what I know now.

What really got my wheels turning, what really got my attention, beyond that little conversation back in 2014, was when people drew my attention to this article and podcast episode called "At a Loss for Words" from Emily Hanford. This came out in 2019, and this to me is what has really gotten the science of reading the attention its been looking for for many years. This is what's gotten people to talk about it, and basically, it's ignited a movement! It's a great time to be learning about reading research because there is so much that's available to us.

That said, I know that some people are skeptical, which I totally understand! Last week, I asked people, my readers and listeners, to fill out a survey about their understandings or opinions about the science of reading. It was great, we got over 1,000 responses, and one of my team members took them from me and highlighted some responses in a 13-page document, so I have a reference list for your questions. I want to share with you some of the questions and concerns that I received in that survey.

Number one was, "Where does the science come from?" Another one, "Is this just another pendulum swing?" Lots of people were asking that. And, "How do I know this isn't just another method that will be disproved five years from now? How do I know which scientists to trust?" Those are all SUCH good questions!

I want to let you know that this series is meant to educate you, but also it's a place to feel safe. I'm not going to judge you for what you're doing, I'm not going to tell you to take everything you're doing and turn it on its head. The podcast, Triple R Teaching, has its name for a reason, we're here to help you reflect, refine by making small, doable changes, and recharge so you're excited. So, don't be afraid to tune into these episodes! They are here to help you, to give you new things to think about, and to help you make little changes that will make a big difference.

So stay tuned because next week I'm going to give my response to the Emily Hanford article. Believe me, I've been thinking about that article since it came out in 2019, imagining what my response should be, and I'll be honest with you that the response I'm going to give is different than what I thought it would be six months ago, based on all the things that I'm learning today.

So, thanks for joining me for this and for bearing with me doing this live. I can't wait to

be with you again next week, when we talk all about the article, "At a Loss for Words", and what that has to do with the way that we teach today.

Thanks for watching, and we'll talk to you again next week.