



Triple R Teaching

Hello! My name is Anna Geiger, and if you're watching me on Facebook, you are watching the live recording of a future podcast episode for Triple R Teaching. Triple R Teaching is my podcast where I help teachers reflect, refine, and recharge.

We're in the second of our series all about the science of reading. Last week, I gave you a brief history of the reading wars in America. I promised you that this week, I would give you my reaction to the article that some would say reignited the reading wars. You could say it made the science of reading a movement.

This article first came to my attention the year it came out in 2019, and it's called, "At A Loss For Words: How a Flawed Idea Is Teaching Millions of Kids To Be Poor Readers". I have to say that when this article came out, I was not a fan. In fact, it brought out a lot of feelings in me, a lot of negative feelings! Let me read to you the very beginning of the article.

It says, "For decades, reading instruction in American schools has been rooted in a flawed theory about how reading works, a theory that was debunked decades ago by cognitive scientists, yet remains deeply embedded in teaching practices and curriculum materials. As a result, the strategies that struggling readers use to get by — memorizing words, using context to guess words, skipping words they don't know — are the strategies that many beginning readers are taught in school. This makes it harder for many kids to learn how to read, and children who don't get off to a good start in reading find it difficult to ever master the process."

I read that quote from the article, and I thought, "What does she know? She's a journalist. How could she tell me how to teach reading?"

That's exactly how I taught kids how to read, to use multiple cues for solving words, because otherwise it sounds like this, "The c-a-t h-a-d ..." and who can make meaning when they're reading like that? If you read books that allow them to have flow to the reading because the texts are predictable, and when they can use pictures to help them solve the words, then they can read more fluently and can make sense of what they read. It prevents them from being word callers, and it brings joy to reading, because who wants to sit and read decodable phonics books?!

So already I was feeling very defensive, what's she talking about? How does she know anything? Then I went on in the article, and she quoted some statistics from the NAEP where she said, "A shocking number of kids in the United States can't read very well. A third of all fourth-graders can't read at a basic level, and most students are still not proficient readers by the time they finish high school."

I read that and I thought, "Well yeah, that doesn't look good, but I've never been an expert on standardized test reporting." I could dismiss this, because I knew that where I taught the students were scoring much higher than the average, so my students weren't struggling to read.

Then in the article, she walks us through the reading wars, a little bit like I did with you last week. Then she zeroes in on the three cueing system, and that's the thing that gets me right in the heart! It gets a lot of teachers right in the heart, because it's something we believe in! She wrote, "In the cueing theory of how reading works, when a child comes to a word she doesn't know, the teacher encourages her to think of a word that makes sense and asks: Does it look right? Does it sound right? If a word checks out on the basis of those questions, the child is getting it. She's on the path to skilled reading."

I read it and thought, "Well yeah, that's true. I do teach kids to use the three queuing system because that's how they'll make sense of what they're reading. If they don't have the three queuing system, they have to read these contrived decodable texts that don't mean anything! It's going to stunt their reading growth, and when people listen to my kids read it...is....go...ing...to sound like this!

Well, then I read on. The article goes on to talk about the science of reading that was going on in the background while the three cueing system was becoming popular. It's the body of research that scientists have conducted on how we learn to read. I felt dismissive again. She's a journalist, they're scientists, and none of them are teachers in the trenches! How can THEY tell us how to teach? So I skipped over that and I kept going.

Okay, now she was getting me a little bit, because now she was quoting an actual teacher, a teacher and a literacy coach in the Oakland Unified School District. Her name is Margaret Goldberg, and she started out using the three cueing approach. That was how she first taught kids how to read, but she transitioned. In the article, it talks about her transition from teaching with leveled books to decodable books.

She's quoted as saying this, "I did lasting damage to these kids (the children who learned three cueing). It was so hard to ever get them to stop looking at a picture to guess what a word would be. It was so hard to ever get them to slow down and sound a word out because they had had this experience of knowing that you predict what you read before you read it."

I thought, "No, you're not hurting the kids! You're helping them read faster and more smoothly, and you're helping them make sense of what they read. When they can enjoy what they're reading instead of slogging through a decodable book, they will learn to love it! Besides that," I thought, "Emily Hanford talks like balanced literacy is without phonics, and that's not true! I did teach phonics when I taught balanced literacy in the classroom. And as my students learned to read more, they started using MORE phonics. They started paying more attention."

That's how I saw the article at first. I basically dismissed it. It was by a journalist who had talked about a lot of scientists - what did they know? - and I didn't agree with this one teacher who felt like the three queuing system was damaging to beginning readers. That's how I felt at first.

Well, that was a few years ago. I have been going back to the article many, many times, as different readers of my blog have directed me to it. My feelings of annoyance, anger, and dismissiveness have faded.

Why? Why am I starting to see this article differently? Well, I believe it started back in, I think it was 2020. I'm not 100% sure about that, maybe it was even 2019, but I posted in a Facebook group about this very thing. I think it was last summer, and I said, "Hey, teachers in this group," because it was a teacher seller group, "I've always taught reading using the three cueing system for beginning readers and leveled books, but now I'm hearing that some people don't agree with that and they keep sending me to this article by Emily Hanford. What do you think?" I tagged some people that I knew taught the same way that I did.

I was REALLY surprised at the conversation that happened in that thread after I posed that question, especially since I'm usually extremely quiet in this group. I usually just head in there to see what's new in the teacher seller world, and I don't participate very much.

Over one hundred people replied to me, and I've got to tell you, the reading wars erupted right there in the comment section! I did not know that teachers everywhere were dismissing the three queuing system now as being faulty. I had not heard that! I

was really not familiar with the new science, or the science that's been around for a while that we're just finding out about, that was leading them to their conclusions.

Now I've been diving into the books and research myself. I've spent many evenings doing Google Meets with other educators. They're teachers like me who were staunch balanced literacy advocates, and are now not trying to throw everything from balanced literacy away, but, confronted with this science, are starting to make a shift in how they approach beginning reading.

Now when I read the article, instead of being afraid and having this tension in my chest and thinking I have to throw away everything I've ever done, I just listen. I listen to this paragraph right here.

"She's come to understand that cueing sends the message to kids that they don't need to sound out words. Her students would get phonics instruction in one part of the day. Then they'd go reader's workshop and be taught that when they come to a word they don't know, they have lots of strategies. They can sound it out. They can also check the first letter, look at the picture, think of a word that makes sense. Teaching cueing AND phonics doesn't work," she said. "One negates the other."

I started to think, "You know, she's got a point. If you teach them phonics over here, but then when you give them their books, they don't have to use the phonics, why would they stop to sound out words?"

Interestingly, this all happened at the same time that I began teaching my youngest to read. I noticed that when I use leveled books with him, which had very few words that he could sound out, he would start to read the pattern and his eyes would jump right off the page. It got to be that any leveled book I gave him, as soon as he figured out the pattern, that's all he needed. However, when I started using some engaging decodable books with him and taught him how to work through those words, his eyes were on every word in the book.

I read this quote in the article, "To be clear, there's nothing wrong with pictures. They're great to look at and talk about, and they can help a child comprehend the meaning of a story. Context — including a picture if there is one — helps us understand what we're reading all the time. But if a child is being taught to use context to identify words, she's being taught to read like a poor reader."

I read that and I thought, "Yeah, I'm starting to get it now." Kids DO use the cues to

help them comprehend what they read, BUT the decoding needs to come first. First, they can decode the word, and after they've decoded it, they can think about whether that word makes sense or sounds right grammatically.

Now, when I read the article, "At A Loss For Words" by Emily Hanford, I don't get that tight feeling in my chest. I don't feel my wall go up or get angry at this journalist who has no right to say these things and cause division among teachers. Instead, I see a challenge for myself personally, to find out what the research REALLY says about our brains and how they learn to read and what implications that has for how we teach reading. I've learned I don't need to be worried. In the past, when I approached this article, it left me with a feeling of being scared and helpless. I thought I would have to throw away everything I've ever done. I don't think that now.

Instead, I think about how I can study all the books and articles that have been brought to bear recently and I can be excited about what I can learn as well as what I can share with you! I get excited about how what I'm learning and what you're learning will impact many, many students around the world.

Next week, I'm going to give you the research, the science that I alluded to in today's video, that forms the basis for the science of reading. I know some of you have expressed concerns about it such as, "Who is this from? Can we really trust this? Is this just a pendulum swing?" I want to address all those concerns for you and just help you see where the science of reading people are coming from.

If you hear science of reading and you get scared and your wall goes up and you don't want to listen, I would encourage you to tune in and just hear what I have to say. I promise you I've been in the exact same position you have, and we're all learning this together. It's not something to be afraid of. It's something to be excited about! So just come and have a listen. I'll be here next week, or you can check on the podcast for the episode next week. Thanks so much for listening. And I'll talk to you again soon.