



Triple R Teaching

I recently had the privilege of doing an interview with Dr. Wendy Farone. She has been in education for thirty years and is just a wealth of information about what it means to teach reading right. I found Wendy when I watched a webinar about dyslexia that she gave for Voyager Sopris and I was struck by how clear and concise she is, as well as her honesty about how she came to structured literacy from balanced literacy. I'm sure you're going to get a lot out of today's episode. We'll get started right after the intro.

Intro: Welcome to Triple R Teaching, where we encourage you to think differently about education by helping you reflect, refine, and recharge. This isn't just about trying something new as you educate those entrusted to your care. We'll equip you with simple strategies and practical tips that will fill your toolbox and reignite your passion for teaching. It's time to reflect, refine, and recharge with your host, Anna Geiger.

Anna Geiger: Hello, everyone. Today in our Balanced to Structured Literacy series, we're excited to welcome Dr. Wendy Farone. She has been in education for thirty years, including twelve years as a classroom teacher in various grades. She was a Title I reading specialist, an education consultant, and a national LETRS trainer, and she also has a PhD in reading. Welcome, Wendy!

Wendy Farone: Thank you very much for having me. I'm excited to talk about this topic.

Anna: Yes, I found Wendy because I was watching a webinar, I can't remember which one, but I think it may have been about dyslexia and I was just struck by how clear and helpful her instruction was, as well as her acknowledgment that it wasn't always how she approached reading.

Can you tell us a little bit about your history with balanced literacy?

Wendy: I sure can. I started in education as an adult learner, so I was about twenty-five, which back in the day was really kind of late to the party, right? When I got my first job, I taught first grade, and it was all literature-based. Students would come in

in the morning and they would walk around that little kidney-shaped table and pick up packets of handouts. We would do what the curriculum, or the text in this case, taught us to do and that was read stories and point to things as we read them. There was really no structure. There were songs and such, but there was no direct instruction, there was really nothing explicit.

What I found was that the kids who got it, got it, and the kids who didn't, didn't. I didn't see that as a fault of mine or the curriculum, I saw it as something wrong with the child himself or herself. So that child, of course, was considered for maybe a special education referral because certainly, there could be nothing wrong in my teaching or something wrong in the curriculum that the district had chosen.

Well, reflecting back, I have quite a bit of regret about that because I know better now. Of course, as educators, we have to remember that we are not responsible for what we do not know, but we certainly are responsible once we DO know in implementing those those good things.

I taught that way for many years. Twelve years I was in the classroom, and I watched it go from configuration spelling, where you draw circles around (I still see it, it makes me crazy), rather than actually learning spelling patterns. Then it went into more balanced literacy.

What I find very interesting is the use of the term "balanced literacy," who doesn't want balance in their life, right? We don't want extremes one way or the other, the middle ground is just a perfect place to be. That was a great way to tag people into thinking that this is the right thing to do.

Well, in the year 2000, the National Reading Panel came out and they had checked out a ton of studies, and they weeded out those ones that were good studies and methodology. They found that there really wasn't all that much that was going into the field of education to teachers and into publications that go to teachers, that really taught what the research said about teaching reading.

Therefore, what happened then is that the teachers were taught by universities who didn't understand, and so balanced literacy was the path of least resistance. It was wonderful, it was fun, it was a hoot! We told stories, kids sang songs, and we loved it. It's just, unfortunately, those who couldn't read didn't learn to read, and so that turned into flooding the special education fields, and Title I, and everybody needs a reading specialist.

We kept pointing the finger at the child and that frustrated me like crazy and so I thought, "There HAS to be a better way to do this!" The National Reading Panel, like I said, came out in 2000, and I was intrigued. I kept thinking, "There is a better way," so I decided I had my bachelor's in elementary ed, my master's in reading, a reading specialist certification through the state, and a national certification, and I thought, "Well, maybe the answer lies in the doctoral level. Maybe that's where it is." I went all the way through, got a PhD in reading, and I realized that it's not there, either.

Well, a whole lot of money spent later, I was really no better off than I was in teaching a kid how to read. It was completely frustrating. Where do you go once you've got a doctorate? I mean, isn't that the top of the ladder?

Well, part of the work that I was doing was working for a Department of Ed in the Bureau of Special Education. I was a training in technical assistance consultant. As part of that work, my director brought in LETRS training, which is Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling, which is ironically spelled L-E-T-R-S, right?

Now it is nationally and internationally known as the gold-star level learning experience for teachers in the science of reading. I was given the gift of becoming certified as a trainer of LETRS. It was life-changing, because now I know why kids struggle as a reader, and I have enough knowledge around spelling systems, writing systems, decoding, and all of those phonology systems that I can truly teach a child how to read on the back of a napkin.

Anna: Well, that's really cool.

Wendy: Mm-hmm.

Anna: So when you gained your understanding of the science of reading, was that when you were an educational consultant?

Wendy: That's correct.

Anna: Then you had to bring this information into schools where teachers weren't always on board. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Wendy: Oh, my, there are so many great stories around that. Most of it, reflecting back, I think is because nobody likes to be told that what they are doing is not the right way of doing it. There's a resistance there. As a consultant, you have to really be careful. When I would approach a resistant group who have the "yeah, but's" (that sounds good, Wendy. Yeah, but in my district...), what I would have to do in my trainings and my assistance work was to convince them that this isn't working for them, that what's happening now has a 50% proficiency rate.

It's not like they unloaded a bus in the front of the school and said, "All kids who can't read, get in there." Mom and Dad are sending the student with the understanding that these are professional educators and even though it's tough and even though things get in the way, the variables are crazy, we can do this, anyway. In spite of those, we can teach kids how to read, kids with learning disabilities and physical and cognitive disabilities. We can teach them to read anyway.

That's the beautiful thing. Once you empower a teacher to recognize that maybe there is a better way, they willing to investigate. Then they catch the bug and off it goes. I've had many, many, many teachers say to me, "Why didn't anybody teach me this before?"

Anna: Yes. Yeah, I hear that a lot.

Wendy: "How do we not know this?"

Anna: What do you feel has been the most impactful knowledge that you shared with these teachers that really set off the light bulb?

Wendy: Teaching them how the spelling system works, that there IS a reason why there's an E at the end of "cheese" or "house." It's not just there because they had a box of E's sitting around, it's there to keep it from looking plural, because any word in the English language that ends in a single S means more than one, or that it's happening right now, like "walks" means that we're walking right now.

So the E is there to signify that we don't mean more than one "chee," or more than one "hou," it's an indicator. Those types of nuances of the spelling system allow teachers to teach decoding better, and to teach writing better, and to recognize errors in student patterns in spelling and writing. This can indicate to me that they don't understand

what a digraph is, or how to blend the "bl" sound together, that's what they're missing. It pinpoints us and engages us directly with what the issue is, instead of saying some broad term like, "He's below, so he gets Title." Why is he below? That's what I want to know.

When I was teaching in balanced literacy and those types of things, it was really kind of hope and, "Well, it sounds like he's reading kind of slow, and when I did a running record, this showed up. Are you sure? Are you positive? Would you stand in front of an attorney and fight that argument?" I've had to do that.

When the time came, I thought, "No, I cannot," but now, put me in front of an attorney and I'll eat his lunch because I know how to teach reading and I know the spelling system and my passion is that every single teacher should know as much as I know about teaching reading. They should have that opportunity to know that much and have that much confidence.

Anna: Well, am I correct that one of your passion projects is teaching about how to help kids with dyslexia?

Wendy: Well, that's true! A lot of times, though, dyslexia is this term that they just give to a child because they haven't been taught well. I caution folks about that. It's become a buzzword and that's a problem. If a child is not able to read, there's a reason why, and I don't care if they're dyslexic or not, we have to do our best to teach them how to read. The world works by being literate. That's your key to a good income, it's your key to a strong outlook on life, all of those things are based on your ability to communicate through print, right?

Anna: Mm-hmm.

Wendy: Very rarely do you have a child who is so severely dyslexic that they are not able to interact with print, very rarely, but sometimes people jump right to that conclusion, "Oh, he has dyslexia, so we are going to put him over there and give him audiobooks." No! Teach him how to read! Put his social studies book on audio UNTIL you teach him how to read. We want him to learn how to read. That's the goal!

Anna: For somebody who maybe can't be LETRS trained at this time, but really wants to learn the things that you're talking about, do you have some special recommendations for them?

Wendy: I do. There's all kinds of books out there now. The Reading League has a ton of resources. Tim Odegard, with Middle Tennessee State University, has a dyslexia center and has a ton of resources there for students with dyslexia. I would offer that you look at the dyslexia site. The International Reading Association is not the dyslexia site, by the way.

Anna: Right.

Wendy: We want to make that very clear because one is very embedded in science and one still has a foot on the dock of balanced literacy and the three-queuing system, and we don't want to go there because there's just a ton of research in opposition of that approach. So we want to make sure that the Dyslexia Association is where we're looking. A reminder for folks, though, is that just because it says the Dyslexia Association doesn't mean it's not good for everybody.

Anna: Right.

Wendy: Right, so there's a ton of resources there. The Reading League also has a strong collection of linked resources, they're now with chapters all across the nation, state chapters. They have just done an incredible job. Colleagues of mine are engaged in the founding of that. What that has allowed them to do is to get a foothold getting the research into classrooms and districts and state law, rather than just screaming parents or screaming teachers. It's about the research.

Anna: Yeah, and I can speak to all that. I have been a member of the International Reading Association for many years, mainly so I can get a hand on their journals, but it is hard. I wouldn't necessarily recommend it to someone who's just trying to learn because you can have an article by someone like Nell Duke or Timothy Shanahan, but then you can also have some articles in the same issue that are very strongly balanced literacy.

But I also get The Reading League journal and I love it. I love that I get a print copy so I can write in it. I really trust that group, and also, if you ever watch a webinar with The Reading League, they have just such a gentle, kind way of communicating all of this, and yeah, they're amazing.

Wendy: They surely are. In my office where I used to work at at PaTTAN, Pennsylvania

Training and Technical Assistance Network, we worked very, very closely, and two of my colleagues are part of The Reading League, that group that brought it to Pennsylvania. If you look at pattan.net, there is a ton of research as well, they've also got very strong Facebook presence, and, because it's a state initiative, it's free.

Anna: I've seen a lot of good stuff from them. I didn't know that was from Pennsylvania. That's cool.

Wendy: It is, yes.

Anna: Looking back at your experience as a balanced literacy teacher versus, I don't know if you call yourself this, but structured literacy teacher. From that shift, what would you say are some things that you would recommend letting go of and things that you would add in its place?

Wendy: Sure. The thing that is a concern for me is the pick-and-choose method that teachers use. If you walk into a situation where you think you have the background, very strongly and you've done it for years, and the curriculum is good, but you "know this kid better" (I'm doing air quotes), that you know this kid enough to make a decision. My question is, show me the evidence that that's true. Show me the evidence. I appreciate that you've been in this a long time, but just like me, I've been in education for a long time, and it never struck me until I had LETRS training that some of the things I was doing were less effective, or even misguided. All of that was balanced literacy, the literature approach, the pick-and-choose approach, "Oh, he has short vowel issues, so we're going to play three games in a small group on short vowels and differentiating."

What LETRS taught me is how the vowels are formed in the mouth, the feel of the sounds in the mouth, and that makes the difference. Why does a kid struggle with short vowels? Well, because they're so closely made in the mouth, it's hard to differentiate those sounds.

When you understand that, you approach things differently instructionally, and what may have taken six weeks to get a child to understand, now you can take care of in a week. We don't have time to waste six weeks determining, "Well, that didn't work. Now, what?"

Anna: Mm-hmm. Something, too, about when I was a balanced literacy teacher, I was very offended if someone told me that I wasn't teaching phonics, or that I didn't believe in phonics.

Wendy: Of course.

Anna: Because I did teach phonics, but like you said, it was pick and choose, hit or miss. I didn't follow a scope and sequence that made sure I taught everything explicitly and systematically. When you do that, you really save time because you don't have to figure out where the hole is, you're moving in a logical order.

Wendy: That's right. You have a series of protocols, we call them "if, then" charts. If a child is having trouble acquiring phonics skills, the advanced ones, not the basic ones, but the advanced ones, we need to stop and ask why? It's not that I need to say it louder to the child, I don't need to shame them into learning it, and I don't have to make the parents teach it to them. What I have to do is see what's in the way of them learning that specific skill.

I have a protocol that says, "If that's an issue, then go look here." Are the basic phonics in place? If they aren't, then you work on that. If they are okay, then you look at phonology, the sounds of the English language, what's going on there? So you see I have a way of working through that "if, then" idea to get right back to the root cause of the problem, and then I can work on it.

Through balanced literacy what I found was, and I taught it as well, as we've discussed, you just keep moving them forward, and the stories just get longer and more difficult, and the child melts down and you say, "Now, he's a behavior problem."

Is he really? Or is he struggling from what I call "dystaughtia"? You've also heard it as "dysteachia," I'm sure. "Dystaughtia," which means ain't been taught appropriately. It's not on the teacher per se, it's that the protocol is not in place to determine what skills are deficit, so we just keep shoving them further and shoving them further.

Now when I teach adults who have a literacy problem, I follow the exact same "if, then" chart, because it doesn't matter if you're in fifth grade or if you are in high school or if you're fifty, the skills to teach to learn to read are exactly the same. Nobody changes the alphabet when your body gets bigger, it's the same thing, the spelling system remains.

What I see in IEPs in upper-middle school and high school is that they create a goal for

comprehension. They create a goal for homework completion. Well how in the world do you expect a person, no matter how big their body is, to understand the spelling system just because their body grew? That's not how that works. Comprehension errors, or an inability to comprehend, and a ton of behavior problems, are caused because someone doesn't feel competent. It doesn't help the louder we scream as educators and put grades on the heads of children and say, "You're not comprehending. You must have a disability," instead of using that "if, then" chart and finding out WHY they aren't comprehending.

I may do an oral reading fluency. I may have them paraphrase back to me what they've just read. "If, then," - if that is low, then I'm going to check on advanced phonics, if that is low, or there's a bunch of errors there, then I'm going to check basic phonics. If that has holes, you see I'm filling the holes all the way along, if that is low, then I'm going to check spelling, I'm going to do a writing sample, and I'm going to check phonology.

With all of that evidence and the knowledge that I have that I'm bringing to the table, that allows me to make a good decision about instruction for that student or that fifty year old person who I'm helping, who struggled all their life acquiring reading.

What's intriguing, though, is that when I have that student who is fifty years old who is struggling and embarrassed, that has lived a life with embarrassment, who looks at me and says, "Why didn't anybody ever teach me this? My whole life, I thought I was dumb." Now think about that, the impact that has on a person's life choices.

Then there is the student who is in second grade, and his mother calls me crying and says, "Wendy, they're going to put him in special ed. He's a smart kid. I don't understand. He can talk your leg off. We use big words in my house. He can put Legos together without a pattern. Why would he be in special ed?"

I said, "Well, reading is a special thing. It's not natural, it's an acquired skill. Let's test him."

I walked through exactly those things that said, "Can he spell? Can he write? Does he know advanced decoding? Does he know all those things that a child is supposed to know?" His phonology was fine, meaning he can recognize the sounds and the language, he can say the word "cat" and bring it out to the sounds, /k/ /ă/ /t/. With that ability, you can now say, "This sound represents what letter? C. Yes, in this word it does. /ă/, what letter represents that sound? A?" So we would do it that way.

I did Elkonin Boxes because this child was in second grade and I told him how to separate those sounds, and to put a box for each of those sounds. Then I told him, "Now let's put the spelling pattern that goes in representing each of those sounds."

He looked at me like he was starstruck, and he said, "Are you kidding me? Dr. Farone, if somebody would've taught me this, I wouldn't cry every night."

It was life-changing for me, and it was life-changing for his family. Now he sent me a picture of his spelling tests all taped to the front door of his house because he wants everybody to know how you can be a good speller.

That happens to teachers ALL the time, those breakthrough moments. For teachers who are not working really, truly to the science of reading, you're missing that joy that comes when a kid says, "Are you kidding me? I get this now!" That's what teaching is about.

Anna: I could talk to you about this all day long. That is very exciting. I love those stories. I think maybe you shared that picture of his spelling list on the door in the workshop that I watched. That was very cool.

Wendy: I think I did. Yeah, very good.

Anna: Do you have online resources or anything that people can head to to learn more?

Wendy: There are many, many, many, many. Too many. What you really want to look for is not necessarily the resource, but the resource creator.

Anna: Yes.

Wendy: Okay, so the one thing that's important is that you learn the names of the people that are trustworthy in our field, right?

Anna: Mm-hmm.

Wendy: You have Nell Duke and you have David Kilpatrick and you have Mark Seidenberg. You have Louisa Moats, you have Carol Tolman. You look for those names because those folks are in alignment, highly in alignment, with the research. So as not to demean anyone, I won't give you the names of those who are on the other side of the fence, but I would offer that you educate yourself as a teacher in those resources.

Where in the world do you get them? Well, you find articles in The Reading League Journal and you look on the PaTTAN website where I worked for eighteen years, and I know there are a ton of resources there. That's the work of the Florida Reading Center. The Dyslexia Association also has many.

Look for common names of researchers, right? Virginia Berninger, Marcia Henry, look for those names, their work is what you want to follow, Tim Odegard is another one. Look for the name rather than the topic because there are a lot of people that will talk about the topic, but their background is really still in balanced literacy, or the three-queuing system, which is the methodology upon which they're writing.

Like you had mentioned, I thought I was doing phonics. I did! The thing is I really didn't understand the spelling system. I didn't understand decoding and encoding. I had all kinds of pedagogy. I knew how to have classroom management, I knew how to organize my materials, and my classroom was cute, I'm telling you, it was darling. "But cute," according to Anita Archer, another one you'll want to follow, "doesn't teach reading." So I would give up a little cute to offer a little more time for teaching reading.

Anna: Awesome.

Wendy: It all lands in the teacher. You've got to be really good at knowing what you know, and not only that, but why you know it and how you know it. Think of yourself standing in front of an attorney and the attorney is trying to pick you apart and you can say, "Bring it! Oh, I so got this! Let me teach you about phonology. Let me teach you why this spelling pattern is the way it is." That's teacher empowerment.

Anna: Awesome, awesome. Well, I'm going to do a hunt for any workshops that I can find that you've done that are available to anybody and I'll put those in the show notes so people can learn more.

Wendy: Good. Wonderful.

Anna: It was really a pleasure to talk with you. Thank you so much for joining us.

Wendy: It is my gift. I really hope that teachers who are listening to this, and parents who are listening to this, realize that there is an awful lot to learn, to give a little grace to people, a little wiggle room, but when we're going in the wrong direction, we need to turn that around, and get in alignment with the science of reading. That's our goal as educators, and as parents, and people who love children.

Anna: Thank you.

Wendy: You're welcome.

Anna: Thank you so much for listening to this interview with Dr. Wendy Farone. You can find the show notes for this episode at themeasuredmom.com/episode89. Talk to you next week.