How to scaffold complex text reading - even in the early grades! - with Dr. Jennifer Throndsen

Triple R Teaching Podcast #234

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of The Measured Mom website. In today's episode, I had the chance to sit down with Dr. Jennifer Throndsen. She's the author of the book, *Raising Up Readers: Twenty-Five Scaffolding Strategies to Help Students Access Challenging Text*.

Today we were able to talk about what those strategies are, but also how we can use them even with our youngest readers. This answered a lot of questions that I've had, and I hope it answers questions for you too. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome Dr. Throndsen!

Jennifer Throndsen:

Thank you, I'm glad to be here.

Anna Geiger:

I'm so glad to have you to talk about scaffolding complex texts in multiple grades, not just the upper grades. Before we do that, can you talk to us about yourself and your history in education and what you're doing now?

Jennifer Throndsen:

Absolutely. I started out as a first grade teacher who did not know phonics, so I am coming full spectrum! I came in pointing at letters and having kids tell me the sounds and being like, "Oh! Good to know."

I did that for a few years and went to Alaska to be the English language learner coordinator, which would now be called the MLL coordinator, but back then it was ELL. I was 25 at the time, it was a district office job, and was well-unprepared for that role. I came in and they hired me for it because they're like, "Oh, you have an ESL endorsement, you must know something!"

It was a learning curve. I came into a population that was 25% proficient and moved to 75% proficient in two years, which was really exciting. It really was that we wanted to make sure they had access to grade level content.

I'd been in first grade as a teacher and noticed that I was matching kids to text. That's how I was trained; that's how I was taught.

But when I got to the ELL and I was like, "We've got 10th graders who read like second graders. How are they ever going to get access to 10th grade material?" It caused some confrontation and some conflict for me of I don't know how to close this gap if we keep putting them in only what they can read.

That kind of started my journey into how do you support kids in complex texts when they are not grade level readers.

I did that for a few years, and then I went back to the classroom in a Title I school that was in school failure. It was a choice. I wanted to go in and have an impact in a school that really needed me. I had a class of 40% proficient, and we ended the year at 96%. I believe all kids can. That was a group that did not come in ready, but we were able to leave ready.

Although I believe in the push for K-3, like let's get the job done by third grade, I also believe that we can keep teaching kids to read well beyond third grade and get them where they need to go.

Then I moved back to Utah to be an instructional coach, moved into the district office to be the English language arts specialist, and then moved to the state department to be the English language arts coordinator. I did that for five years and then moved into the Director of Teaching and Learning for five years at the State Board in Utah. That was over all the core standards, educator preparation, and educator licensing.

Then I left that to start my own company and really just work with schools, leaders, districts, and states in their literacy initiatives, as well as student-centered learning and multilinguals and just wanting to improve outcomes for kids.

Then I wrote the book, *Raising Up Readers*, to really say through my experience, and through the research, what we can do to really accelerate reading progress. We don't have to settle for this is where a kid is and that's where I'm going to support. It's really how do we support them with where they need to be so that we can accelerate their progress and get them on grade level or above.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you so much for laying all that out.

Now this is a very interesting and needed book because I think there's a lot of confusion, including for myself as well, about if we're not using these patterned predictable books in the early grades, what are we supposed to be doing?

We understand that the guided reading levels from Fountas and Pinnell are arbitrary and there's a problem with trying to fit kids into a particular level and then move up to the next level, but many of us are not exactly sure what we should be doing instead.

I'm hearing lots of different conflicting things from all different people, so I'm excited to talk through this with you.

Before we do that, can you talk to us about how you define connected text and why this is important in all grades?

Jennifer Throndsen:

Connected text is basically a series of sentences combined together to tell a story or give information. They're connected. We've got multiple sentences, and it could be paragraphs or it could be pages of text.

But ultimately, there's more than one sentence that is conveying some kind of meaning that you have to take an idea from one sentence to the next sentence to the next sentence to make meaning from.

That can be anything from a decodable text to a grade level anthology in your core program to science and social studies textbooks. It's basically anything that has a group of sentences that work together to make meaning.

Anna Geiger:

Okay, so we talked before we pressed record about how connected text is important in K-1. We need the decodable text to practice what they're learning, but we also talked about how that's not all that they need. Maybe we can start right away with that.

When is it important to start having kids also read text that is not highly decodable, with teacher support? How does that look? When does that start? How do teachers pick the text? I have lots of questions.

Jennifer Throndsen:

Yeah. From the research, it says as soon as kids know a few letters we should be reading, because we want to get them blending as quickly as possible.

A lot of our core programs used to do a letter a week, and it took weeks before we could even start. The newer programs these days have you starting with a vowel or moving quickly into a vowel, so you can be making words within a few lessons. That's very different, but kids are very capable of starting to put those words together with support and teaching.

With the leveled text issue that we've had for decades, we've been doing that for a very long time and we've gotten the results we're getting. We really have to say that yes, kids need decodable text. I will champion that all day long.

But there's a point at which they also need to take the skills that they learn in a very constrained, very controlled manner and apply that to a less-controlled text. That's where the authentic reading comes in. The basil program typically has a student book of some kind that is meant for students to read. A lot of teachers do that reading for the kids, but it really is intended for students.

If you don't have a core program, then it's saying, "Okay, there's no Lexile band within the state standards necessarily…" In second grade there is a Lexile band, it starts at 450. Well 450 is second grade and that's the low band in the second and third grade band. That means something before 450 is what happens in the K-1 space. So if I'm having to find my own materials, if I don't have high-quality instruction materials, then I'm going to look for some of those early readers that don't rely on picture clues, that don't have only predictable text patterns.

We need predictable text very early when we're teaching kids concepts of print, going from left to right, knowing when a sentence ends, knowing what a word is. But we move very quickly out of that so that we can focus on the strategy that works in every text, which is called sounding it out.

With those opportunities, we want to show kids that, yeah, you just read "The cat sat on the mat," now let's apply our blending skills, our ability to use the sounds, and match those to the letters that are representing those sounds to read other texts. That skill that you used to read "The cat sat on the mat" is going to come back up in this nondecodable, highly-controlled text.

When I was saying that, I mean the nondecodable is not going to be the highly-controlled; it's going to be less controlled. It's giving kids that authentic opportunity to apply those decoding skills in a text that is not like, "Oh, we just studied short a, and everything in here short a." Well, we might actually have things that aren't short a, and how do we navigate that? Because that's true authentic reading.

As adults, we come across words where we have to go, “Hmm, let me try what I know about phonics. Let me think about the context to help me figure this word out.”

We need kids to do that too. We need them to look at the word and go, “Okay, let me take what I know about the sounds of letters and apply it here.”

Sometimes you have to be flexible, and we need to teach that early. How many times is it a schwa in a word that we need to say, “Oh, it's not /ă/, it's not /ā/, it's /ə/.”

We really have to give kids that flexibility of thinking early on because… Although 96% of our words are predictable, that's if you know the etymology of the word, that's if you know a lot of other things and a lot of kids don't have that knowledge. We've got to teach them that flexibility in our reading early.

Anna Geiger:

Now, of course we know that if we're having kindergarten and first grade reading something with teacher support that's not highly decodable, it's not like we're just going to give them anything. We're not just going to give them a really hard chapter book or a high school textbook.

How do we choose a text that's appropriate? If we don't know the Lexile, what would tell us this is probably an appropriate text to read with my K-1 class.

Jennifer Throndsen:

Yeah, I think it’s thinking about the scope and sequence of the high frequency words you've been teaching. Those are things you can look at, like how many of these words have we taught? Knowing it does not need to be…

When we think of decodable text that's usually 80-90% decodable, but you might be more in the 60-70% range. But are there some words that they know? Are there some words you can pre-teach? You can say, “Oh, we haven't learned this one yet, but it's going to be in our story,” just like we would with vocabulary.

Young readers don't have deep vocabulary lessons in the type of text that we're going to engage them in. Our vocabulary is more some of those high frequency words or some of the context words that they're going to need to be able to understand the story.

It's also the background knowledge. Are they reading a text that is on a common lived experience for a kindergartner or first grader, or are they reading a text that is outside of their common experience?

In first grade we often taught national symbols. What national symbols are in America? Most of my first graders had no idea what a national symbol was, nor what the Statue of Liberty was. Maybe they'd seen it before, but they didn't really know about it. And so I might need to do some pre-teaching. “We're going to read about the Statue of Liberty. Let's show you some pictures. Let's talk about what it is. Now let’s actually read the text.”

Even just some quick background building can be a powerful lever for giving them greater access to a more complicated, complex text than typical text they might be reading in a decodable setting.

We can set them up for success through some of the things that we do before, during, and after reading.

Anna Geiger:

What would you say, is there any use at all in using the old guided reading levels to help us choose text that we might read with our group? Or are those all just completely random and not useful at all?

Jennifer Throndsen:

Well, levels are levels, right? We created a new scheme, it's called Lexiles. We've had different leveling systems for almost the entirety of the education system. It's how we use those levels.

Instead of saying you read a J, or a 16, or a Lexile of a 450, I can use that information to say that's how much scaffolding I may need to provide you in this more complex, challenging text. Because you're here on the spectrum of reading, and this text is a little outside your comfort zone of that.

The goal of leveling now is to say how much text mediation, how much text scaffolding, do I need to provide to give you access to that text. Because if I want to close the gap between where that student is and where they need to be, it's not by putting them in what they can already do, it's by stretching them.

I equate it to weightlifting. If I go to the gym and I can lift 15 pounds, I can do that all day. My stamina is great. I can lift that weight, but I want to lift 20 pounds. I can't magically do that. You have to scaffold me into it.

Oftentimes you might have a trainer and you get stuck, but what do they do? They just push gently up on your elbow so you can get over that hump.

That's the teacher in a text that is beyond the kid's current level. We are the scaffolding, we are the spotter saying, "Ooh, you're almost there. Let me give some on-demand scaffolding to help you get over that difficulty so you can keep going, and so that you can build the strength to read that harder text."

We have not done that for kids in a lot of ways. We've just said, let me have the text be the spotter, but the teacher's role is truly to be that spotter, to be that scaffolder. Then kids can access that more challenging text, but they need that support of the teacher.

Anna Geiger:

That's an interesting way to think about it because before we pressed record, we also were talking about how traditionally with levels it was that we pick a level that's what the kid is at, and they practice and practice and practice it until we think they're ready for the next one. Versus maybe a small group or a whole class setting where I'm giving you a text that I know is above where you are, but I'm going to give you the support to get there.

Now, what do you do when you're trying to do this with the whole group potentially?

My first year of teaching first grade, I had a little girl who didn't know all her letters, and I had two kids reading fourth grade level chapter books. What would you have recommended for me in my situation if I was going to be doing this scaffolding of grade level text when some of those kids were way above first grade and other kids weren't even close?

Jennifer Throndsen:

Yep, let's say we're doing a whole group instruction, and we're using the basil student book. I need to look at that text and say, "What is challenging about this text for my kids?"

I had a very similar class of first graders who didn't know all their letters and sounds, and a kid that read like an 11th grader. He had prosody; he had expression. He knew what an onomatopoeia was. It was amazing.

That happens in all of our classrooms today, and so that continuum is saying for my kids who aren't at that first grade level, what do I need to do to scaffold them into it? Are there some things that they need to know in advance? Are there some words I need to pre-teach? Are there things I can do during the text, like asking questions or making connections?

What do I do after the text? One reading may be insufficient for all kids who have demonstrated automaticity with that text. Do I need to do more?

One of my more powerful levers that I found in the classroom is front-loading. Do I pull that small group who needs more support and teach them with that text prior to us engaging it in a whole class? Now they have greater access, and you will see them light up because they're like, "Oh, I actually know something today!" They sit up straighter. They engage at higher levels because they've got some preparation.

We may not have read that whole story in advance, but we got enough background knowledge to know who the characters are, what's happening in the story, and they now have some knowledge to be bringing that. Then they can lean on that as they decode that more challenging text.

It's not about not giving them that, but it's thinking how do we prepare them for it? Both before, but also during the text. There are things where you're like, "Ooh, they're having a hard time here. Let's reread that. Let's reread it together. Let's do some choral reading. That was a really tough sentence or paragraph." We need to have some of that on-demand. We can look at a text and know this one has some complexities.

I was teaching second grade teachers a couple weeks ago, and we looked at one text and it was pretty easy. It was lived experience. Kids had jumped in a puddle. But the next text was this Revolutionary War story about a baker who made bread. It had some really complex sentences that were forty words long that were kind of outside the lived experience of a second grader who doesn't even know what the Revolutionary War was. That's going to take a lot more scaffolding, even for your second grader who reads on a fourth or 11th grade level. That's going to take more scaffolding for all kids.

I need to look at what makes a text hard, what makes it complex. That might be the knowledge they need for it, or it might be the vocabulary, or it could be the syntactical structure. How do I scaffold that so that my kids can have access to this text?

Anna Geiger:

I'm sure that at some point the teacher might want to do a text and it is too hard. We'll get all to all the scaffolding strategies in a little bit, but how can they know in the moment, "Oh, I overshot this time," or "No, I just need to provide more scaffolding."

Jennifer Throndsen:

Yeah, I think it's always just more scaffolding. The research evidence, especially once you get to second grade and up, is that kids grow at accelerated rates when you actually put them in harder text. Harder is like two years, three years, or four years harder than what they can currently read.

It's not about saying I picked too high of a bar. It's saying, "Okay, this is more challenging than I anticipated. What can I shift? How can I support them? Do I need to provide more background knowledge? Do I need to give them more opportunities to go back and reread and ask and answer questions about what we're reading to develop?"

I watched a lesson and the kids were lost on who was what character. It would have been simple to say, there's a picture here, and let's label these people, because they were like, "Oh, I think that's the kid that's talking and it was the baby." Well, the kid that was talking was like the eight year old standing over here.

Even that context was going to have some dissonance for kids in really understanding that story and what was happening and which character it was happening with. Taking that quick moment when you ask the question, "Okay, who's talking in the story?"

They're like, "This one! This one!" You're getting six different answers.

That's a time to say, "Hold on, let me adjust. Let's take you back in."

We read this and say, "Okay, it says 'I.' Okay, we don't know who 'I' is. 'I' is someone in here. But then it's talking to this person who's letting her know if she can go to the party or not. Okay, that must be the mom, or the aunt, or some adult must be this person."

We can take them through the mental process we would go through if we were trying to navigate that situation. We can model them through it so that they can be like, "Oh, okay, that's who these people are in the story."

You can't plan for everything that the kids might need, but you certainly can make that adjustment in the moment to say, "Oh, they're not understanding. What can I do to help them? Where is the breakdown?"

Anna Geiger:

When kids start to learn to read in kindergarten, many kids are just… Let's say they know a vowel and like four consonants. They're just starting with very basic decodable text, and they're not even fluent at all. They're just barely making their way through a CVC word.

At what point do you also work on these, I don't know what you call grade level text in kindergarten, to be honest, but this more complex text at that level? When would you start that typically.

Jennifer Throndsen:

I mean, you need to have some ability. That many letters with this vowel is great, but it's not going to lend yourself to too much of grade level text because you don't have enough letters. You need to have kind of the full alphabet.

This is why you're seeing a lot more programs going at a much quicker clip. It used to be a letter a week, but now we're getting a letter every couple of days in most programs so that we can get through the alphabet within the first few months of school.

Now we've opened the door to being able to read text. Once the kids have been exposed to the full alphabet, we've got an opportunity to be able to say, "Okay, you know all the letters of the alphabet. Now you're not going to know digraphs, you're not going to know long vowel patterns, and all the things that come more in advanced phonics, but you have enough to get started."

Those high-quality instructional materials, which most schools and districts have moved towards, have built curriculum that does. They might be leaning on the high frequency words that were in the decodable and using those pretty heavily. They're using the same name or characters over time. They're allowing kids to use that sound out strategy with sounds they have practiced but maybe haven't mastered.

That's the point when you have at least have been exposed to all the letters of the alphabet, we are ready to start to apply that.

But we should be reading simple sentences and things up until that point as well. Once you can blend a word, we are ready to keep blending words, and we can make simple sentences. If we have the high frequency words "I" and "am," we can start putting some simple sentences together pretty quickly.

I think we were waiting way too long before with the previous editions of curriculum to get kids into actual blending words. We ended up with what I call barking. I know with a lot of kids who could bark the sounds, they could tell you all the sounds, but they couldn't put those sounds together to make words. They were coming into first grade with sound knowledge, but not reading. That's the part where I think we have to start with blending words as soon as we have a vowel.

I had a kindergarten teacher, and she was great. She gave them the gift of "a." She put it in a box and said, "I'm going to give you the gift of 'a.'" She gave it to them way earlier than she had in the past.

It was her final year as a kindergarten teacher, but she was like, "Okay, I hear what you're saying." They started blending words in the fourth week of school instead of the twentieth week of school. The difference in how those kids came in into first grade was remarkable compared to previous years where we held the gift of "a" back.

Anna Geiger:

Would you say, just hypothetically, that maybe halfway through the year... They've been taught all their sounds, they've been putting all this together slowly, and all the way along we've been adding more CVC words, and they've been working with decodable text and all that. At the point when they've been taught all their basic letter sounds, because always there's more phonics to learn, then it could be time to move into more complex text with teacher supports? Perhaps the whole class type of lesson, even if the kids are at different places.

Jennifer Throndsen:

Yeah, the power of a peer is really underestimated. There's research that shows that reading with a peer support, so you have a more capable peer with a less capable peer... It's not like Rainbow Method where you put your top reader with your bottom reader, but more splitting your class in half. It's called strategic partnering. There's power in having that support.

Especially in kindergarten, you might have kids who can't even track the text. Having them with a more capable peer that can support them, they might be sharing one text or reading it whole class... That more capable peer is pointing if the less capable peer is unable to do so. Now both of our eyes are on the text that's being read. We're acquiring. We're practicing. We're getting that opportunity to read together.

The power of a peer is really underestimated in our culture because we all have more capable kiddos in the classroom that can support another reader, while they're also benefiting from the instruction that's being provided. Even that is a scaffold. Putting a kid with another kid who's more capable, who can track. Whereas that other kid's like, there's a finger on the page, but they really don't know what's happening.

Anna Geiger:

What about to somebody who would say, well, we know orthographic mapping is connecting the sounds with the letters with the meaning. So if I'm putting my kids in this text, which includes many words that they don't yet have the phonics skills to decode, how am I actually promoting orthographic mapping with this text when they couldn't even decode it?

Jennifer Throndsen:

Some of that's just fast mapping. When you're reading along and you come to a word that the kids don't know, you're quickly saying "shin," and you point to your shin, right?

There are just these opportunities. I think we think we need to teach every word that a kid ever needs to know for a text, but you don't need to know every word to get the basic gist.

That's where rereading comes back in. Let's make sure they have a basic understanding, and now, if I want them to have a deeper understanding there's value of repeating a text. The research shows rereading a text up to three to four times maximizes your investment in that text. After about the fourth time, you start to plateau in terms of your return on that reread.

But in kindergarten, we could be rereading that text. You could be using the FORI method, where the teacher reads it aloud the first day, then we echo it another day, we do choral reading. All of those strategies where we reintroduce that text, and now I can give them a different vocabulary word that maybe they didn't know.

Over the course of those few repeated readings, they now have a lot more exposure and that opportunity to have that cognitive process of orthographic mapping, because I gave those meaning moments throughout the lesson.

It's the same way in phonics. How many of us teach a bunch of words in the blending word lists that the kids don't even know? If I quickly said "shin" and I pointed to it while we read that word shin, I have a greater opportunity that they could orthographically map, especially for our multilinguals in the classroom.

There are so many words in phonics that have no meaning for them. Are there quick ways that I could fast map that word so there is a quick meaning connection?

Anna Geiger:

Okay, then to somebody who says, "Well, I'm already doing lots of decodable text work with my students. They're really decoding really well. I don't see the point of this until they're at least in second grade, because I'm reading to them, and we're building oral language through discussion. I'm teaching vocabulary and comprehension through my read alouds. Is this really necessary?"

Jennifer Throndsen:

I will say, yes, it is, and here's why. When we only practice within decodable text, we don't get to the application stage. We got to automaticity. Decodable is a great place that's controlled. We've had all the skills that are required for that text, but we have not learned to generalize that skill beyond a text that is not so controlled.

We were working on short a. We read a decodable text with short a. We're really good at it. We found that pattern that was in that text. Well, in real authentic text, that pattern does not exist. That short a will be in there, but it will also be with short e and short i and long a and all the things. We need kids to be able to generalize that skill in text that is not so decodable.

We've all had kids where they totally know the sound of that letter in the decodable. Then the next day you take them into using that skill in a different text that's not that decodable, and it feels like they don't know it. It's because they haven't generalized that skill to all settings. They only have generalized it to that controlled setting that we put them in.

This is where, like in phonics, we teach a phonics lesson. We get through the decodable. Ultimately, we then need to say, "Great, you just learned AI and AY. We're going to go read the grade level text. I want you to look for that skill in this text, but you're going to definitely find other skills in there." It's getting them to realize that AI and AY doesn't only live in a decodables, but it lives in real, authentic literature, authentic informational text. We need to help them to make that connection to other texts.

If you don't give them the opportunity to read texts that are not controlled, they don't have that opportunity to generalize. Some of them are very unlikely to generalize that and will not be able to transfer that skill from a very controlled setting to a less controlled setting.

Anna Geiger:

We also know the importance of set for variability, where they're able to adjust for the schwa and things like that. There are some other questions I have about that, but we'll get to that later.

I want to dive into the scaffolding strategies because that's the point of the book. It's called *Raising Up Readers*: *Twenty-Five Scaffolding Strategies to Help Students Access Challenging Text*. Can you talk about some things that you think are useful for before reading, whether that's K-1 or older grades?

Jennifer Throndsen:

Yeah, absolutely. The number one strategy I tell people to use for any text is establishing purpose. Why are we reading this? What is the standard or standards I'm trying to achieve through the reading of this?

Most of us have texts that we're given that we're like, okay, we're supposed to read this today, but we need the clarity of why we're reading it.

One, the teacher needs that clarity. What's the purpose? It's not just to read the text. It's for some service. Maybe it's to identify the elements of a story. Great. Then we need to talk about character, setting, plot, problem, solution, all those things, and we're going to use this text to do so. Awesome. That's great for the teacher to know.

It's even better if the kids know that because it gives them purpose for reading. Your developing readers don't necessarily know why you're reading a text, and they're not able to sift through all the information to figure that out.

As soon as you as a teacher, say, "Today we're going to read this story about these characters. As we do so, we're going to fill out the elements of a story, the elements that every story has, and we're going to fill that information out together so we can really start to identify those key elements of a story." That sets a kid up to look for those key elements, and we'll go over what they are and so on.

But without purpose, kids are not reading. It's kind of like saying, "I need you to go here. Not sure why we're going there, but we're going." It gives so much lack of teacher clarity and student clarity that that is my number one.

No matter what text you're reading, set the purpose, even in a decodable. Why are we reading this? It's so we can apply our skill in connected text. We're moving beyond just reading it in single words into sentences and paragraphs. That's my number one.

My second piece that I think is really important before reading is to think about is there knowledge that the kids have? Or is there knowledge they don't have? Do I want to activate prior knowledge, things they already know because they've had a similar experience, like we've read another book like this or that kind of thing? Or is this so outside of the typical lived experience for my kids that I need to actually build some background?

I work in Arkansas as part of some of my consulting, and for a tornado story that we might read, they don't need background built. I can activate background. They have had that lived experience in their young years.

But if I'm in Utah, where I live, tornadoes are not common here. They're not a common experience. Most kids would not know what they are. I'm going to need to build some background. I might show them a one or two minute clip on what tornadoes are and the destruction they cause. That moment alone will give them better comprehension for moving into the text on a topic they have very little knowledge about.

But for the kids in Arkansas, I can just activate that and be like, "How many of you have been in a tornado?" I can put up a picture to help anchor them to the text, and we can jump into that text a lot quicker because they have a lived experience.

When we're thinking about before reading, we have to think, what do the kids know? What don't they know? What are those barriers going to cause and how do I overcome them?

We don't need to give them all the information in the text. I think sometimes we spend too much time in background building. We need to give them enough to have some concrete idea of what this topic is going to be about so that we can read for the information and for the meaning-making that it was intended to be.

Anna Geiger:

I was thinking about a family situation we had, not with text, but with theater. For example, my kids have gone to see their older sister be part of plays at the high school. Before we go, I'll typically say what the story's about for my younger kids, just so they can follow along.

Then our family had the chance to go to a Shakespeare play last summer, and it was not one that everybody's familiar with, The Winter's Tale. It was probably not what I would choose to take my 9 and 11 year old too, but that's how it worked out. For all the kids I actually made a PowerPoint, and I went through the whole story. We went over it so they knew the story, because it was almost like a different language when we went to watch it. They got a lot out of it when we went, but they wouldn't have gotten much of anything out of it if I hadn't laid it all out in advance. I guess that's sort of a parallel situation.

Jennifer Throndsen:

100%. It's a perfect example. You're saying my kids won't get the benefit of this experience without a little knowledge built beforehand. And, like you said, your kids got way more out of it than they would have.

It's the same thing with reading. They will get way more out of it if they're coming with some knowledge. Knowledge is the number one predictor of comprehension, followed by vocabulary, if I'm a reader who can decode the text. If I'm a fluent reader I may still not understand a text if I don't have the knowledge of that text or the vocabulary that's in that text.

Before reading, those are the two places I start knowing that they're the number one and number two factor in whether a kid's going to comprehend a text. Is there knowledge that they need to have to be

able to access this text? Are there some vocabulary or language, as would be in Shakespeare, that the kids need to have to be able to access this text? Those are the number one and number two places I start when I'm planning for before reading instruction.

Anna Geiger:

Something teachers can keep in mind, maybe they have a little block of time every day that they have set aside maybe ten minutes before this period of time or whatever, maybe earlier in the day, where they pull aside the kids that they know are going to need extra background support or maybe kids whose oral language isn't as good or who don't have as many experiences.

Jennifer Throndsen:

Yea, like my ML background. Pull those kids. Sometimes they're not even MLs, they might be English-only kids, but they have an impoverished home life or they don't have a lot of language. They have low language skills. Pull those kids in. Let's talk about the topic to build that knowledge.

It might just be a small group who doesn't have that knowledge or might have that knowledge if I can connect to their home language. There are just these great opportunities for front loading, that's what I call it. Others call it pre-teaching, but front loading for the text.

It might be that we actually read some of it prior to the instruction so that those kids have knowledge of the characters. They have a basic underpinning of what's going to happen. Then when we read it in whole class, they feel more invested and they feel more successful. That success breeds success because they're more willing and motivated to put the work in to achieving that success.

Anna Geiger:

So when you're reading the text with the class, are we typically thinking of this is a whole class thing where the teacher maybe reads some, the kids echo or read chorally? Or are we thinking... Is there ever a place for you read on your own and then we'll talk about it? Or do you think this should all be guided by the teacher?

Jennifer Throndsen:

It can be a variety. I don't do silent sustained staring, I will tell you that. What other people call silent sustained reading, it turns into staring for kids who aren't as successful. What I encourage, if you want a kid to read independently, and I often do it with even the decodable. I think the first read should be a whisper read. We just spent 20 minutes prepping you for this text. Let's whisper read it.

In the whole class setting, I might say, “Okay, I want you to go ahead and whisper read. When you've read it once, put your finger on it and keep going,” because some kids might take longer.

When I've got about 80% who have made it through the text that I want, then we're going to come back together. We might talk about it or we might now go read it differently. We might go and do a cloze read like, “Okay, now when I'm reading and I pause, you fill in the blank.” We cloze read it together now, but I gave them the opportunity to struggle productively with that text with the whisper, which is my accountability that you're actually doing the work. Where with a silent reading, you'd have no idea what just happened with that kid.

Anna Geiger:

So let's say I have kindergarteners. We're more than halfway through the year and I want to have them read a partner play. Would it make sense to work on this text with them where I read the whole thing first and they follow along? Or might it make more sense to try to do a choral read or an echo read? Do you have any thoughts for teachers that want to get started with this?

Because if they start by having the kids just read it on their own, a lot of the words they're not going to be able to do even if we've done the building the background and setting the purpose. What might be a good strategy for beginning the first read of the text?

Jennifer Throndsen:

Yeah, the first read you might read yourself as a teacher read aloud. That's one of the strategies in the book. There are times that the teacher reads the text aloud. If it's very complex in kindergarten, it might just be beyond their current independent reading capability, even with a partner.

But I also want to take that moment to model fluent reading, and we don't often get to do that when you're doing whole class reading with young kids. Choral reading is not fluent reading. It is slow and laborious in order for kids to be able to keep up and track.

It's a great opportunity to say, "Listen to how I read this. Notice where I pause and I stop." Because a lot of little kids don't use punctuation as a cue for reading.

Think about, why am I modeling it? Why did I choose to read it aloud? It might be that I want them to hear what a fluent reader sounds like. It might be that this text is more complex than we normally would do. Let me give them an initial hearing of it before we jump in.

There's a strategy in the book that's around actually reading the text aloud and putting the pictures up. Then the next day you come back and you read it aloud again, but this time the kids have word bubbles or vocabulary cards. As you're retelling the story different kids are bringing those up and adding it in the sequence of events of the story so that the teacher is engaging in that read aloud.

Now by the time we get to read it ourselves, they know what's going to happen in the story. They can anticipate, but they're still having to do the heavy lifting of actually reading the text eventually.

Anna Geiger:

Okay, so now I'd like to talk about when you have a word that's going to trip up some of our early readers who haven't learned the phonics pattern.

It's one of my oldest memories. I don't know why this sticks in my brain, but when I was a little kid, my mom was teaching me and my twin brother to read. She grew up in the whole word method and really didn't learn to read fluently until she read to us. She always says so. Unfortunately, that was a problem for her for many years, and she still struggles with spelling.

Back then she would write little phonetic stories and draw pictures, and we'd read them. There was one day where we could not figure out the word. I just remember neither one of us could do it. We just couldn't do it. It was the word "silly." We just couldn't figure it out. Obviously that's a word probably beyond a typical kindergartner who's just learning CVC.

If that word is in the play or the story, whatever they're reading, would you recommend taking it and putting on the board and saying let's look at these sounds and sound it out first? Or would you say, no, I want them to work on it, and they might be able to figure it out within the context of the story. I mean, obviously we can do either one, but do you have a preference or thoughts on that?

Jennifer Throndsen:

It's not necessarily a preference, and I think it depends on how critical is it for them to know? Is it a word where I'm just going to say, "That word is 'silly.' What's that word?" Everyone says silly. "Silly means funny," or that kind of thing. It really depends. How critical is it to the text? How useful is that word beyond today's text?

"Silly" is an opportunity that I might take to be pre-teaching. When it's two syllables, the Y on the end of words says /ē/. What a great first exposure to that word, because there are a lot of other words that that's going to apply to down the road in kindergarten and in first grade instruction.

There's no harm in front-loading that for the class, and I'm going to tell you right then and there, some of your kids are going to apply that from there on out because you gave them the gift of the two syllable Y.

I think it really is about how critical is that word? How useful is it beyond this text? Are we going to see it again? "Silly" is going to be a pretty frequent word in a kindergarten vocabulary, and a word that's really useful both in this text and probably beyond. I probably would take a moment to teach it.

I'm going to teach them how to read that word so that they have it, but I'm also going to make some meaning. We're going to spell it, and we're going to show a picture of what it means to be "silly." I'm going to have them use it in a sentence. I'm going to take the time to build vocabulary, and then I'm going to talk about what other words mean "silly" and help kids make those connections to words they already know if "silly" might be a new term for them.

Anna Geiger:

Okay, so it really, as always, comes down so much to the art of teaching, and there aren't easy answers to a lot of these things. Everybody wants an easy answer and to know that this is what we do every time.

Jennifer Throndsen:

I think that's the benefit. There are very few things we're going to do that make it wrong. We really have so many opportunities.

I could fast map that and say, "This word is 'silly.' Everyone, what's the word? Silly. Let's read it in the sentence. Now, silly means this…" and we're moving on.

Or if it makes sense, because it has meaning that's going to go beyond today's text or is so important in the text, then I might actually go deeper into vocabulary and how to break that word down.

It's really thinking about our purpose. Going back to the number one strategy in the book, establish purpose. Why? Why do we need to spend time on that word? Or do we if there's a real clear purpose for it?

Anna Geiger:

So tell me what you mean by fast map.

Jennifer Throndsen:

Fast map is just where you're reading along and it says “calabash,” and you say, “‘Calabash’ means a big pumpkin,” and we move on. Because how many of you have ever heard that word before, and is it going to be useful beyond the story? Probably not, unless we're on a farm growing pumpkins.

It’s really thinking about how I want them to understand. They need to know what “calabash” is for the sake of understanding the story, but long term they don't necessarily need it, so I'm just going to fast map it. I'm going to tell them it means a big pumpkin and we're going to move on instead of spending explicit vocabulary instruction teaching what “calabash” means.

Anna Geiger:

Okay, so we're doing the during reading. That may be starting with the teacher reading aloud, it may be starting with a choral read or an echo read. What else are some other strategies for supporting students during the initial read or even the second or third read?

Jennifer Throndsen:

Yeah, I think attaching onto those active reading engagement strategies we talked about.

There's cloze reading where I'm reading along, going usually seven to nine words, and then I pause and the kids fill in the blank. I need to read at a rate that they can track me, otherwise it's not a benefit. That way they're seeing those words said, and they're hearing what they say. Then they have an opportunity to engage. Cloze reading is another scaffolding strategy that helps me to have the kids practice.

I can be really intentional and with knowing we've been working on that phonics pattern, AI and AY. Whenever I see that in this text, I'm going to give my kids another opportunity. It could be using the high frequency words we've been learning. What are the ones that I want to give more hits on?

You can be really intentional with cloze, or you can just be like every seven to nine words, I'm going to leave out a blank. It's a great way to engage kids in looking at text, but also engaging in the parts of the text they might be able to actually read.

Echo is a great one.

Choral duet reading is where we read with a partner, and we read with one voice. Instead of the whole class reading together which is choral reading. I had a group of 34 first classes graders once, and choral reading with 34 first graders was a lot of effort. So maybe instead of choral reading, if I have those strategic partners, a more capable peer with a less capable peer, they can be choral reading together, called duet reading, instead of the whole class trying to manage 34 voices.

I do hope no teacher has 34 first graders ever in their careers. It's hard.

There's partner reading where we take turns. You read a page, I read a page, or you read a sentence, I read a sentence, or even you read a page and I reread that page. The more capable peer goes first, and I reread it. If a page is too much for that less capable peer, then let's do a sentence at a time. There are different ways to scaffold.

You might say, “We're going to partner read.” Then you go around to a few of the partnerships and say, “I want you to partner read every sentence,” versus everyone else is reading every page. That's a scaffolding strategy that we can tweak where we're all partner reading, but this kid needs more support. Reading a whole page and then repeating it based on what their partner modeled might be too much for where they are in their development, but I still want to give them access to that grade level text.

Then back to whisper reading. Whisper reading, instead of silent reading. Anytime I'm having kids read on their own, there needs to be some active way for me to know what's happening. Anytime a teacher

might think of having them silently read this part, I would just translate that into whisper read. Have them whisper it out loud.

I go around during whisper reading and I tap on kids' desks. When I tap, they know they're supposed to say it louder so I can hear them more clearly. Then I tap and they go back to whisper reading. It's just my way of kind of getting some formative assessment. How are we doing on this text?

I think that's one top recommendation during reading is to actually have kids to do the work of reading, and not...

When I came to the state level over a decade ago, I told teachers kind of snarkily, but truly, seriously, one of my goals is to rid popcorn reading and round robin reading in the world. I did that through saying here's a bunch of other strategies that you can use. It's not only because they cause harm... You know, there's evidence that those create some bad situations for kids.

I was a kid with a speech impediment, and so when I was in that setting, I would practice my sentence and hope to get it really good. I had no idea what happened before or after me, but my sentence was going to be successful. I try not to bring my own personal experience to it, but it definitely has a play in it.

More kids are reading with active reading. You have 50% if you're doing partner reading. When we're choral/echo/clozing it goes to 100% of kids reading instead of one kid.

We really, in a classroom, do not have time for one kid reading other than for assessment. We need as many kids engaging.

So even when teachers are reading dramas and there are characters, a lot of times they'll be like, "Okay, you're going to be this character. You be this character." Maybe there are four characters, and the rest of us get to sit and watch.

Learning is not a spectator sport, per Anita Archer and Kevin Feldman. We need to be in the game. And if we want kids in the game, they have to be doing the heavy lifting.

Active reading is my number one go to for during reading because we actually engage kids in the text.

Instead of silent sustained staring, we do whisper reading. We've done it for decades where we had kids silently read, but there's no evidence that it makes kids stronger. But it still persists widely across this country. Why not do things that can actively see if they're engaged in the text?

I think the other one for during the reading is discussion. We need to stop and talk about what we read. We need to have opportunities to process.

The research is around five to one for little kids. For every five minutes I'm talking to them or we're reading, we need to stop and pause to process either written or verbally for about a minute. The upper grades can go a little longer, ten to two. Even for adults it's ten to two. You can go for about ten minutes of teacher talk or us reading before I need some time to process or it gets lost, it gets jumbled, and it gets confused.

Really that frequency of that discussion opportunity, whether that's to write down your thinking before you turn to a partner or let's turn and talk about this question. Let's reread this and tell me what you're thinking, or summarize this portion. There are so many ways we can engage kids in that during reading.

We can also give sentence frames where we get to build their academic language. When kids can speak it, they're more likely to write that way. But without giving those frames, most kids speak in phrases or single sentences. We have so much opportunity to leverage other skills within that discussion through things like sentence frames or word banks where you're using some of the language of the text for their discussion and sharing.

Anna Geiger:

When I think about doing that kind of discussion as you read, it's basically keeping them in the game so they're not getting to the end all of a sudden and having no idea what they just read.

I have one child who does that, so after every paragraph or something, depending on how hard the text is, we stop periodically to maybe get the gist or, like you said, to complete a sentence frame.

Where that gets tricky is if you're doing this with partners and one pair is done sooner than later. Do you have any tips for managing that whole class discussion when you're having kids read in pairs?

Jennifer Throndsen:

One of the things you can do is first set them up for the purpose. "You're going to read this part with your partner. Here's the question that you're going to come out with." They can be pre-discussing. Or you say, "We're going to have you read this page, and then I'll give you a task. You're going to keep reading it until I tell you to stop."

With those that partnership that takes longer, the other partners might get more repetition at it, which is a benefit honestly. It's that opportunity to give that additional practice to those who finish early, while we get the kids through the page who might be your slower group in the room.

Anna Geiger:

Okay, that makes a lot of sense.

Then moving on to after reading. Any particular things you recommend for when the text is finished?

Jennifer Throndsen:

I think for this one it's text-dependent questions. Not that we weren't doing those during the reading, but also we need to do some more processing after that relies on the kids going back in the text to find the answer.

A lot of our developing readers don't know where the answers came from. They're just like, "Huh, good job, friend! I'm glad you knew that answer." We really need kids to say where they found that answer, or what in the text made you think that? If it's an inferential type of question, we need to get kids realizing the information that we are seeking from them somehow was provoked by the text we just read.

Those text-dependent questions are really valuable in kind of moving through the right-there questions which we probably asked as we were going. Now we might be going into that deeper level of questioning or having them make connections between a text we read last week and a text we're reading today or whatever it might be.

I think the other piece here is writing. Writing is a great way to solidify our reading. It deepens our comprehension.

In little kid grades, writing doesn't have to be elaborate. What was the main event? What happened in the story? It could be a sketch with a sentence. It's getting kids to articulate some of those key story elements, going back to that example, who was the character and where does the story occur? Let's put that together in a sentence.

It's really thinking through, how can I reinforce, if my standard objective was that they understand the elements of a story, how do I reinforce that? That might be through written composition. It might be through that text-dependent questioning. You said it happened in the prairie. How do you know that?

Show me. In the text where it either says that or there's a picture that gives us that inference that it's in the prairie.

We need to take kids back into the text. Just getting through it shouldn't be the end. It should be how do we process that more deeply so we can achieve the standard or standards that we were attempting to drive home? A lot of that comes all the way through the process of before, during, and after reading.

It's things that we can do to deepen their understanding and take it to the next step, which might be doing something in the writing space.

Anna Geiger:

Well, thank you very much because I've definitely heard many researchers say that research does not say that kids should only be in decodable text in those early stages, but I've never had someone lay it out for me how this could possibly look. Thank you for that.

I just want to finish with... It could be a very long question, but we won't make it last too long. This was just emailed to me yesterday, and it's a question I get all the time, and so I'm going to read to you.

She said, "So many of our teachers want, even need, a reading level." We're talking about for individual readers, like trying to help them choose what they read on their own. "I spoke with a reading specialist at my table..." She was at a reading event, "...who said we need to focus on skills. How do we get the teachers to let go of the children's levels in reading? Would you recommend using leveled reading assessment at any level? If so, at what point?"

Then I'm going to add on to that. If we are getting rid of levels, then how do we help kids choose text without knowing the exact reading interests and knowledge background of all 23 of our students?

Jennifer Throndsen:

Yeah, I think that's the challenge. We have this belief that reading levels are perfect. They are very imprecise. Even a Lexile, when they tell you the kid is a 720, Lexile will tell you that means 100 below and 50 above is kind of their sweet spot for independent reading. It's not a single number; it's actually a range.

That's where we all have had this experience, if you have been in the leveled reading game long enough. Say the kid's a J. You read a J today, it was awesome. Read a J tomorrow, it was great. We read a J the third day and you're like holy cow, are they getting worse? Something happened.

That is not the level of the text that is causing that complexity because it was level J. It's that there might have been more unusual words than this kid knew. It might be an experience they have no knowledge about. It might be a topic where the syntactical structure that the author used might be short and choppy, or it's some high level vocabulary. Think Hemingway with short choppy sentences, but really high in terms of understanding. It's difficult to understand, but it has a low Lexile.

We have to think beyond the level. The level gives us one piece of the puzzle, but it doesn't tell us the whole thing.

I had a kid in fourth grade, and he loved race cars. He read like a second grader, but he could read a race car text at an 8th grade level easily because he had so much knowledge, and he had so much of the common vocabulary that would be about race cars.

We have to consider our kids as more whole people than just a number. That number starts us. If a kid wants to do some independent reading, we want to give them a space that they can feel comfortable

in. But we have to realize our leveling systems are not precise enough to be the end all be all. We need to consider what's going to motivate this kid.

Do they have support? Support can be an adult reading with them. The neurological impress method, which is now dyad reading with kids, came with adults tutoring kids and just reading out loud together in a more challenging book than the kid could read.

We have to think, is independent truly me just reading this by myself? Is there a partner that's more capable? What's the setting?

There's a lot of research, dozens of studies, that if you find the reading level of a kid, I recommend still knowing the level, and put them in text two years above what they currently can read on their own with scaffolding of a peer, mind you, they have accelerated reading progress.

We actually did a pilot study in Utah in my time at the state department, and the kids grew two to three years in one with fifteen minutes a day reading with a more capable peer out loud in a book that was two years or more challenging than their current reading level.

We have to consider what are all the factors we have to bring to this equation.

If it truly is a kid independently reading, then I think that's an appropriate time. But we have to realize our system is not precise enough to say that you're a 720, so you can only read 720 books. The perfect range in Lexile land is 100 below and 50 above, so give some flexibility, but also consider if the kid knows a lot about the topic. Say a kid loves whales, I'm going to tell you they can handle a book well above 720 because they have so much prior knowledge that they're bringing to that text.

Anna Geiger:

So are you saying that you would recommend leveling a classroom by Lexile?

Jennifer Throndsen:

Yeah, for particular purposes. If I'm going to put you in two years harder, I need to know what two years harder is for you.

I was just in classroom two weeks ago. We leveled their library so that they could engage in the practice of dyad reading, which is in the book, which is that fifteen minutes a day reading with a more capable peer in text that is two years above your level. This was second grade teachers. We partnered them up strategically, and we found the books that would be appropriate. Now they're doing 15 minutes a day reading out loud together to see if we can accelerate their reading progress.

Some of that is that reading text is helpful, and spending more time in it. But the part that we found in the pilot study too, and there's been dozens of studies done... We just wanted to say, great, nationally this seems to work, does it work in our home state? Because that's how we are here in Utah. And it did.

We had one teacher who piloted in the project, but she had missed the note of the two years more difficult. She didn't get the results that the rest of the group got. Two to three years was the average of the other teachers. The special ed teacher got three to four years of average growth. But this teacher who missed that critical moment of more challenging text than what the kid can read, those kids gained a year, but they didn't see the two to three years that we saw in the classrooms that did the more challenging text.

I am a strong believer in more challenging text to accelerate reading progress for kids.

Anna Geiger:

What about if a child is reading independently so they're just choosing a book to read on their own? How would you know? There used to be the three finger rule.

Jennifer Throndsen:

Right. If you didn't know this many words on it.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah. Do you have any particular strategies for a teacher trying to help a child choose a book from their classroom library?

Let's say the books are sorted by topic. We've got a bin of books about animals and they like animals. How can we equip the children, even in first grade, to pick a book that they can handle on their own? What might we be teaching them in terms of choosing a book?

Jennifer Throndsen:

Yeah, I think you can start with the Lexile as a starting point, and then I would have them read the first page and see how well they do. They don't need to have 100% of the words mastered, but they need to have a high level so they can comprehend.

If they read the first page and can tell me about what they read and can give me a few details, I'm going to let them move on. You don't have to be 100% correct.

Accuracy rates, especially in those primary grades… 80% accuracy is not a bad place if I'm getting the gist of it. If I'm successful enough, could I go back and reread it? Now I might have an even higher level.

I think we forget the power of rereading. Kids watch movies many times. They watch shows repeatedly. Why can't we reread a book? Every time you watch a movie again, you pick up on stuff you missed the first time. The same thing can happen with reading. You can pick up on things you weren't able to understand in the initial read-through during that second read.

So even if they're not super perfect at that text, but if they're motivated to read that text, they really want to, then they will put the work and effort in.

I think that's the part… We just need to be careful not to keep kids from reading. We all had the phase of Harry Potter. Everyone wanted to read Harry Potter. It's this huge book. Well, not all kids were capable of reading Harry Potter on their own, and so it's thinking about how do I put them in that book?

But independent reading is such a small portion of the day, hopefully, in classrooms. We're spending our time engaging in active reading and more small group and whole group reading than kids off doing it independently.

Honestly, I tell teachers I'd rather not see kids go totally read independent. They might read with a partner, or at least read the same book so that they can talk about it with a partner and process it if we do want to have independent practice. But really in the classroom, we've got so many kids, why not have them read together, even in a partnership, rather than all alone?

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Then if kids are just choosing a book to read sometime, probably a lot of it comes down to teaching comprehension monitoring.

Jennifer Throndsen:

What do I do when don't know what I'm doing?

Anna Geiger:

It's realizing, oh, I didn't get this, because it's not just about getting the words off, it's about making sense of it, making meaning.

Jennifer Throndsen:

And I think some kids think that reading is just about getting through it. But when you ask them questions and they have no idea, you're like, "Okay, well, let's stop, and what do we do to fix that up?" We need to go back, we need to reread, we need to stop, or we might have to look up some words.

There are all these strategies, and what a great, authentic way to show them those strategies are actually needed. A lot of core programs weave those in and it feels kind of inauthentic. You're forcing this moment of, let's monitor and clarify. But truly, you want kids to be monitoring and clarifying when they need it, and so we need to give them those opportunities.

Anna Geiger:

That's a really good point because, and I don't remember who I had this conversation with, maybe it was Dr. Elleman. I can't remember. But we talked about the point of these strategies. The strategies are not useful if the text isn't hard enough to merit. Make them be needed, right?

But that's what I remember from school, like so much. Those basils that I used my early years of teaching reading. It was like, "Why are we asking these dumb questions to these 5th graders?" They know that if they're sitting at the table in the morning eating eggs and bacon, it's breakfast time. That was an inference question we had in fifth grade that I remember. It was just forced and silly.

Jennifer Throndsen:

Yeah.

Anna Geiger:

We could talk about this probably for another hour, but I think we've got a lot done. Thank you so much.

Jennifer Throndsen:

It's been a pleasure, Anna.

Anna Geiger:

I really appreciate it, and I do recommend your book, and I have an endorsement on the back of it even.

Jennifer Throndsen:

Yes! Thank you for being a pre-reader.

Anna Geiger:

Yes. I was really happy to get an advanced copy.

So how can people learn from you, reach you, or get more information from you?

Jennifer Throndsen:

I have a website called impactfullearningdesigns.com. You also can follow me on LinkedIn, it's just my name. I'm on Instagram. It's under jt_travel32 because I like to travel on the side. I've been to 55 countries, so you'll not only get educational tips, but you'll get vacation tips too.

Anna Geiger:

Well, thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.

Jennifer Throndsen:

You as well. Thanks so much.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you so much for listening. You can find the show notes for today's episode at themeasuredmom.com/episode234. 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.