



Does consistency matter more than fidelity? - with John Bennetts

Reach All Readers Podcast #247

Anna Geiger: Welcome, John!

John Bennetts: Hi. Thank you. Thanks for having me. It's so nice to be here.

Anna Geiger: I'm really excited to talk to you about fidelity across tiers. Before we do that, could you introduce us to yourself and your history in education?

John Bennetts: Sure. My name is John Bennetts, and I'm currently a national literacy consultant. I work with schools kind of all across the country from the West Coast to the East Coast. I'm based in Providence, Rhode Island. I started as a kindergarten teacher in the middle of nowhere, Arkansas.

I went to college in Minnesota. I grew up in Minnesota, and I got all my prerequisites to be a pharmacist. I have all my prerequisites to be a pharmacist and I did an internship to be a hospital pharmacist, but I really did not like it. And so it was my senior year and I had a history degree with all this science and I was like, oh, I'm not going to do pharmacy. What am I going to do? I ended up doing an alternate route to teaching.

My mom was a reading specialist growing up, and so I found an alternate certification path into education, and it moved me down to middle of nowhere, Arkansas. It was a small town called Helena, West Helena. My school was right on the Mississippi River, and so it was beautiful.

There I had the privilege of helping to found a school. I helped build a K-1 school out. We built it with just a hundred students year one into a Pre-K3 to fourth grade school with over 400 students by the time I left.

The most unique about that is that I ended up starting in kindergarten and first grade reading and Spanish, and then I just taught first grade. I rolled with my kids. I taught them in first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade. Then before I left, I re-looped to the middle school and saw them there. I was a principal at the school I started teaching at, an assistant principal there, and also an assistant principal at the secondary level.

And so that unique experience in Arkansas gave me a ton of professional experience across grade levels, from department leads to assistant principal to principal.

And my one last fact about that time that I'll share is I had the greatest fortune of all time of meeting Linda Farrell. For those of you that are avid in this space, you'll know Linda Farrell, and Linda somehow, by the grace of God, was at my school my very first year, teaching us how to teach kids how to read. I had just taken over a first grade classroom in like October, and she's like, "This is how we do it."

And it was well before you had to take a 40 hour course on the science of reading. She didn't teach me about the Simple View or Scarborough's Rope. It was just, "John, this is how we do it. Let's go." And she came to my room and modeled and we worked and it was phenomenal. And then I ended up interning with Linda and living in her basement for a summer.

My claim to fame there is Louisa Moats also lived in Linda Farrell's basement, and this is where she kind of started thinking of her LETRS project, in Linda Farrell's basement. I like to joke I'm one degree of separation from Louisa Moats in that way.

Anna Geiger: That is fascinating. What a history. Very cool.

So today we're going to talk about fidelity, and maybe you can start by talking about what schools typically mean by fidelity.

John Bennetts: I think when I work with schools, most of the time it's, are we following the pacing guide? Is every component of the lesson being delivered? Are you using the materials as written? Are you following the script?

I can't tell you how many times they'll come into a school and they'll want, "John, we really want you to see the third grade ELA block."

Everyone goes in and it's a team of people and we sit in the back and then we open up our laptops. We find the lesson they're on and we see how well they're following it. And I'm not saying that's the only thing that people do. They get up, they observe, but first is just, where are they? Are they on the pacing guide we developed? Are they following?

When things go awry, it's, "Oh, it's because they forgot to say this part, or they didn't do this thing."

Some people call it fidelity. Some people have taken a turn now around integrity, right? I'm not here to say they're bad. It's important to make sure, if you actually have a good curriculum, that you have a plan to get through most of it, right? We don't want to just be getting through half of it every single year. That doesn't do service to anybody. And of course, we want people following and delivering the lesson in a way it was designed and using those materials.

But they're really focused on adults following directions, and I think that's where fidelity is kind of stuck.

Anna Geiger: So what should we be focusing on instead?

John Bennetts: I think we need to push ourselves to be thinking a little bit more about impact on students. And I think we can do that by focusing on instructional routines within a curriculum.

Many of these programs are designed with repetitive... There's repetition in terms of we always write a paragraph using this structure, or we always make a gist statement in this way. Or we always introduce a new sound-spelling correspondence in this way, or we have kids blend like this.

And I think if we really focused our attention on finding those routines within our programs and elevating them out of, what my colleague Devin Kearns would say, are bespoke lessons. These long, lengthy, everything lessons. If we can help educators lift those out and find what those routines are, then I think we can start focusing on how well are they executing the routine that we know students can transfer over lessons and over content areas.

Right now I think there are two conundrums. Here is one, sometimes they're really hard to find in programs. Like I referenced before, they're buried in like a six or a seven page thing. And when we're so focused on what the lesson is in fidelity, the lesson teachers just look in isolation there, and we don't elevate them up to say, what are we doing across the lessons?

But I think that helps because then if a teacher knows, all right, this is how I introduce a new sound-spelling correspondence every single time, then it becomes less about a manual in front of your face and more about, I know how to do this in the same way that I know how my kids enter the room in the morning and put their backpacks up here and put their homework folder here and do this here.

Teachers are at home with some of those routines, and I think we've poured all of these components of curricula on top of them without pulling out the routines. You know routines. You know all about routines in a lot of different ways. Let's find them, elevate them, and pull them out for you so we can focus on how well you're doing those, not how well you're following the word-by-word script that's laid out.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, and doing those routines reduces cognitive load for the teacher.

John Bennetts: One hundred percent.

I've helped schools and led implementation of new programs and I have teachers that for 20 years, they've been phenomenal and have gotten great results for kids.

We pull the rug for them, put the new curriculum in front of them, and to your point, they're overloaded. And they have a terrible two years because they can't get their feet under them. They can't find the things. They're good. And when I stop and say, "Hold on, your entire past career has been spent having kids find a main idea or making a gist statement, and the program does that. Let's find it; let's elevate it. It might be slightly different than what you're used to, so let's get you good at that. But it's there."

And I find when we can do that for teachers, they start to be like, oh, this is less overwhelming. And it makes sense because they're not trying to also flip through 80 pages in a lesson and nervous.

Anna Geiger: In the presentation that I saw that you gave with Devin Kearns, your main point of talking about this was to help the students who are receiving different instruction, maybe in Tier 1 and Tier 2, and they're confused because the teachers are using different programs which come with different sets of routines. Why do schools often use different programs across tiers?

John Bennetts: Yeah, I think there's multiple reasons. I like to highlight two. I think the first and most obvious is it's the way we've kind of designed the higher level system in this "science of reading movement."

What I mean by that is we have lots of states now that have policies around either approved materials lists, like I know in Rhode Island we have a law about you must use high quality instruction materials, and they define that a certain way. And so there's legislation or guidance or in some spots, there's incentives to use them.

But how it's done generally is here's your list for core programs. Here's your approved list for Tier 2. Here's your approved list for Tier 3. Here's your supplement. Right? It's some different name, but we put out there multiple lists that are different from each other and let schools start picking from those.

And so one thing we've unintentionally done in an effort to make sure we are putting good materials in front of schools, which is critically important, I think we've built these silos, right?

If I'm a school leader, I don't have time. Like you have to implement something new. Great. Show me the list. I'm going to find the things, ask some people, and I'm going to pick it. We're going to go and we're going to adopt it with fidelity. That is the capacity and the easiest way to do it.

And so I think that's kind of one big reason that we are doing that is just how we've structured and how we've always talked about education is what are you doing in Tier 1? What are you doing here? What are you doing here? What are you doing here?

And when I'm asked to support or get questions, it's always, "John, what should we use for Tier 1, John?" It's always separate as well.

Then, not to mention, you get ed tech off to its side and the computer program too, right?

So you end up with like truly four or five different things that some of our struggling readers are seeing.

I think the other way is not even... It's just the fact that with more science of reading training and more information and more knowledge out there, which is fabulous, teachers themselves are genuinely excited and eager to make changes in their own classroom.

If I was teaching I would! I'm going to change my small group reading. Like I just learned continuous blending. I'm going for it. This is the way I was just on a webinar for it. It's awesome. I'm bringing it in. Or I just found these awesome decodable readers from here or this, right?

People start bringing it in, and some principals, they'll listen to their teachers and their teachers are excited about it and really want to try this. Awesome. Let's do it. That sounds great. I trust you.

And so I think from that then we start getting some of across classrooms our own language and our own practices with no mal intent, at all.

But we forget that kids have to go from grade to grade to grade or setting, to setting, to setting. And that's where we end up seeing some tricky things.

Anna Geiger: So in your presentation you gave some examples of how a child might hear instruction across multiple tiers. You had recordings of teachers giving it and it was really interesting and certainly made me think because we don't really think about that very much as teachers. I don't think how teachers might word things differently for very basic routines, but how confusing that could be for our kids who are most likely to be confused. Could you give an example of how that might look?

John Bennetts: Yeah, so imagine you're in Tier 1 and the teacher has the word sheep on the board, and they've underlined the digraph sh to show it's one sound. And they've underlined the two e's to show that that spells one sound. And the teacher might model and say, "I blend the sounds to read this word," and the word's written as a whole. And they say, "/sh/ /ē/ /p/. Now I read it fast. Sheep." That could be the Tier 1 routine.

In Tier 2 then a student maybe who's not acquiring the code at the rate we want them to, they go to a different teacher, say, Mr. Williams. And he says, "Watch me read this word." So he might have the word clip on it, and he has it in sound cards. So in Tier 1, it's a whole word in Tier 2, it's individual sound cards. And he points to the first letter C and says, "Sound? /k/. Sound? /l/. Sound? /i/. Sound? /p/." Then I read it slowly. Clip. Now I read the word clip. Okay. So each letter is its own individual box to scaffold a little bit more. So the kid hears the sound first, then a slow blend, then a fast blend.

And then in Tier 3, maybe that same student, gets the word and the teacher says, "Watch me read this word. Sound? /k/. Sound? /l/. Blend. /kl/ Sound? /ō/. Blend. /klō/. Sound? /k/. Blend. /klok/. Now say it fast. Clock." So in that one, right, it sounds sound and then blend two sounds, sound, sound, sound blend at three. So it's scaffolded more down.

Three different routines, and we joked in that presentation is that's actually like the best of the worst case. That's like the best bad situation in that you can actually track a little bit of the reasoning and

rationale behind why each of these routines look this way in those tiers. Devin joked it's the best of the worst.

Anna Geiger: Because they actually do all have a routine.

John Bennetts: They all have a routine. That's all there. Yeah.

And then imagine you're the kid though, who you're in the Tier 1 class and the teacher says, "All right, I blend the sounds to read the word. Now I read it fast. Go." And then you hear that in Tier 2, and then you hear the different thing in Tier 3, and the prompts all become slightly different.

I think that's right in Tier 2. Tap each sound before you blend it. The Tier 2 one doesn't say, "say it fast," it just says, "read the word." So what are we going to teach kids? Is it read the word? Is it say it fast?

For us, as teachers, as adults, it doesn't really matter, but it does, especially for our kids who are struggling the most, because they get confused with, is it reading, is it saying it fast? What's the thing?

And I think as much as we can do to take some of that thinking out of the, what do they want me to do here, and just into, I need to learn to read and I need repetitions to do that, the better off we'll be.

Anna Geiger: Before we move on, what are the other types of routines that teachers need to be thinking about when teaching reading? We've got blending, but what else do they need to be trying to keep the same across the tiers.

John Bennetts: How students read multisyllabic words, I think, is really important.

In the presentation as well, we referenced a study that Devin did with his colleague Natasha Feinberg. They looked at 28 programs and how they taught polysyllabic words, and 13 used strict syllable division and seven used just flex the vowel syllable division. Eight of them had no approach at all. Even within that then how they described things like closed and open syllables was wildly different.

So I think blending a single syllable word and attack strategies for a multisyllabic word feel really important to me.

I think if we're sticking on kind of like the early reading side, I think phoneme blending and segmenting is really important.

Are you counting on your fingers? Are you tapping, are you using your shoulder elbow? What's the thing you're using on that?

And then I just see a lot of ones that would take more work. But things like, how do you find the main idea? If you're in upper elementary, kids will have a pullout space that's targeted on that, right? But they'll get a different passage on entirely different content than their core. And they'll have an entirely different graphic organizer to find it.

Or even, how you write a paragraph? Are we going to use the hamburger structure? Are we going to use the topic sentence, evidence, elaboration? Are we using the RACE? All of it shifts for kids based on the thing. And the end goal for the teacher is just, can they write the thing?

I always would just encourage starting small with a couple and just lifting up and thinking how are we doing blending? How are we doing phoneme segmenting and blending? How are we doing polysyllabic words?

And then picking one kind of core strategy outside of that in more of the language reading comp land to align on. And I think summarizing main idea and gist statements are all good ones to norm on there.

Anna Geiger: If you had a school, and I'm just picking two programs out of my head, but if they had, let's say UFLI for their Tier 1 and then maybe for their Tier 2 or Tier 3, they used like Wilson Foundations. Those two programs would be very different. For example, because UFLI doesn't teach syllable types and Wilson is heavy on that sort of thing.

What is your perspective on schools doing that? Would you advise against doing something like that, because obviously the whole word reading is going to be different? It's going to have to be different because of the way that they teach it, whereas sometimes you could more easily change these routines. What do you think?

John Bennetts: Yeah. Well, I would... If Holly Lane were on, she would say UFLI should be used for your core and your Tier 2 small group. I just chuckle because she was in the session as well.

I think what you are describing is challenging in that, of course most schools have adopted programs and now they're legacy programs, and so it's hard to do away with one. If it's been around for a while, I would advise against two totally disparate like programs like that, trying to serve those needs.

I wouldn't say that MTSS is my area of expertise per se, I but my opinion on it is that schools think they need something different for Tier 2 to show that kids failed in order to set them up to potentially be identified for special education. Or I think sometimes schools think they need a different program for their response to intervention to see if they can respond to that specific intervention.

With a couple of my schools, there's this misconception that your Tier 2 has to be different. If kids aren't successful on that, they need something different in Tier 3 as opposed to, no, you can just increase your intensity. Increase those types of things with the same program.

I would advocate for using the same and increasing intensity as you go

Now, perhaps, I'm sure that in Tier 3 there might be kids with very different needs and need something, so, so much more broken down and scripted for them. And I think in that case it makes sense to have something different. But I would look before I purchase to make sure, are we doing flexible syllable division? Look at some of those big things. Even glued sounds or not glued sounds. We came across that a lot in a school where they see "am" and they're taught it's one versus another program it's not. We're now adding arbitrarily, the number of things that kids have to remember. And it's the kid who has to remember it across the rooms. It's not the teachers that have to remember it.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, no, that's a good point. A really good point. That last thing you just said, and I think it's fabulous when teachers are learning new things and want to incorporate into what they're doing, but to your point, it's important for them to be communicating with other teachers, not just in their grade, but across grades as well as with the intervention team.

What are some questions that teachers and interventionists and so on should be asking as they make sure their instruction is aligned?

John Bennetts: I think it's starting with looking at a lesson as a team and thinking about trying to distill what's the routine that's actually driving the learning in this lesson. What is the thing that I might be modeling? That the kids are practicing? They have the dependent and then they do independently?

What is driving most of the learning in this lesson?

Then talking across a team to understand what that routine is, what are the components of that routine, and then thinking, is this actually effective? Because we also find that a lot of programs have routines that may not mirror the components of explicit instruction, right?

We've looked at some where they do something in the I do, and then all of a sudden the you do, they get a whiteboard and they introduce new things, right? With explicit instruction, we don't want to be doing that.

I see that a lot of times that the routines themselves aren't actually that effective either.

But I think the first thing is we have to just say, what is the routine? Not what lesson are we on? Not what's the exit ticket look like. Not how many minutes are we spending, but is there routine within here that is going to be potentially transferable to other lessons? What is it? Pull that out.

Then get teachers to get good at that routine agnostic from the specific lesson they're in, because they'll see it over and over again. It's harder to do in spaces like a WIN block, a "what I need" block, or a small group reading where kids walk to read. But I think there, it just would be important if you have a PLC time or coaching meeting time, to just say how are you teaching a kid to decode this single syllable word?

I think just bringing that to a team, a teacher meeting of team, you might learn people are doing it very differently. Or here's a polysyllabic, multisyllabic word. How are you having kids read this?

What we try to always do with Devin and I is like, what's the thing the next day you can go back to your school and try to do? I think these two examples we keep coming back to because they're so critical and they're prevalent in classrooms, polysyllabic word reading and single syllable decoding. Have those conversations right from the start and you're going to get a lot of alignment conversations generated right from there.

Anna Geiger: So first they want to make sure they want to look at their program that they're using. They want to make sure that it includes a routine for these things, like for the foundational skills portion, the phonemic awareness, blending or segmenting, if that's part of it. And then decoding simple words, blending simple sounds, and then decoding longer words. And then if the program doesn't have it, then working together to have a routine that makes sense.

You talked about how different programs might have different routines and then choosing one to agree on, and we were talking about how you might make the decision, and part of it was, what's the routine that's the, the least word heavy? What's most efficient in terms of what the teacher says? Anything else to keep in mind if they're trying to choose between different routines?

John Bennetts: I would also look at is the I do, we do, you do all the way matched all the way through. More often than not, it's not. The teacher practices this way, they practice, then they do something on the rug, and then the you do is like something totally different. What's the routine where it's the same matched all the way through?

I think looking at things like vocabulary. How accessible is the vocabulary? An example, are they using the word medial when they could just use middle? Things like that. They're sophisticated and they're, perhaps they're right linguistically, but it's not necessary to use that in your talk.

I would also just say making sure you're not over scaffolding for kids who don't need it anymore. Sometimes the routines will continue to be very over scaffolded, like a blending routine perhaps, where it's sound by sound reading still, when they're actually ready to just be whole word reading. The routine

didn't change in the program because it's not designed to respond to where your kids are. Looking at things of that nature are helpful.

Then there's a whole bucket of work around when you do have two routines there, and ways you can go about aligning them.

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

John Bennetts: I don't know if you want me to talk about a little bit of that too.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, go ahead.

John Bennetts: So it's simple things like there's the silent E versus the magic E versus the sneaky E. Just pick one. Don't make kids do that. Or is it the ender bender suffix?

Anna Geiger: Or bossy r or r-controlled.

John Bennetts: Yeah, just pick a thing. And it might be that I like r- controlled, but maybe six of the teachers like bossy r, I don't know. You have to give a little bit too, for the sake of a kid's experience on this.

Back to my example around asking people how do you teach kids to decode this word? Similarly, what do you call the e at the end of the word? The conversations like that as well just help to start doing some of that alignment.

Anna Geiger: I appreciate what you said before, and I remember in your presentation too about thinking about how not to over scaffold when kids already know this.

So when you're practicing routines with teachers, there needs to be an understanding of this is where we start, but this is where we go. This is how we let go.

Versus the intervention teacher might be still working with that very explicit scaffolding, but knowing that the next stage looks like this. And that once they can do that, it looks like this.

John Bennetts: That to me is what's missing in the fidelity conversation in that there's no space for that type of conversation.

I'm guilty of it myself. When I run a professional learning community on the curriculum, it's all about just what's right there, and a little bit of data analysis around our kids. But it's not, are our kids ready for something different? Are they ready to take away some of this because that's actually going to accelerate where they're at. Can we take away some steps here? Can we take away our visual? Do we need to keep the visual? That piece isn't in there.

And I think that goes arrow by arrow all the way back to my beginning part, that piece around how do we bring the instructional routine front and center so that gets centered in those conversations as opposed to all of the nuts and bolts of what's happening in that lesson.

Anna Geiger: Because, as you said before, the curriculum or the program providers can't do that for you. They can't know. They kind of need to keep all the routines in there in case you need it, and all the scaffolding in case they're necessary. But you, as the user of your program, need to know, well, my class has passed this. Now we need to loosen up.

John Bennetts: Yeah, and I think we've, I think we really had our fingers crossed, and we were so hopeful that curriculum adoption would be the magic.

Anna Geiger: Mm-hmm.

John Bennetts: That it would be a magic lever. Like we just get a better... Like out with the units of study, out with Lucy Calkins, and we'll be good to go. Which that obviously is not the case and has not been the case.

To your point, the curriculum has a purpose and a role, and they can't do that for every specific context and need and everything. So that's where we have to center our teachers and our leaders to be better decision makers within those programs.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. Well, thank you very much. It's a super interesting conversation.

Is there anything else you want to share about this topic before we see where people can find you?

John Bennetts: Devin and I have a course coming out in partnership with AIM Institute around how to go about doing this. We actually walk through what is an instructional routine. What is a good instructional routine? What are the tenets you should be looking for? We're actually talking through this where to look to find them, the changes you could make, and why you might make those changes.

Our goal here is not let's have everyone willy-nilly start changing things in their program. That is not the message that we're sending. It needs to be done intentionally.

And so we are working on building a course that helps schools and teachers think about this framework and actually walk them through this as a reference so that it's not as scary and gives them a roadmap and a place to start.

And we've built a corresponding app that goes with that. It's called Tier Bridge, and it can help you catalog the routines that are in your school. Right now there's no place for those to live, and so we've actually built something to help catalog those, and to help analyze them against explicit instruction markers, and to help generate new routines that might be missing from your program. That's coming out in the spring, we hope. It should be a pretty exciting parallel to this conversation.

Anna Geiger: Well, fascinating. I'll make sure, when that comes out that we'll get it in the show notes so people can access that.

Where can people find you?

John Bennetts: You can find me on LinkedIn. I only do LinkedIn.

Anna Geiger: Good for you.

John Bennetts: You can find me there. I gave up the other ones when I had my kids and I was realizing I was spending too much time mindlessly, unnecessarily, attached to my phone.

So anyways, you can find me on LinkedIn. It's John Bennetts. And you can email me at john@bennettsedconsulting.com. My colleague on this is Devin Kearns, and you can find him also on LinkedIn. He's probably on other places too, that I don't know. His email is devin@devinkearns.com.

Anna Geiger: Perfect. Well, thank you so much!

John Bennetts: Thank you!