How to do a repeated reading intervention to build fluency - with Melanie Brethour

Triple R Teaching Podcast #227

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. Today I'm welcoming back Melanie Brethour to the podcast. Melanie is a strong structured literacy advocate, she is a full-time reading interventionist in Canada, and she shares literacy and dyslexia tips through social media. Today we're going to talk all about using repeated reading as a fluency intervention.

Anna Geiger:

Welcome back, Melanie!

Melanie Brethour:

Thank you for having me!

Anna Geiger:

I'm so glad to have you back. Can you reintroduce us to yourself and let us know what you're doing now?

Melanie Brethour:

My name is Melanie Brethour, and I am a full-time elementary resource teacher. I consider myself an interventionist. I did not know a lot about how to teach reading after I left university. We were a very balanced literacy curriculum, just learning through osmosis. It wasn't until my son was diagnosed maybe five years ago where I went down the science of reading rabbit hole and learned so much on my own time, as many of us do. So that's my little quick journey for the most part.

Anna Geiger:

And you also share on social media quite often. What's your social media handle?

Melanie Brethour:

It's called Soar with Dyslexia, so the play on words of science of reading with dyslexia. My son is severely dyslexic and I really wanted to share as much information, not only for parents, but for teachers as well, like myself, who did not know any of this prior to just five years ago.

I try and share little tidbits of information like PD in your pocket and as many free resources as possible too, since as teachers, we spend a lot of our own money on many materials in our classrooms and also professional development.

Anna Geiger:

I'm really happy that you're here to also provide quick PD in this short podcast episode with some practical advice for building fluency. Can you remind us what fluency is and then talk about how to use repeated readings to build fluency?

Melanie Brethour:

Fluency for me, because I wasn't taught really how to do this or a lot about fluency, I always used to think that you had to be fast for fluency and that's not it.

I love Jan Hasbrouck, and I did write it down for this. "We should think about getting students to the point where their reading mirrors spoken language and it's about rate, accuracy and expression." We obviously don't want students to be reading very slowly and if they are, we need to figure out why.

Fluency for me is not about reading fast, but it's with appropriate rate. If they cannot lift the words off the page and they're having difficulty decoding and making lots of errors, you do not want to work on fluency for those students. You really need to work on those foundational literacy skills, the decoding piece.

In order to do that, I would suggest using a universal screener to see which students are having difficulty with fluency.

Anna Geiger:

Thanks for letting that out because when people start building fluency or wanting to work on fluency, you first need to look at the accuracy rate, like you said, of the passage, like an ORF passage.

If the accuracy is low, having them reread and reread isn't going to solve the problem. We've got to do probably a phonics diagnostic and figure out exactly where the problem is so they can get fluency at the word level. Then eventually we can work toward text level fluency.

Melanie Brethour:

Exactly.

Anna Geiger:

So for students who are doing pretty well with their phonics, but aren't reading as quickly as would support comprehension, what are some things that teachers might do?

Melanie Brethour:

There are so many in your book; you gave a lot of different examples.

I'm going to talk about repeated readings, and it's exactly that where you have students read over a passage. Usually what I hear is three to four times with the same passage, and it needs to be at their instructional level. You do not want to give something, again, that's too difficult because you obviously have to see what is the underlying issue.

But you want to... Usually it's 95%, even 98% is, I think, the gold standard. For me, I even have a poster on my wall that we're always striving for 98% accuracy and above. I've looked at 95%, and there are quite a few errors in the text, but usually an instructional level is around that from my understanding.

Then you take that text and you have the student, and it's usually one-on-one for the repeated reading, and you want to do the repeated reading in one session. It has happened for myself that time has just run out for whatever reason and we did the repeated reading another time. But they do recommend that you do it in one sitting.

You just time the student for one minute. They read the text. You calculate their errors, their accuracy, and the words correct per minute. Then you write that down.

I like charting it out. There are so many free little fluency charts where you have the percentage and you also have their words correct per minute and a chart and the students love coloring it in and then they can see their progress as well. I like doing that.

Then you give them feedback, though, because if you don't give the feedback as to what errors they're making, it's not going to be very effective. They'll probably reread those words incorrectly if they read that wrong.

Then you do it again a few times and you track it again, their accuracy and their words correct per minute.

There's so much research out there about repeated readings. If you look it up, there's 40 years of this research.

So that's what I do in my groups, and I'm an interventionist, so sometimes I have a larger group, and if they're doing something independently, I will just call the students over. I might not get to all of them at the same time, but if I get to one student that one day, it's fantastic.

In a classroom too, I've seen it work where the teacher is doing centers or there's a lull in the classroom and they'll call a student over to do that too. Or if you have an attendant or somebody in the classroom that works too.

I've seen parents do it. However, I would caution this because parents don't truly maybe understand. They might think it's about reading quickly, but I have seen it a few times where a teacher has sent a video explaining the purpose of it and the parents have done it. But I don't know if I would recommend that unless you're really modeling it for the parents.

Anna Geiger:

And just to be clear, you're talking about timed repeated reading, which is an intervention strategy, and it's not for everybody, right? For kids who are reading at an appropriate rate and accuracy, this probably would be boring. And for kids who are struggling with the accuracy rate, this is not, as we said before, not the appropriate intervention.

This is for kids who need to read at an appropriate rate and are getting the words mostly right, would you say?

Melanie Brethour:

Yes, exactly. It's that 95% and above, but I would even go a little higher than that because I find that at 95% they're having difficulty, but you can track that, right? Hopefully their percentage goes up as you're doing the repeated readings.

Anna Geiger:

Now by percentage going up, are you saying their accuracy and their words correct per minute, or just words correct per minute? What are you paying close attention to?

Melanie Brethour:

Both, but it depends on their accuracy. If their accuracy is quite high, I have a lot of students that will read 99% or 100% accuracy, but their words correct per minute is quite low. Really the goal is to increase their rate and accuracy. Sometimes we have a lot of students who are just reading slowly, and those are the students you want to target.

Using a universal screener is fantastic because you can see which students are having difficulties on those areas. I use Acadience as my universal screener for the whole school. We do make fluency groups, and there are grouping sheets that help you figure out which students need fluency, such as repeated reading or something else like going back to those basic foundational skills.

Anna Geiger:

So now you've been saying it's not about reading fast, but the goal is that they read faster. Help us understand how that works.

Melanie Brethour:

It's like that quote that I was telling you from Jan Hasbrouck. I always say to students, "The way I'm speaking right now is probably the way I should be reading it." I will model that. I will model also maybe the not so great way of reading really quickly, because I have students do that. They think they have to read fast, so they're reading so quickly, but they have no clue what they're reading at the end.

I also say you don't want to be reading like a very slow robot, very robotic. It should be the way you speak.

I just find that's one of my favorite quotes because that kind of explains it in a way... Because if you look at the Jan Hasbrouck and Tindal norms, if they're below the 50th percentile, there is something going on and they're having reading difficulties. That's why we do want to increase the words correct per minute, but it's not about how quickly. It's really about peeling those words off the page and working on automaticity.

Anna Geiger:

So the goal is to speed them up so they are reading at a speaking rate. I know Jan Hasbrouck talks about how if you read after a certain percent with the "norms," maybe it's 75%, I can't remember, but with the words correct per minute, that's not going to improve anything. Going super fast doesn't make it any better. We're just trying to get to an appropriate rate. We're not trying to be speed readers.

Melanie Brethour:

Exactly, and I think that I always had a hard time with that because I always thought it was about reading fast. Look, you have to read those how many words by the middle of grade two. I think that there are a lot of misconceptions like that about fluency.

But there are so many fantastic resources, as I mentioned before, for teachers out there.

In your book, you have a lot of different activities that teachers can do in their classroom. This doesn't take very long, it's 10 to 15 minutes per student, and you're not doing everybody in your classroom. If that's the case, then you probably need to look at your core classroom instruction and tweak it a little bit here and there.

Anna Geiger:

Where do you find the reading material for the repeated reading?

Melanie Brethour:

There are so many texts out there that you can use. You can use a decodable text as well, but you want to try and find a text that is at their instructional level. I use sometimes the progress monitoring texts. There's Really Great Reading decodable texts as well as UFLI. I even looked in your book, you have the QR codes and I downloaded those little passages as well.

As long as you are having the students repeat that reading a few times, three to four times, and tracking it is really powerful for students.

I can't emphasize this enough. It's one thing for the teacher to do it, but they're really excited when they see it going up, their words correct per minute if they're having difficulty with their accuracy too.

It's really a powerful tool and it's fantastic to show to parents as well that this is what we're working on.

Anna Geiger:

What does your tracking sheet look like?

Melanie Brethour:

I use one from Really Great Reading. There are a few. There's one where it's a cold read and then a warm read, but I like doing at least three to four repeated readings. At the top, you put the date, then you have their accuracy, and it's from 95% to 100% in little boxes. Then for the words correct per minute, depending on the grade level, it's just by increments of five words correct per minute.

Then I just write the numbers at the top for the accuracy and the words correct per minute, and then the students color in the chart. Because you're doing three to four repeatings, I usually write at the top what is the text and then continue with that.

Anna Geiger:

Now to figure out that percent, do you have that text marked up by number of words per line? How do you figure that out quickly in terms of accuracy?

Melanie Brethour:

That's it. It depends on each text; some texts have the numbers. Sometimes I just will count before, so it's a little bit of work, but I try and pick texts that have the numbers on the side so you can figure it out.

Then there are some words correct per minute calculators, or you just simply divide the number of words correctly by the words that they read in total with the errors. But if you're not too sure there's a word correct per minute calculator that I used to use all the time. It would tell you if you were doing

something longer than one minute, but usually you only do it for one minute, and it would calculate everything beautifully.

Anna Geiger:

So we know that in doing this, the feedback is important. I know that some people would just think that if I just have my student read the same thing over and over without anybody next to them, that's not going to do it. We know that the feedback, and that's what researchers tell us, matters. What kind of feedback are you giving after they read for that one minute?

Melanie Brethour:

It depends on, obviously, the year, right? Is it because of the short vowel? Is a multisyllabic word? Is it a function word? A lot of students have difficulty with those. So I will just give them feedback and have them try and sound it out and break it apart. But if they're really struggling, then I will obviously tell them the word.

Sometimes we'll have them underline it, or I'll put it on a post it on the side. These are the words that you had difficulty with, point to it and have them repeat the word. I have a lot of students that have language difficulties, so maybe they don't even know what the word means as well.

It's a lot of different feedback in terms of... Sometimes instead of me telling them, I'll ask them what do you notice. Can you sound this out for me? And just if they have difficulty, I'll help them with that.

Anna Geiger:

Do you ever do any kind of modeling in terms of expression during the feedback portion?

Melanie Brethour:

I do. I always start with that at the beginning, saying, "I don't want you to read fast. It's the way you're speaking right now." I'll model it for sure. Then if they have difficulty or it's really robotic or they don't have any expression, afterwards I will model by reading one or two sentences.

Anna Geiger:

Do you typically do this with one child once a week or multiple times a week? How do you decide how often to do this? Are you progress monitoring to figure it out and then you discontinue this intervention, or how do you work it?

Melanie Brethour:

For me, it depends on each group. Sometimes I have a group of three to four students where I'm really working on those foundational literacy skills, so I'm not working on fluency with them. But other groups, I actually take them out and we do other activities for fluency and breaking apart multisyllabic words.

Then I take students on the side, if I'm in a small group, and I'll just call them over, or I will take them one-on-one. It really depends on each class because I have timed in my schedule which groups or which students I'm working with so the teachers know I'm taking them.

Sometimes I'll take a small group but still do the fluency on the side depending on... My goal is maybe a student each time.

But if you're a classroom teacher and you're doing centers, this is something that you can do.

Again, you're not targeting everybody in your classroom, hopefully. You're just targeting those students who need that fluency support, but you can do it a few times a week. You want to target maybe one or a few students in your classroom as well. And if you have extra help, that's even better.

Anna Geiger:

Yes, always.

Thank you so much for sharing how you do repeated readings with your students. Is there anything else you'd like to share before we sign off?

Melanie Brethour:

No, that would be it. Again, there are so many resources out there, and I don't know if you'll be posting them, or I can send them your way as well.

Anna Geiger:

Sure, if there's anything you want to share, I'll add it to the show notes, and we'll also link to all of your social media profiles and all the support that you provide for teachers that way.

Thanks again, Melanie!

Melanie Brethour:

Thank you so much for having me again.

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode227. Talk to you next time!