How to teach students to use set for variability - with Jen Yagid and Wendy Darasz

Triple R Teaching Podcast #230

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. Today I'm interviewing Jen and Wendy of Informed Literacy. They are both dyslexia practitioners and literacy specialists. Today we're going to talk about set for variability, what it is, and why it's a skill that all students need to have even from the beginning days of their reading journey. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome Jen and Wendy!

Jen Yagid:

Hi, how are you?

Anna Geiger:

I'm glad to have you here. I enjoy all that you share on social media and the resources that you also create, including your brand new decodable books!

Before we get into talking about set for variability, could you tell us a little bit about who you are and what you're doing now, starting with you, Jen?

Jen Yagid:

Sure! Hi, Anna. Thank you so much for having us on the podcast. I'm Jen Yagid. Wendy and are both certified reading specialists and Wilson Dyslexia Practitioners. Like many, we started our journey as classroom teachers in the balanced literacy era, and we quickly realized that it just was not cutting it.

Fast forward, we created a blog and with that grew our TPT store back in 2016. We've really been sharing science of reading tips and resources ever since.

Wendy Darasz:

I worked for many years as a primary teacher with a great team of teachers back in the balanced literacy day. We were looking at our data going, something's not clicking, something's not working. So we went off on kind of our own exploration and found structured literacy and started going to workshops and science of reading workshops. I loved it so much.

Then I became a literacy specialist. I met Jen, and Jen and I worked together as reading specialists. Then we both decided we needed more, so we both became Certified Wilson Practitioners.

Currently I'm not working in the classroom; I'm working privately with students and as a consultant. That's what I'm doing.

Anna Geiger:

For many people, this understanding that balanced literacy was not the way was actually around COVID time because people found themselves more at home. Have you been in this longer, and how long have you been sharing your Informed Literacy resources?

Jen Yagid:

We always like to say that we've been proponents of science of reading before it was coined the term "science of reading" and "structured literacy." We started working together in 2012. Wendy and I originally started because we wanted to write a book, and then it ended up leading to us creating our TPT store. We realized that the processes that were in place with balanced literacy just were not helping our struggling readers.

I think it's harder to see that when you're a classroom teacher because there may be a few struggling readers, but our entire caseload was struggling readers, so that's where it became super apparent.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, because if you're doing balanced literacy in the classroom, it appears to be working, and it's good enough for some kids. Then you maybe assume, and this is my experience, that the kids it's not working for... It's not necessarily because I'm doing something wrong; it's because of whatever, or there's some magical knowledge out there about dyslexia that I don't have!

What's it been like for you to watch this become more mainstream? Because you started when balanced literacy was still number one, and it is still pretty prevalent today, but things have really changed.

Wendy Darasz:

I have found it really rewarding because we've been pushing for this science of reading in classrooms. Part of the reason we started creating our own materials is because back in the day there wasn't anything to choose from, so we had to create it.

Anna Geiger:

Right.

Wendy Darasz:

It's actually really rewarding, and I'm so excited for kids and teachers now because we know that this works. More kids are going to be able to achieve literacy, and that's really what it's all about.

Anna Geiger:

Well, I appreciate what the two of you share. In addition to your products, you also have excellent blog posts that I link to and share because they are very informative and talk to people who come from a balanced literacy space. I think that's very helpful.

Today we're going to talk about set for variability, and I don't think that that's something everybody is aware of what that is. If we could maybe start by talking about what it is and then how it's different from three queuing.

Jen Yagid:

Basically, when we first came across this term, it sounded intimidating and super technical, like what is set for variability? But basically, the more Wendy and I researched it and explored it, we realized that it was just simply a way of encouraging kids to be more flexible when they self-correct. It's a decoding strategy that helps students use words they already know, that are in their oral language vocabulary, to fix mispronunciations while reading. It's also known as mispronunciation correction. It's pretty simple.

Anna Geiger:

Can you give an example?

Wendy Darasz:

I have two examples actually. Let's say students are just beginning to read, and they're just getting that CVC pattern under their belt. Initially one of the things that they want to do is they want to give every vowel they see that short vowel sound. So if they come across the word "have," they might say "hav-eh," and in a sentence, it's not making sense to them. "I hav-eh a pet cat."

Some students might naturally go, "Oh, 'hav-eh' is not a real word," and then they would self-correct.

Other students might need the prompt of, "So we're learning that short vowel sound, that's great! You're doing a great job using those short vowel sounds. But in this word, this word has a V at the end, and the E is there just to keep it company. It doesn't say anything. Now try it." Then they could say "have."

Another example is a two-syllable word. As students venture into that territory of reading multisyllabic words, they might come across the word "blossom." Now, "blossom" is made up of two closed syllables, blos-som, but some students might not know that schwa. They might say "blossahm."

Now, some students are going to have blossom in their oral vocabulary because, as Jen said, oral vocabulary is going to help them with that mispronunciation. If they're reading, "The blossom is on the plant," and they read it first as "The blossahm is on the plant," some students are going to naturally say, "Oh! Blossom!" and self-correct.

Other students may not have blossom as part of their oral vocabulary. At that point, it's incumbent upon the teacher to say, "Okay, that word is 'blossom.' It has a schwa at the end, 'blossom.' That means it's a part of the plant that has a flower on it."

You want to teach into that vocabulary because oral vocabulary is a very important part of that mispronunciation and self-correction.

Anna Geiger:

When you teach students to use set for variability, how do you go about doing that?

Wendy Darasz:

One of the things that Jen and I have talked about is the importance of having enough patterns under their belts. It's using the patterns of spelling to self-correct into the correct pronunciation.

It's really important to start set for variability at the very beginning with decodable books because you want the student to do the heavy lifting. You don't want the teacher to teach into every word. If they can't read CVC words and you're having to teach into every CVC word as they're reading, set for variability is not going to work.

If they have enough of the pattern under their belt, when they come to an unknown word, when they come to a word they're not sure about, they can, some students, as we said, might automatically correct. For other students, you can teach into it.

You might say to the student, "Okay, so that word has a silent E at the end. It's not 'lick,' right? 'The dog and the fox lick to wag' does not make sense."

But they might not have enough cognitive energy to self-correct, so then you could teach into that pattern. "That's a silent E pattern. That E is going to make the I say /ī/, and the E is going to be quiet. Let's try it. /l/ /ī/ /k/. Like."

You teach into the correct pronunciation by using the patterns of the spelling and the sounds of the letters. It's never a guessing and checking. It's always teaching into the code that you're doing.

Anna Geiger:

So when you talked about the word "like," you're basically saying that's someone who maybe hasn't learned the CVCE pattern yet.

Wendy Darasz:

Correct.

Anna Geiger:

But you've taught them that vowels have two sounds, so they can adjust it.

Wendy Darasz:

Exactly. So they can adjust it.

Jen Yagid:

I've actually changed my thinking a little bit as we're kind of thinking about set for variability. As a Wilson Dyslexia Practitioner, we start on the closed syllable, and then we move systematically across through the patterns.

One thing that I have changed a little bit in my thinking is that with my students in intervention, I will teach the short vowel sounds. We do our letter keyword sound drill with the short vowel sounds, but now I'm starting to say, "Well, so these are the sounds that we've learned, but I'm just going to tell you that these vowels also spell other sounds. Sometimes A spells /ă/, but it can also spell its name, /ā/."

Doing that, just opening it a little bit, we're just kind of exposing it to them as opposed to teaching explicitly the CVCE pattern, but just to get that exposure. Because they're going to need to have that skill, and they're going to encounter words that are not decodable.

Like I always say, the world's not decodable. We're not going to be able to have them encounter text and have no idea what to do with it because all they know is short vowels.

So I've kind of changed my thinking. In my drills, I'll include some long vowel sounds too, just to get them exposed to it.

Wendy Darasz:

Even in the phonemic awareness activities. It's okay if you're teaching the short vowel sounds, but you *have* to expose them to other words and other sounds of our language because you can't wait to teach those sounds.

We say it's like priming the pump so that when they're reading, if they've never been exposed to those sounds, you can't tell them to flex the sound, right? Because they're not going to have another sound to go to.

It's like Jen said, as you're teaching along, you can introduce other sounds of these vowels.

Anna Geiger:

I know with some people, we become very sensitive to the idea of not using three queuing, which is this idea that when you get to a word that you don't know, you use context to figure it out. Often the first plan of attack is to look at the picture and the first letter, so not the full phonics, and then go back and try again and see what would make sense. They might say "house" instead of "home," and the teacher might not even be bothered by that because they pretty much got the idea.

I know that's not what you're talking about, but when some people hear set for variability and they hear about using context to help you land on the correct pronunciation, that concerns them. Can you talk a little bit about how it's different from three queuing?

Wendy Darasz:

Happily. First of all, reading is a code-based system, so why not teach the code? Set for variability is a two-pronged approach. You approach it first with code, and *then* if it doesn't make sense, they access their oral vocabulary and they correct that mispronunciation.

It's very different than MSV. MSV is actually the opposite. If they come to a word they don't know, you're actually asking them to lift their eyes from the page, look at the text, maybe read past the word to see what would make sense, and then guess and check.

That is a very inefficient approach, whereas set for variability is much more efficient and it keeps the eyes on the text.

Anna Geiger:

And we know set for variability is so important because phonics only gets you so far, right? Learning the syllable types, there are so many instances where the schwa is the vowel sound, and so if we don't have this strategy, then we can be stuck.

Like you said, it's so important that kids have these words in their oral vocabulary.

What happens if they're reading on their own, and they don't have it in the oral vocabulary? They're trying set for variability, but they're not landing on anything. Do you have any tips for teachers in helping kids with this, or is the general idea just to build that vocabulary as much as you can?

Jen Yagid:

In terms of a small group setting, that's where the teacher would be there to help and support the student, because I don't know how you would necessarily help them if they just don't have that.

But again, it's so funny because I feel like sometimes with science of reading, it can be very black and white. We kind of talk about a common sense approach, like with pictures. Pictures will help students in some ways. That might be where they would use the picture to help them understand what the word means.

So if they're learning something and they see a diagram or they see a photograph, that might help them look and say, "Oh, okay, so that must be what that word means."

I don't think that we can *never* use pictures, we just can't use pictures as decoding strategy. It's just not a thing.

Anna Geiger:

Yes, I agree. I appreciate that because I know that that is starting to happen. There are becoming black and white issues within the science of reading space, like that a book has to be a hundred percent decodable or all kinds of things. We have to be very careful about that.

You talked, in our email before this, about how you can use set for variability with both decodable and non-controlled texts. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Wendy Darasz:

Sure, so like I said before, you want to start with set for variability right from the get-go, right when you're teaching with decodable texts, because, as you said, the world is not decodable. It can't be 100% decodable. Any decodable text that makes sense is going to naturally have some words that contain untaught patterns or irregular patterns.

You want to build that experience and the confidence when they come to a word that is not following a pattern so they have a strategy. They have a tool in their toolbox to approach this word. So that by the time they get to non-controlled text, because you're not going to keep them in controlled text forever… So that by the time they get to non-controlled text, they already know how to use that strategy. They already know, "Oh, I'm going to just flex the sound and try a different word."

I think it's really important to teach that basic strategy early on in their reading experience.

Anna Geiger:

That strategy would be when you come to a word, sound it out. But if it doesn't make sense, shift the vowels. Then from there, maybe the picture might help or something. Always we start with sounding out the word as best we can with what we know.

Wendy Darasz:

Exactly.

Jen Yagid:

And we might incorporate a hand motion too. It will just say to them, flex the sound or try a different sound. We might show our hand palm side up, and it's that visual cue to them to flip it over to remind them, "Oh, I need to flex the sound." Then it's not interrupting the flow of their reading, but it's just kind of a helpful cue.

Anna Geiger:

And maybe you could even start with set for variability very early if you're doing those whiny sounds, know, like "Sam." They might say "Saaaam," but you can show them, let's fix it a little bit. That can tell them right away from the beginning that sometimes we have to adjust and that's okay. That's how reading works.

Jen Yagid:

That's a perfect example. I notice a lot of OG-based programs, when they teach it, they'll teach AM as CVC, and then a program like Wilson or Fundations, they teach it as a glued sound. But still, no matter which way you teach it, you can just say it's a whiny A. Most kids, whether they're taught in either context, they can kind of make that whiny A, and they usually can solve that word.

Anna Geiger:

Interesting. Anything else you want to share about set for variability?

Jen Yagid:

We have a few big ideas that we wanted to talk about. We had already mentioned that the world is not decodable and that a lot of kids, even your most struggling readers, are going to be encountering words that contain patterns they don't know. They need to have a way to solve those words, or at least tools in their toolbox to help them.

When we talk about decodable books, when you're selecting decodable books, you need to carefully select the decodable books that are mostly decodable, but I really feel like that hundred percent decodability really limits them as opposing to stretching them.

If you put 100% decodable books in front of them, they are never going to have the opportunity to practice the strategy of set for variability because they know all the words. It's really important that as the teacher you're mindful of that, and that you're carefully selecting. We're giving the kids a chance to implement the SFV strategy.

Just like our other piece of advice that Wendy had already said, we don't want to wait to teach SFV. You can start at the CVC level with students, and they're going to start to get it.

When we do universal screenings, they're exposed to non-controlled text because that's part of our screener. Not every word that my little friends are reading are words that have patterns they've been explicitly exposed to, but they can solve some of them.

I think just starting early and then making sure that you're not limiting the students. You're stretching them, and you're giving them a chance to try this.

Anna Geiger:

Any thoughts from someone who might say… And I know you have a blog post about this because I've linked to it on my blog post… But about moving kids out of decodables, like what's the balance? Because you could have all the words be words they require set for variability to read, but is that the right way to go? How do you decide which of the words should be like that?

I know we don't have a percent from research in terms of how decodable a text should be, but how, as a teacher, can you kind of make that judgment call?

Wendy Darasz:

One of the things that Jen and I are proponents of is when you're teaching a new pattern, use a decodable text that contains that pattern. Decodable texts are the bridge from the phonics instruction to how this can be applied in our reading.

If you're always just teaching phonics in isolation and you don't give them the opportunity to apply it into a connected text, you run the risk of students making the false connection that phonics is not for reading. I don't use phonics in my reading.

Again, every child is different, and as Jen talked about, some kids are going to need that explicit exposure over and over and over again.

Other kids, you're going to teach them the phonics rule, give them an opportunity to apply it in text, and you can determine whether or not they're applying it successfully. If they're not applying it successfully, give them another opportunity or reteach it.

We talk about this pendulum swing in the science of reading and listening to your students read is not bad. Running records got a really bad name because it was about MSV, right? But you can do oral reading assessments and listen to your kids read and kind of take notes to determine whether or not they're applying these patterns to their connected text.

If they are, then you can move on. If not, then you need to stay and muck around with that again.

Anna Geiger:

We also know that the more that we do *with* them and can support them, the more complex text they can handle. But if we're setting them to read on their own, we might want to have more controlled text at the beginning. Would you agree?

Wendy Darasz:

Absolutely.

Jen Yagid:

Yes, and just to piggyback off of Wendy's point, a lot of times in the classroom, I will use data to support my decision of when to expose kids to more non-controlled text. That's not leveled text, because we know that leveled text is an arbitrary level, but leveled text is essentially just non-controlled text.

If I'm trying to figure out when to incorporate more non-controlled text with my students, I might look at the universal screening data and I might say, "Oh, look at how they're doing with the oral reading fluency."

If they're able to read based on the benchmark, and they're meeting their benchmark goals or they're close to their benchmark goals, that's telling me that's a student that might be able to use that set for variability strategy, and you might incorporate some more non-controlled text.

If it's a student that's reading nine words per minute, that's not a student that would be ready for non-controlled text. Really using the data is also helpful.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you very much. Is there anything else that would you like to share, or some of the resources that you have that people can find? I know we'll put some links in the show notes, but what would you like our readers or listeners to know about?

Wendy Darasz:

As you mentioned right from the very beginning, we have a blog that we've been working on. It's always been based in the science of reading. You can find us there at informedliteracy.com.

Jen is an Instagram guru. I'm not an Instagrammer, but she is. That's @informedlit. We've recently started to post some teaching videos on YouTube, also found @informedlit. Our most exciting news is that we have published our first set of decodable books. It's a 10-pack of hard copy books, and we have more on the way.

For your listeners, we're offering a limited coupon code for if you purchase a set of our hard copy books, you can get our supplemental resource pack, which is a $20 value. In that is basically everything you need to teach with the decodable books. It's got sentence scrambles and vocabulary and spelling and all of those good things that come with a structured literacy lesson. Everything's included, and we have a freebie too. Do you want to talk about the freebie, Jen?

Jen Yagid:

Sure. If you wanted to take a sneak peek into our decodables, we have a freebie that is a printable version of the decodable with an abridged version of the lesson plan, so you can kind of get a taste of what our supplemental resource pack is like. We'll give you the link so that readers can download it.

Anna Geiger:

Absolutely. I'll put those things in the show notes.

Thank you so much for all that you've been doing all these years and that you continue to do for teachers and students.

Jen Yagid:

Thanks for having us, we had fun.

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode230. 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, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.