Triple R Teaching

Hello! Anna Geiger here from Reach All Readers. If you're new to the podcast, I just

been sharing education resources on my website for ten years now, I'm Orton-Gillingham certified, I have a science of reading grad certificate, and I have a master's degree from quite a long time ago.

I was a balanced literacy teacher during my classroom teaching days, when I taught my oldest five kids to read, and for much of the time that I've been sharing online. It's only been in the past few years that I learned that a lot of things I thought were true were actually not aligned with the research.

So I come from a balanced literacy background, and because of that, I think I have a unique perspective. When I hear people from the balanced literacy community defend things or word things a certain way, I can kind of see where they're coming from, but now that I have learned quite a bit, I can also see where the holes are.

Because of that background that I have, I want to share today my reaction to a video that recently came out. It was sponsored by Pioneer Valley Books. It was an interview with Dr. Jan Richardson and Dr. Michele Dufresne. If you're at all familiar with guided reading, you know that Jan Richardson is way up there. She has a very popular book called The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading. It's this beautiful spiral-bound guide to teaching guided reading. Honestly, it's a lovely book. In fact, I used to give it away, when I was a balanced literacy teacher, in some of my giveaways on my website! Now, though, I understand that there are many issues with this approach.

She's also the co-author with Dr. Dufresne of The Next Step Forward in Word Study and Phonics. Just an interesting aside here, the first book to be published was about guided reading, and the phonics book didn't come until a few years later, which I always think is really interesting to think about that sequence. This happens a lot with our guided reading gurus.

I want today to respond to some things that they share in that webinar. I think this could be a rather long episode, so we'll probably break it up into several. But as you might imagine, the webinar is about refuting some of the things that people are saying,

in the science of reading community, about the problems with guided reading. Here we go. Here's my reaction to this interview.

A few months after this episode went live, Pioneer Valley Press indicated that they felt I had infringed on their copyright by using their audio. So I'm going to redo this episode by paraphrasing and sometimes quoting Dufresne and Richardson, but not using Pioneer Valley Press's audio.

Dr. Dufresne begins by saying that there's a lot of science of reading talk in the media, and we have to be careful about what we're seeing from people who are not experts - who are journalists. They have read a lot about literacy, and thought about literacy, but are not necessarily bringing the right background and understanding the research.

She says that the media is telling us that science has proven there's just one way of teaching reading effectively, which is systematic, highly structured phonics. But truthfully, she says, the research does not back that up. She says that she and Richardson think phonics is very important, but there is no research that's proven there's just one way to do it.

Anna Geiger: Oh, boy. That gives us a lot to talk about right out of the gate. That was Dr. Michele Dufresne.

I've got to say, from the very beginning, I get it. That's what I said. When I first read Emily Hanford's article, At a Loss for Words, which debunks three-cueing, I thought, "What does she know? She's a journalist."

Since then I've come around because after I did all my research, I went back to her article, and sure enough, she had quoted all the major players. She knew her stuff. She had clearly studied this.

When I think about it now, it kind of makes sense to me. When a journalist studies it, they're not going to come into it with the same defensiveness that a teacher will, right? Because when you've been doing something for a long time, to hear that it's not backed by research is like a gut punch. You feel kind of sick if you actually believe they're right, because that means there are things you've been doing that weren't in the best interests of all your readers. I get it. I've totally been there.

I'm going to quote something here from Timothy Shanahan's blog. Here's what he wrote,

"The idea that reporters can't report on education unless they've taught school or possess a PhD in education strikes me as loony. It is akin to the idea that Woodford and Bernstein couldn't cover Watergate since they'd never been elected president. Rejections of accurate reporting because the source isn't a professional educator is fallacious. The issue shouldn't be who the sources are, but whether the reports are accurate."

Let's address the next point she made. She said that the media tells us that the science has proven there's just one way of teaching reading effectively - systematic, highly structured phonics - and she says that is not true.

First of all, I think we should be clear that the media and the science of reading are two different things. The media is reporting the science of reading, and they may or may not be doing that accurately so we need to NOT get our science of reading information from big articles.

I mean, there's some good stuff out there. Emily Hanford certainly opened my eyes, but even she would tell you she's not the research, she's reporting the research. So I think they're trying to debunk some of what people are saying about the science of reading by using the oversimplification that the media does.

We have to be really careful, right? We know the Simple View of Reading tells us that word recognition times language comprehension equals reading comprehension. Therefore, decoding HAS to occur. Now it's not the only thing. You also have to understand the words, right? That's why there's another part before you get to the equals.

But she, I feel, is trying to oversimplify it to get our eyes off the whole picture, and that's a little concerning. Also when she says there's no research to back that up, she doesn't share any research about why this is not true.

That's something to always watch for. If people tell you that research doesn't say, or they try to tell you that something is simply not true, but they offer nothing to back it up, that's a little bit of a warning sign.

Dr. Dufresne goes on to say that the media is spending a lot of time saying that teachers do very little phonics and that teachers are teaching children to guess. She says that there probably are some teachers that aren't doing much phonics, and there's probably some teachers that are prompting kids incorrectly, and it may look like they're teaching kids to guess, but that's not what the majority of teachers are doing. She says that most teachers, "a highly, high statistic number of teachers are teaching phonics, and they are not teaching children to guess at words."

Anna Geiger: So how do you back up your opinion that, for the most part, teachers are teaching phonics appropriately and are not teaching kids to guess at words? She offers no data.

Dr. Dufresne goes on to say that the media, the journalists, have been saying that balanced literacy is the reason why a lot of kids aren't learning to read. She says it's not a simple answer as to why so many kids are struggling, but it's definitely not balanced literacy's fault.

Anna Geiger: Again, it feels like she's just sharing her opinions. She's not backing this up with anything. She's not even telling you why the claims that balanced literacy is hurting kids is wrong. She doesn't even have any explanation for that.

Here's the reason why many people are saying that balanced literacy hurts kids. It doesn't hurt ALL kids. If you take a look at Nancy Young's Ladder of Reading and Writing, you'll see that a large percentage of kids, maybe up to 40% or so, are going to learn to read no matter what type of instruction you give them. That's why so many of us have seen so much success with guided reading. Particularly if we have students coming to us with strong vocabulary and background knowledge, which are really important to get through those guided reading leveled books, especially at the beginning when you can't sound out the words.

The problem is, for many children, this doesn't work. They need a structured approach to learning to read, which includes systematic explicit phonics instruction. She doesn't talk about any of this. All she does is say, "Nope, they're wrong."

Next Dr. Richardson talks about how we have to be careful about listening to the media versus actually studying the research because they're two different things, and that is true. She takes the definition of the science of reading from The Reading League's definition, which is great. Then she talks about how Dr. Jan Hasbrouck has added in there how it's vast, it's changing, it's evolving, all of which I agree with. But anyway, her point here is that we need to remember that the science of reading is not a program,

it's not a one-size-fits-all, it is the body of research, and she's correct on that one hundred percent.

Next, we hear from Dr. Jan Richardson, who says that just as people are confused about what the science of reading is, they're confused about guided reading. One reason she says is because there's no definition that everyone agrees on; it looks different in each school.

She says that she's seen some ineffective guided reading lessons, and she wrote her first book because she felt there wasn't enough systematic explicit teaching of phonics and writing in guided reading lessons. She says that not all guided reading lessons contain the same elements.

So her definition of guided reading is that a teacher meets with a small group of students, differentiates by their needs, provides scaffolding, and gradually reduces support to promote independence.

Anna Geiger: I don't know about you, but to me that definition sounds pretty good! The teacher meets with a small group of students and differentiates. Love it. Targets specific learning needs. That's important. Provides appropriate scaffolding. We need that. Gradually reducing support to promote independence. That could be the I Do, We Do, You Do model. Sounds good. Let's keep listening.

Next, Dr. Richardson addresses what guided reading is not. She says it's not a group for every level, because you'll drive yourself nuts if you try to do that. She says grouping should be based on common needs, not just text level. She says that you can use a phonics assessment, a writing sample, a running record, or a fluency assessment to help you form your small groups. She says these groups will change because children progress at different rates and require different instruction. She says that teachers should think about regrouping about every two to three weeks.

She says that guided reading is not reading an easy book. If the book is easy, and the children don't need help, you've just wasted time. So she says that you really need to be careful to make appropriate book choices.

She says that guided reading is not a one-size-fits-all, no matter what grade level you're teaching. They need to be taught different skills and strategies, and guided reading lets you differentiate that way.

Then she says that guided reading is not an invitation to guess at words. She says kids should never be encouraged to guess. Children will make mistakes, but we should not encourage them to guess at words. Then she quotes Marie Clay. "We need to draw the child's attention to the letters and sounds, spelling patterns, words within words, and syllabic chunks, because reading is not a guessing game. Reading remains a problem solving task in which the reader must get the precise message of the author." (Becoming Literate, page 137.)

Anna Geiger: Okay. First of all, I really don't think there are a lot of teachers out there who think they need to have a group for every level in their classroom. Only because, from my experience, when I would use running records to figure out my students' reading levels, they were all over the place. I might have eighteen kids and have nine reading levels, and that's impossible, right? You can't have that many groups. So I'm thinking most teachers aren't really actually doing that.

Also, the process that she talks through, which is very muddy as far as I can tell, about regrouping students every two to three weeks with all those assessments sounds a little bit like a nightmare.

I appreciate that she mentions that guided reading groups should be using challenging texts because that is definitely important.

Then she also talks about how we're not teaching guessing, and then she uses all the phonics words about how we're going to have kids read those words, and then she also says that reading is problem solving. That's exactly what I used to say when I was a balanced literacy teacher. That is a little concerning to me because that makes me think about three-cueing, that there's all these different cues you have to use to solve a word instead of just reading it.

The fact is, if we're giving our students early reading material, which includes words they can't possibly sound out, in fact that's primarily what the book consists of, there's going to be some guessing involved, but I'll save more discussion of that until later.

Anna Geiger: Next, Dr. Dufresne talks about the difference between decodable and leveled books. She shares Heidi Anne Mesmer's definition about decodables, which basically is that they are books that mostly contain sound spellings that have already been taught.

Then she talks about how leveled books have a gradual increase in complexity. That can be in different ways. It can be the word choice, it can be sentence structure, and so on.

Next she shares a leveled book that she has written. In the opening pages this is what it says, "Little dinosaur is hungry. 'I am hungry,' said little dinosaur. 'Here is a flower. Yum, yum! Here is a bug,' said little dinosaur, 'Yum, yum!'"

She's going to break this down, but I just want to address really quickly which words on these two pages are very easily decodable for a beginner because this is only a level C book. Well, let's see, "is" isn't too hard, and "I, am, sad, yum, bug." Those are the words that they could sound out.

Here are the words they probably cannot sound out, "little, dinosaur, hungry, said, here, flower." Okay, that's quite a few. Let's see how she approaches the use of this book.

Next, Dr. Dufresne walks you through a level C text from Pioneer Valley books that she wrote many years prior. She notes that in the book there are some words kid can decode, but there are words you would not expect kids at level C to decode, like "little dinosaur" or "hungry" or "flower."

Then she asks, how are kids going to figure out these words? Are they going to guess at them? No. That's because as part of your book introduction, you'll help kids understand what the story is about. It's about a little dinosaur who is out looking for food. We're not going to expect them to sound out "dinosaur."

But, she says, there are still opportunities for decoding: "Yum, yum" and "bug."

And then she says that these books are very carefully designed to bring sight words in. The sight words are repeated to give kids automaticity with them.

Anna Geiger: So I think she's saying that the kids can figure out the words because we've talked to them about the book because I didn't hear her say use the picture or anything like that. So she says that since you tell them about the book, then they can solve these hard words.

I think we need to give kids books they can actually read, without an introduction, because they have the tools to actually sound out the words.

I found it really interesting in The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading (2016), they talk about early readers and say that they read the book using the pattern, but don't always attend to the print (p. 104). What does that mean?

What does that mean? If you're not looking at the words, and you're not attending to print, you're not reading!

This is a confusion I had for a long time. I thought that they actually were reading because they were getting the words, but they weren't!

The Simple View of Reading, which has been proven many times by research, tells us that reading comprehension results when there is actual word recognition (which includes decoding because recognizing the word means actually looking at it and reading it), times language comprehension. So both things have to be present.

If I'm just guessing at the words using context or because the teacher told me something, but I don't know a hundred percent for sure because I don't have the phonics skills to sound it out, then I'm not really reading.

I know, I know, I know that balanced literacy teachers - I was one of them, remember - hate it when people say they're teaching kids guessing. It does not feel like you're teaching kids to guess. We don't use that word, guess. At least not usually. But if kids do not have a surefire way to figure out what a word is, they don't have the phonics skills to actually decode it, and they're relying on something their teacher told them or they're using the picture or they're using just a part of the word, they're not actually reading it. If you can't know for sure, that's what guessing is. Your best guess is still a guess.

I think we should also address that they're talking about sight words. Sight words are really the words you know by sight. Those can be any kind of word. They can be phonically regular or phonically irregular. They can be high frequency. They can be words you've read just a few times in your life. But as long as you can read it instantly, it's a sight word for you. The question really is how do we turn high frequency words into sight words? There's already a terminology issue, which I would hope for better

from people with doctorates who are publishing programs.

Regardless, when I look back at their guidebook, it says that "the first sight words are difficult for some children to learn. The children might have poor visual memory, weak phonemic awareness skills, or difficulty attending to print."

First of all, we know that learning "sight words" is not about visual memory, it's about connecting the sounds to the letters and mapping those in your brain. I heard Jan Richardson use the phrase orthographic mapping earlier, not sure if I included that, but I'm not sure she understands what it means. In this book, it actually says to teach these difficult "sight words" as wholes, that you cannot sound them out (Next Step Forward in Guided Reading, 2016, p. 104).

That has been said many, many times to be inaccurate! I don't know, that's just a big red flag for me, that they're showing a misunderstanding of what sight words are and how to teach them.

Next, Dr. Dufresne goes on to show you some other examples of leveled text. She talks about all the different ways you can pull phonics into it, and of course you can. Of course you can. Some kids will do that. That's why balanced literacy seems like it works. Because some kids, once you've taught them phonics in a disconnected lesson, or maybe for three minutes at the end of your guided reading lesson, they will apply it.

But not all kids will do that! I think that's the big thing we need to remember.

For me, a huge turning point was when someone in the big science of reading Facebook group acknowledged that balanced literacy seems to work for some kids. I mean, there's always more they could learn, but in general, yes, they learn to read. I said, "Thank you. I'm not crazy," because I did use balanced literacy, and guess what? Most of my students became pretty good readers. Now I would probably define pretty good readers differently, but they could get through their leveled books just fine with fluency and comprehension. However, many children will not.

She talks a lot in this webinar about switching back and forth between decodable and leveled books. That's what I wanted to do. That's really what I wanted. When I started understanding the science of reading, I really wanted to hold onto my leveled books. I did not want to do purely decodable because a lot of decodable books aren't very good.

Now that's changed, but at the time, and certainly for many years, there weren't many good ones to choose from.

Here's the problem. When you teach kids that, "In this book, you sound out the words, but in this book, you think about what the teacher told you before the lesson." I think she's honestly leaving out what we do tell kids to do, which is use the picture or use the picture and the first letter. She left that out in her discussion. But then you confuse kids.

The very first day I taught my youngest to read, I had learned about the science of reading, structured literacy, and I was going to teach him to read that way. I taught all my other kids to read with more of a balanced approach, with a combination of leveled and decodable, but mostly leveled.

With him, I thought, "Well, I'm definitely going to teach with decodable. That's going to be primary, but I don't want to let go of the leveled books, I think he needs those too." So I got them both out. We read the decodable, and it was very slow going. It was a wonderful decodable book from Flyleaf Publishing, one of their first ones. I think it's called I Am Sam. It's about a snake. He read it all very slowly.

And then I got this leveled book that I had. He tried to decode the words just like I told him with the other one, but he couldn't because they were all these patterns he hadn't been taught yet. So then I was like, "Well, actually, no, you can't sound these out, but use the picture." Or, "What do you think would make sense?"

I realized very quickly this was such an inefficient way to read. Each of the words required all of these questions I had to ask him to see if he could possibly figure out what the word was. It made no sense. I set aside the leveled books after that day, and we only used decodable in our reading lessons.

Now, he was a very good reader. He learned very quickly, and he, on his own, moved to "leveled" books during his independent reading in just a few months. But we had to start with a decodable so he understood that the first line of attack for a word is always eyes on the word, read it, sound it out.

The last thing I want to touch on today is the feeling that you have when kids are struggling through decodable books versus breezing through their leveled books. The

leveled books, especially those very early ones, can make it feel like kids are making faster progress because if they pick up on that pattern right away and they're good at using the picture, they can "read" them rather quickly. Whereas with a decodable book, if they really have to sound out the words, it's very slow and can be painful to listen to.

The fact is they will seem to make faster progress with the leveled book, but if they don't have strong phonics knowledge, they will eventually hit a wall. I think we need to remember this, the wall may come after your classroom.

That was something else that perked up my ears. When people said, "Oh, yeah, kids can 'read' those leveled books in first and second grade because that's how the books are written. But then when they get to third grade or fourth grade and they get to these books with words they can't sound out, words they've never recognized, multi-syllable words, they hit a wall." That really made me think. So maybe the way I was teaching reading was a way that was going to get my kids through their leveled books, but wasn't going to equip them to read harder books later on. Food for thought.

We're going to talk some more and do some more reaction next week. Thanks so much for listening!

You can find the show notes for this episode, including links to articles and research at reachallreaders.com/episode109. Talk to you next time!