Triple R Teaching

Anna Geiger here from Reach All Readers. Today we welcome Dr. Karen ho also has a doctorate in special education. In today's episode, she talks to us about the role of an SLP in a school and how an SLP can work with teachers and other team members to help students who struggle with language comprehension, and finally, how SLPs and teachers can help all students with language comprehension through some simple activities. Stick around to the very end because I have a special freebie for you that you'll find in the show notes!

I'm excited to welcome Karen Dudek-Brannan to the podcast today. Welcome!

Karen Dudek-Brannan: Thank you so much for having me!

Anna Geiger: Can you talk to us about your history? You have a wide background. Can you tell us about how you got into education and what it is you're doing now?

Karen Dudek-Brannan: So I guess to start at the beginning, I spent fourteen years as a school SLP and during that time was getting my doctorate in special ed.

When I first started, I really thought that I wanted to go into a medical setting and do things like work with patients who have had strokes and traumatic brain injuries and do the medical side of speech pathology. But those positions were a lot harder to find when you're first starting out so I started working in a school thinking, "I'll just do this for a little while and then I'm out of here."

That's because the language piece for me was always really confusing in grad school, and I always felt like figuring out how to support language and vocabulary was very difficult because unlike some of the other things that we have to do as speech pathologists, there's not a set protocol for figuring out how to navigate that in the school systems.

I always felt like I was shooting from the hip, and it wasn't a good feeling because I'd be working with kids and we'd get to the end of the IEPs and it's like, "What did we accomplish?"

So that's why I decided to go back and get my doctorate. I really wanted to figure out a way to navigate that because I realized that when you're in the schools, that is a huge part of your caseload. It was like half of the kids on my caseload needed support with language literacy, and I didn't really know how I fit in.

During that time I put together a framework. When I graduated and I was figuring out where do I want to go next with this, what I ended up doing is that I started creating my own products and started taking all the research that I did in language literacy and metacognition, and I put it together into my own course. I have programs and services for speech pathologists and other members of the IEP team that want to support language and literacy.

Now really what I focus on is having one aspect of my business and my services where I give speech pathologists and other professionals who really want to support language and literacy a framework for doing that intervention and kind of fitting into the process. Then I also have some other things that I do because really it's a team effort and everybody has to be on the same page. A lot of times people realize, "This is great and this is what I do when I have students in front of me, but I also have to get everybody on board." So that's why I have some other things focused on literacy and executive functioning as well.

That kind of brings us up to date to what I'm doing now!

Anna Geiger: It all sounds very complex, so let's back up. I have a lot of people that email me with a reply to my welcome email to my newsletter and tell me they're an SLP. I don't know a whole lot about SLPs and their job. I taught in very small schools that didn't have big support staff. Can you talk to us about what exactly an SLP is and what they do and how they can help teachers?

Karen Dudek-Brannan: Yeah. So in the school systems, I know that a lot of SLPs struggle to figure out what their role is because we are trained in more of a medical model where it's, here is a student or a client or a patient and I'm going to evaluate them and give them this treatment plan. That's very medical. We're going to do therapy, and we're adjusting this particular issue.

So when SLPs come into the school setting, a lot of times they have to figure out how to take what they know and fit it into the way things work in the schools. I was a member of the problem solving team where if there was an issue with a student, if they were, for example, not making progress in reading, the team would have to figure out, "What do we do for this student?" Sometimes that would involve giving the teachers some strategies to do in the classroom. But after we would do a certain set of interventions, a lot of times it was, "Okay, the student isn't making adequate progress. We need to do an evaluation."

If we were doing a special ed evaluation, a lot of times the psychologist, social worker, the special ed teacher, and the speech pathologist would be involved because if a student is not making adequate progress academically, a lot of times language is a factor. A lot of the students that I would evaluate, the teacher would be saying things like, "When they're trying to explain a word, they can't find the right word. I'm giving them directions and they can't keep up with them. They seem like they're not understanding me. They're giving me that deer in headlights look where they're not really sure what's going on."

A lot of times that would come out in the early grades, when they're just not making progress with those literacy concepts like phonics. But then in the later grades, a lot of times they would be behind on some of those things, but also we would see those comprehension issues where students would read something and then they would have no idea what happened. They couldn't answer a question about it. The class is moving along and having these discussions, and the students aren't making progress there.

So the other members of the team do need to be involved there because, again, the special ed teacher might be involved in teaching spelling and reading, and then the psychologist has to look at some different things as well, but the speech pathologist can address that language component, which can really impact... Obviously there's a huge impact on reading, but it can really impact all of the academic areas.

The thing that a lot of people think of when they think of a speech pathologist is a student that is hard to understand and they're not pronouncing their sounds the right way or they're stuttering. But really that language piece was huge. That was a big part of my caseload where I had to do a lot of education with the people I worked with because if I didn't, then I would just be getting referrals for kids who just couldn't say R or S, which of course is part of what you would do, but not the whole thing.

Anna Geiger: Thank you. That is really helpful because I think I just thought of SLPs as speech therapists. I've mostly just thought about helping kids pronounce words correctly, but you're telling us that's just a small piece and there's this huge, huge area of language, which is very overwhelming for teachers to know what to do about because we know the Simple View of Reading, word recognition times language

comprehension equals reading comprehension, and we know what goes in the word recognition part. We know how to teach phonemic awareness and phonics, but the oral language is so huge, there's just so much.

Could you maybe break it down for us a little bit and talk about what language skills kids need to be successful readers and writers?

Karen Dudek-Brannan: Yeah. Honestly the Simple View of Reading is a really good framework for teachers because it's broader, and again, it's simple, but if you're going to figure out specifically what to do, you do need to drill down a little bit more. Scarborough's Reading Rope is a very good framework. Again, that is a lot more complicated than the Simple View of Reading, but it's very helpful as far as just being evidence-based.

But the most helpful framework that I have found was from an article by an author named Linda Kucan where she broke it down into five areas. That is what I have based a lot of my work on when I give people an actual framework for addressing this. This is something that I teach SLPs. I would not say that SLPs are the only ones that can address this, but again, it's a framework that you can use to start making some of those decisions about who's doing what.

So if a student doesn't know what a word means and they don't have that topic knowledge, then the whole story isn't going to make sense. If you're trying to figure out what does this word mean, and what does this word mean in one sentence, and you can't understand those individual words, then your comprehension is going to suffer. We need to understand about 90 to 95% of the words in a text to have solid comprehension. So that's the first element in why vocabulary is so important.

But when we think about vocabulary, it's kind of this broad umbrella area that has five elements in it. So it has things like phonology, morphology, orthography, semantics, and syntax.

Phonology being our understanding of how sounds and phonemes go together to make up words. So if you hear a sequence of sounds, you process that as a word and that means something to you. That impacts vocabulary.

Morphology is those parts of words, the prefixes and the affixes, those give us meaning as well. That gives us information about what words mean.

Then orthography is understanding the print symbols.

So those three elements right there, I think that a lot of the things that teachers are doing will hit those elements. I do see that sometimes morphology isn't emphasized as much as it should be, but with those types of things, that's going to really impact the word decoding.

Where I end up spending a lot of time with the speech pathologists that I mentor is in the semantics and the syntax pieces, because a lot of times that's what's missing. It's not that I feel like this is the only thing that SLPs should be doing, it's just that when I look at what's going on, these are usually the missing pieces.

Semantics would be your deep understanding of what words mean, like their attributes. When you think of the word dog, you think animal, you think fuzzy. You think of all the things that a dog would do or that you can do with a dog. Those are pieces of information that you kind of attach to that. As we're exposed to words, we're kind of fine-tuning that. So it fine-tunes our semantic knowledge that's going to improve our ability to remember, and have a really solid understanding of what words mean beyond just memorizing definitions for tests and things like that. That's kind of a shallow understanding because when we have that deeper understanding, we see it in different contexts than a text, and that's going to help us to just understand the big picture.

Then the final thing is syntax, and that is understanding how sentences are structured. The reason that syntax goes along with vocabulary is because it's not just about knowing what words mean, it's also about knowing what words do. So things like nouns, verbs, and adjectives, those are the content words in the sentence. A lot of times kids who struggle with language will pay attention to the content words, but they won't pay attention to the function words like conjunctions. Conjunctions are huge because those are what helps us to join clauses together and use more complex sentences. So when the syntax doesn't make sense to students, they miss out on key pieces of meaning and that causes their comprehension to suffer as well.

So that was a very long answer to your question, but again, it's vocabulary as the big umbrella area, and then phonology, morphology, orthography, semantics, and syntax that fit under it. And, again, a lot of times where I feel like I need to come in and say, "Hey, don't forget about this part" is semantics and especially syntax, because a lot of times people kind of don't know how to address it or they're just kind of missing it.

Anna Geiger: If a teacher has a child where they're concerned, like you said, they're

not explaining themselves well, maybe they can decode, but they can't comprehend what they're reading. Is there a specific assessment or tool that you use to nail that down?

Karen Dudek-Brannan: That is a very good question. I get it like a million times every month. So the quick and dirty answer is no, but there are ways that you can look into it. The way that I advise speech pathologists to look at it is that they need to do some kind of a formal evaluation, but the problem with formal evaluations that are norm-referenced is that they're not sensitive enough to pick up on certain things. Sometimes you might have an issue where a student actually does need support, but their score might be in the average range so then they don't qualify. What I advise people to do is to do a portfolio approach of looking at writing samples, looking at reading comprehension, and seeing if those things are an issue.

Then something that I actually have speech pathologists do, which teachers can do as well, is that you can do sentence imitation and directed questions. For example let's say you're reading to a student, and you're asking them questions about a paragraph, and they're not getting it, you could pick a sentence that has a complex sentence structure and read that sentence and then ask a student a question about it. That could give you an idea of if they're comprehending it.

Then another thing that people don't realize is that when you have a student, you say a sentence and have them repeat it back to you, people sometimes think, "Well, I just told them the answer." But what happens is that if you don't have a syntactic structure, a lot of times you won't remember it and be able to repeat it back.

When you look at these assessment procedures in isolation, they're not very strong because they all have pros and cons about them, but when you use them together, that's where you can kind of build a stronger case.

So really what I encourage people to do is to kind of pool all their resources because the teacher would be the one that's getting that information. They would be getting the writing samples, they'd be getting the reading comprehension assessments, and so everybody can kind of pool their resources together to get that information.

Anna Geiger: Okay. So I'm going to imagine I'm a classroom teacher and I have a student who doesn't understand what they read, maybe they're in third grade or something, and I've already figured out that they can decode so that is not the issue. So now I'm trying to figure out, "Okay, what do I do?" So you're saying that I need to keep a folder basically of all the evidence that I have that there's a problem. Maybe I would write down specific problems the student has in classroom conversations or in

personal conversations with the student. Maybe I would listen to the child or I would read to the child and I would ask about the text and I would write notes about that, about their answers and how they didn't make sense. Any other information I could gather that would be useful?

Karen Dudek-Brannan: I mean, all of that is good. I would definitely be doing all of that that you just said, but I would definitely try to form an alliance with somebody else to help you out with that because every school team is a little different as far as the process that they have. A lot of times those other people on the team might have something, some system where you can kind of work together. That would be the thing that I would add to that because it is sometimes hard to say definitively, "You need to do this and this and this," but if you do have somebody else, you can problem solve together.

Another thing is if you are in a classroom where you have a special ed teacher coming in, or maybe you have the speech pathologist who's working with other students in your class, if you can start those conversations then you can get a good system down to where it doesn't feel like you're starting from scratch for every student. I would definitely take advantage of those types of things as well, in addition to just trying to do it on your own.

Anna Geiger: Do you have any little tricks or tips, specific things that teachers can do in the classroom that will help everyone, but, in particular, these kids?

Karen Dudek-Brannan: In addition to the things that teachers are already doing, they're doing kind of the high level graphic organizers, and they're teaching the comprehension strategies, a skill that you can focus on and teach directly is just being able to pay attention to conjunctions and using complex sentences.

I actually teach a technique for sentence combining and sentence deconstruction.

Anna Geiger: So basically what you're saying is maybe not what teachers think of first, and that is to not think so much about the whole piece, but the little pieces, the sentence itself because that where it could be breaking down. And you could work on the sentence combining and deconstructing in the context of social studies or science, for example, right?

Karen Dudek-Brannan: Oh, totally. Yeah.

Anna Geiger: For instance, you could teach a lesson about metamorphosis and then have two sentences that are connected and then say, "We're going to connect these two sentences. What's the best conjunction?" and then talk about how you would choose and, but, or so, or whatever.

Karen Dudek-Brannan: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, that makes sense.

Do you have any specific things that you would say for teachers when it comes to vocabulary in terms of word meanings? I know that it just feels so overwhelming because obviously there's tens of thousands of words. Do you have any good tips for that?

Karen Dudek-Brannan: Yeah. Something specific that teachers can model is just the whole concept of definition syntax and figuring out what the defining feature of a word is. If it's a noun, that would be categorical information. Usually the syntax is, an X is a Y that's Z. A dog is an animal that barks. Usually around 2nd or 3rd grade or so is when kids can really give you that solid definition that actually has defining features.

Before that, usually kids will give you information that's related, but isn't really telling you what the word means. They're kind of talking around it and saying, "Well, it does this and it does this," but you're like, "But what is it?" So that's something that you can definitely embed into the work that you do in the classroom.

With other types of words like verbs and adjectives, the defining information is usually a synonym or sometimes an antonym, another word that means the same thing. For instance with the word sprint, sprint means to run fast. You can use another word that means the same thing and then you say how you do it.

What I do when I have speech pathologists who are working on that is really focusing in on that strategy of using that definition syntax for all kinds of different words, but teachers can certainly reinforce that in the classrooms as well.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. So that's a way to help them frame definitions so they can

remember.

Karen Dudek-Brannan: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: Do you have any tips for us for teaching morphology?

Karen Dudek-Brannan: Yeah. This one is really interesting and humbling at the same time. My first tip would be that you don't have to be a linguist or perfectly understand all of it. Google is your friend. Expect to be in the middle of teaching something and not know the answer.

But I would say that what you really want to do is just like when you're teaching phonological awareness and you're drawing kids' attention to the sound units in words. This is just a different version of that. You are having them pay attention to the other meaningful units in words. So you want to pull out the prefixes, the roots, and the suffixes, and teach kids to look for those patterns, teach them that they mean something. Just like you would if you're segmenting for phonological awareness, you can segment for morphology as well.

That's actually more efficient than trying to segment a word into phonemes when there's... Like the word reaction, there's three morphemes in that word. RE, ACT, and then the ION at the end. It would make more sense to process that word and chunk that out, and it's a lot easier to see those three patterns than it would be to try to start with the phonemes.

You can even, when you're looking at different patterns, play around with it and have a pattern that you're focusing on that day. If you're focusing on RE words, you can ask how many words can we come up with to have RE at the beginning? Or it could be vice versa where you might have a list of words, and then you're kind of pulling them apart into the different sound units.

You don't have to know all of them. You don't have to teach every single one. But if you teach kids the awareness that there are pieces to this word, and there are patterns in this word, then that's going to help them to look for those patterns. Knowing that they exist and knowing that they need to look for that is a strategy that they can use in their own self-talk to figure out what information to look at. Just like you would if you were working with semantics and teaching kids definitions, it's like, "Okay, where's the categorical information? Where's the relevant information to look at?"

Anna Geiger: I want to tell everyone who's listening that there are tools for you to help teach morphology. I don't think it's as scary as some of the other ones because there is technically an end to morphology. There's not an infinite number of prefixes and suffixes and roots. I would check out Deb Glaser's Morpheme Magic. It's a really nice curriculum. She just released one for primary grades. It's very easy to use, and I think that will just really help you. I will provide a link to that in the show notes.

We're going to wrap it up because obviously we could just talk about this for hours because there's so much to know.

Can you talk to us a little bit more about your business and the course that you offer? Anything else that would be helpful for people who are listening.

Karen Dudek-Brannan: Yeah, obviously my initial signature course that I created was originally designed to help SLPs who wanted a framework for language therapy. However, I do have a lot of other people who check out my content. Then I also have some other programs that I'm working on for the IEP team just to work together more effectively.

So that main course that I run is called Language Therapy Advance Foundations. Again, I do teach a specific framework for the five components that I mentioned, the phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, and orthography. That is designed to give professionals a framework to use on top of a robust reading curriculum for those students who just need a little bit more. Again, it was originally designed for speech language pathologists, but anybody who is working on specialized language intervention is welcome to check it out, whether you're a special ed teacher or reading specialist or you're just a teacher who wants to learn more about how you can support language.

I also have a free guide for people who want to learn a little bit more about syntax and some of the strategies that I have mentioned today like sentence combining and also some of these sentence types that tend to cause comprehension issues. I focused on one of them today, but there's actually a couple other ones that you can just be aware of, and I have a free guide that walks through what those are and just some tools for supporting them. That guide is at drkarenspeech.com/sentencestructure.

Anna Geiger: Fabulous! Well that's amazing, I'm going to grab that for myself and make sure I link to all this in the show notes.

Karen Dudek-Brannan: Thanks.

Anna Geiger: That's really good to know. I'm going to start following you now more because the language piece is just so hard. I've had so many people ask for a specific comprehension assessment and I tell them, "Boy, I wish there was a really good one I could tell you, but comprehension depends so much on background knowledge and vocabulary. It's hard to pick the right passage for somebody that's really going to tell you." Like you said, it's more just working on all these intricate parts.

The show notes are going to be packed full, so I hope everybody will download those or will head to those and get all the links that we mentioned today. Thank you so much for spending time with us today.

Karen Dudek-Brannan: Thank you so much for having me!

Anna Geiger: Today in the show notes you can find a link to Karen's podcast, as well as a freebie on her website and a link to all of her products. You'll also find a link to Morpheme Magic, that morphology program I recommend by Dr. Deb Glaser.

I also have a very special freebie for you, a collection of printable activities from my membership, Reach All Readers Plus, that will help you help your students with verb.
It also includes whole class syntax activities where you display a sentence and kids talk about how the parts of the sentence work together. And finally, you'll get some task cards that will help students combine sentences using conjunctions.

To get all of that, please head to the show notes at reachallreaders.com/episode115.