Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here from Reach All Readers!

Today we're speaking with Brent Conway, who is currently serving as superintendent at a school district in Massachusetts, and he is passionate about improving literacy outcomes for all students.

Today we had a really interesting conversation about reading comprehension, what we had wrong in our balanced literacy classrooms, and how we need to rethink how we approach reading comprehension. We talk about things like reading comprehension strategies, choosing texts, and assessing comprehension. I know you're going to get a lot out of today's episode, so let's get started.

Anna Geiger:

Welcome, Brent!

Brent Conway: Thank you! Thanks for having me.

Anna Geiger: Can you give us a little background about how you got into education and what you've been doing in the past few years?

Brent Conway: I had started as a teacher, fifth and sixth grade into middle school, and then ended up working as an assistant principal in an elementary school and as a special ed coordinator, and then became a principal at the ripe old age of thirty. I was a principal in Melrose, Massachusetts for a number of years at one of the elementary schools, Lincoln Elementary, and then they had me move to the middle school. Now, over the last five years I've been the assistant superintendent at Pentucket Regional School District in Massachusetts, all north of Boston.

Anna Geiger: Can you help me understand the difference between what a principal is responsible for and a superintendent?

Brent Conway: Well, I mean, the principal's main responsibility is the building itself, the physical building, and the people inside. Principals' jobs, from a pace perspective, are a lot more rapid; everything's in thirty-second intervals throughout the day.

Whereas someone who works in central office, so an assistant superintendent or superintendent, I think has some broader responsibilities that lean into budgeting, program evaluation, and support. Mainly as a central office person, I really only work with adults, for the most part. Although I certainly do make time to work with kids in a variety of ways, because I think that keeps me grounded, for sure.

Anna Geiger: I've heard some talks you've given, and I sort of got the impression that you had maybe a little bit of background in balanced literacy. Can you talk to that a little bit?

Brent Conway: I don't know that I personally had balanced literacy background, maybe a little without really realizing that's what it was. But for the most part, my experience really started as a principal realizing we had a school that was about 50% high needs with declining student performance. And this was in 2007. I was the fifth principal in, I don't know, about seven years or something to that effect. The literacy performance of the students was really poor for a community that should certainly be doing better.

I realized very quickly that no one really had any consistent way of how literacy should be taught. Some data was being used, not much. I don't even think we used the phrase "balanced literacy" or "science of reading" then. We just called it teaching kids to read, and we did it together. As a principal, I did it with teachers together, learning more around what was evidence-based literacy instruction and how to consistently do it.

Then I moved on to a middle school and wasn't engaged in the early literacy process as much, and just assumed all these other school districts were doing what we were doing in the elementary school, which was the science of reading essentially, based on the science of reading.

Then coming to a new school district about five years ago, I realized, oh, no, lots of other people have been using a balanced approach, which was not really effective. They had moved away from a lot of the evidence-based approaches that I had had

success with.

Anna Geiger: How does a typical balanced literacy teacher approach comprehension?

Brent Conway: You hear the phrase a lot, "Well, my goal is to make everyone love reading." And I think it's admirable, for sure. I would love for people to love reading too. That would be our goal for kids to love reading. But that's really hard to have as a goal as a teacher or a school district, because number one, you'll never know whether you achieved it or not, and whether a student loves something or not should not really be our objective as a school. Our school, and as teachers, our objective should be, can they? And then, when they need to, be able to.

I was not a kid who loved reading. That was not something I enjoyed. I could, but I just didn't enjoy it. I had other things that I did. I read far more now as an adult than I did. I do enjoy reading, but I'm also particular about what it is that I read, and I don't know that I would say I love reading. And I think that's okay, because I can read and I can read to gain the information that I need, or I can choose to read for pleasure if I have time.

I think that's what we want. We want people to have the ability to make those choices, and you can't push upon your love of something onto someone else. That is up to them to make that choice.

So you hear that a lot, that love of reading, which again, it's hard to say, "No, you shouldn't do that."

But also I think people hear reading comprehension as that's what we're working on, "comprehension." And I think most people in the balanced literacy world, when you think about balance, it's, "Oh, yeah. No, no, phonics is important. We need kids to be able to decode and read, but then we have to work on comprehension," as if comprehension was totally separate from the ability to decode and read fluently. As if comprehension was a thing itself that you do.

So I think most people's view of comprehension was to give kids books that they find interesting so that they can love it, have them practice reading it, and you give them feedback and ask them questions about it. Give them books potentially that they can read that aren't too hard for them, because if it's too hard, they won't love it, and they won't get anything from it. I think that was what you saw a lot from balanced literacy.

You saw kids in different types of books. You saw different levels of books. And they really lacked this direct and systematic and explicit way of helping kids, all kids, actually engage with and learn to read a complex text, and that's really what we needed kids to do. And if you're using levels and you're focusing on comprehension as a single thing, you're not teaching the specific skills and components of that language that kids need. That's what's lacking a lot of times, and people don't necessarily realize that.

Anna Geiger: I think that's a very good description, and I remember when I taught with the balanced literacy way, I did a reading workshop where I did talk to a lot of kids about their books. We would try to do some literature circles and they would talk about the books more. I really didn't know any kind of scaffolds to help kids read more complex texts. I hadn't heard of them myself, the things I've learned about now.

Could you talk to us a little bit about what it even means to access a complex text?

Brent Conway: When we say complex texts, I'm not saying we're going to take War and Peace and have a first grader dive into that and just have them go read and then ask them to tell us about it. That's not what we're talking about. I mean, grade level texts and maybe a little beyond in some spots.

One thing that happened when the common core standards came out, they addressed three major shifts that needed to occur. To me, I always saw that as the three major shifts were the things that gave more definition and description to what was meant by comprehension. Because when you look at Scarborough's rope, and you think about the Simple View of Reading or Scarborough's rope, the language strands and all of those little components, those are the things we need to be directly and explicitly teaching and structuring for students to engage with.

Text complexity was one of those big shifts. Evidence, so acing student response in speaking, reading, and writing in evidence was the second. And knowledge building across all domains. Those were the three really big shifts.

So when you begin to think about that, what does that mean for comprehension? For text complexity, texts can range in complexity for a variety of reasons. Most people automatically go to vocabulary, texts with more advanced vocabulary, words that are content-specific or just Tier 2 words that maybe provide a little bit more specificity to meaning and context. People think of that, and vocabulary certainly is an element that makes texts complex.

Because we've always known a vocabulary as another component, that's not typically the piece that gets missed or tripped up on. It's more around sentence structure, syntax, and having kids understand coherence. When you start getting into texts and they use really unique uses of clauses and so forth, even in early grades, that type of information and complexity can really confuse kids. It's not that they don't actually know what the words are, it's the manner in which they were sequenced or used in a clause or a phrase that prevents it.

I actually have an example. We use Wit & Wisdom here in Pentucket, and I think second grade's a perfect example because we still have kids trying to master that decoding and be really fluent. Yet at the same time we have kids engaged with knowledge-building and complex texts. Some of it is teacher-read, but some of it the students are reading.

So in module two for second grade, it's about folk tales, and Johnny Appleseed is one of the folk tales they end up studying. They read multiple texts around Johnny Appleseed, and in particular, Aliki has this text on Johnny Appleseed, The Story of Johnny Appleseed. I don't know if you've ever seen this one before.

Anna Geiger: I don't think I have.

Brent Conway: So this is the one of the ones. Every kid has this book. It's not a read aloud. Every kid's engaged in this book, and it's very interesting. And this goes to the phrase of placing text at the center or planning from the text.

There is a sentence in here, well, a couple sentences, but on this page right here, this is what it reads, "Johnny did not like people to fight. He tried to make peace between the settlers and the Indians for he believed that all men should live together as brothers."

Now, there is no vocabulary in those sentences on that page that is confusing to second graders. For the most part, kids can decode almost all those words and read it fluently. There's nothing overly tricky except the use of the word "for," F-O-R. And who would've thought that that word would be the word that trips them up?

The phrase was, "For he believed that all men," da, da, da, da, da. Really, use of the word "for" there is just a fancy way of saying "because," and that's not vocabulary. It's

a clause. It's a sentence structure. It's syntax. And it's grammar, and really, helping kids to break that down. But if you didn't plan from that text, you would never know why kids are confused after reading that.

That's the type of scaffold that we can do, just pointing out that phrase and that the use of "for" means "because," so these specific things. Then hopefully, kids can end up actually maybe even writing something like that, using that.

Anna Geiger: Something you said that was really useful, something about how we're planning from the text, not the other way around. I think that's a difference, at least in how I used to approach it, where we have this big list of comprehension strategies and so, "Okay, this week we're teaching predicting, so now I need to find five books that will help us practice predicting," versus starting from the knowledge.

That's a little bit easier when you're thinking, "Okay, we're going to start from knowledge. I'm going to read this book, and I want them to know this information, so I'm going to use these strategies to help them figure it out."

How would you approach that with a fiction text?

Brent Conway: So I think you look at what are the knowledge and skills. For instance, our fifth grade, the module they're in, they're reading A Phantom Tollbooth, and that's the core text. It's a pretty complex text, but the knowledge we're looking for, it's not about time travel. That's not necessarily the knowledge we want them to learn. The knowledge is actually about wordplay, and puns, and uses of how an author uses words. That's the knowledge we want them to learn, but we also want them to learn about a narrative text structure and character development. That's the knowledge they're working on.

So if that's what we're working on, I plan from the text about those components, knowing full well that when the book is over, what we're going to ask kids to do is write using evidence from the text, but what we're going to ask them to do is write from a perspective of one of the characters about how something would've been done differently.

So we want them to understand character, because character structure is important, setting, all of those components along with the wordplay because that author chooses those and that wordplay plays into the character's personalities and the interaction of all the characters.

Anna Geiger: So I've recently been hearing a lot about how we can't actually teach comprehension. We teach other things that lead to development of comprehension. Have you heard that? And can you speak to that?

Brent Conway: Yeah, so we have a phrase, Jen Hogan and I, Jen's our literacy specialist. We have a phrase, we call it the "balanced literacy hangover," and it is this lingering effect of all these years of thinking about a strategies-first approach to teaching reading comprehension. That if we practice making inferences every opportunity we get, then kids will just get really good at making inferences, and then they'll be able to make them. If we practice main idea and key details, if we practice these with all sorts of random texts, it's the strategy that gets better.

That's not necessarily true. It doesn't transfer that way. In the baseball study, which people have read about in Natalie Wexler's book, all that sort of makes that apparent. I could read a newspaper article about a cricket match, but I know nothing about cricket. I don't have the background knowledge. I can make inferences. I can summarize the main idea, but I'm going to struggle to use all those strategies effectively to show that I know what this means. It's not that I don't know how to do those strategies. I do. I lack all the other components of language comprehension.

So the "balanced literacy hangover" is when we sort of get focused on that strategies-first approach and we forget what is the purpose of reading? The purpose is either I'm reading to gain knowledge or understand something, whether it's fiction or non-fiction.

I'm glad you asked that example because we're talking about building knowledge around folk tales. It could be building knowledge around civil rights heroes and so forth, and the intent of that is different than the intent of reading a narrative book that's fiction, for instance, where I'm trying to learn about characters and settings and so forth.

So I think that's where that plays in a little bit, and it's different. Reading comprehension is the outcome. It's the outcome of being able to read the words, decode fluently, but then also use your language strands, all of the components, to make sense of what you're reading. And then you have reading comprehension.

That hangover, we saw even as we made these changes with teachers who were used to it. It was a lesson that was supposed to be five minutes on main idea, but it was at

the beginning of this whole sequence of days and days of lessons. They were thirty minutes into the lesson, and that teacher was still doing main idea because she said, "The kids didn't understand the main idea."

That's when we realized, "Oh, this is going to be hard for people to step back."

Well, they're not going to know the main idea until you're done with the text. You've got to keep going, and they'll continue to use those strategies.

If you think about inferencing, inferencing really isn't a reading strategy. It's a cognitive skill. We make inferences at birth. Babies start making inferences, for instance. We just apply it to text. So it's not like we have to really teach people how to make inferences. We can help people learn when they have made an inference so they're more conscious of it, more purposeful.

Those are the types of things that we did with that strategies-based approach through a balanced literacy approach. Really, it should be about the content, and the knowledge, and the skills we're trying to achieve.

When you think about writing, you can't write anything you can't say. So when we think about writing, we want students to be able to say, and this goes back to that evidence from the text. We want them to be able to answer it out loud, and then have it transfer to writing.

But if you don't have the language, and the knowledge, and the vocabulary, you're not going to be able to say it either. So all of that is very much related, and it does take a different approach.

Anna Geiger: So I think it can feel maybe a little bit scary, because it's much easier to just check off a list. I taught this strategy, this strategy, this strategy versus the idea of building knowledge and vocabulary that's humongous, and that goes on, of course, forever and ever.

Is there anything you could say to a balanced literacy teacher who thinks, "Well, I want to do this, but this just sounds too much, how do I even get started?"

Brent Conway: Achieve the Core has a great document out, I think it's actually called Placing Text at the Center. It's sort of like a do-this-not-that approach that I think can be really helpful, and it does sort of talk about that moving away from a strategies-first approach.

I think you can begin to do it. I mean, I think ideally, having high-quality curriculum programs that are built for that purpose make it a lot easier. I know there are a lot of folks who are trying to do this on their own in a classroom without that curriculum. They're using the materials they had.

That is actually something from in the beginning when I came here, we were not ready to go buy a new curriculum and we began to just outline, "Well, what does the science say about how we should be teaching, and what we should be teaching?" And I think people tried to do all that work and it was hard work. They were looking for things, trying to put things together. Then we were in a position to make a change and give them the right tools that made it a lot easier.

Even at that, even these curriculum programs that are high quality are not perfect. People have to learn how to skillfully implement. So we do a lot of PD, for instance, Nancy Hennessy's book, The Reading Comprehension Blueprint, if you've ever seen that, is really helping people know how to use the tools like that. Tim Shanahan's work has been great as well.

We basically take that and use examples from Wit & Wisdom to show them how to do this, because some of it we need to scaffold up for some of the teachers too about how do you make this happen? It's curriculum-driven professional development based on evidence-based practices, right?

Anna Geiger: Yeah. So when your teachers are doing it this way versus some of the old ways, what are some changes that teachers can expect to see as they start doing this in the more research-based way?

Brent Conway: I guess it speaks to what screening and assessment datas you are using as well. There are districts who are saying, "We're moving towards a science of reading approach. We're going to teach in this approach, but we still want to use a leveled assessment to ensure students are comprehending text." Those assessments are not reliable in everything. They're not valid and reliable anyways, because they're so reliant upon things that you can't control for, like students' knowledge or understanding of the topic of what they're reading. There's a lot of variability.

To help people understand how to shift, for instance, we did a correlational exercise between the leveled assessments they had and the student's outcome on MCAS, which is our state assessment.

Anna Geiger: Was that the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment? Yes?

Brent Conway: That's the one! So it only correlated 20% of the time. It was wrong on four out of five students. I think that was a little eye-opening.

Anna Geiger: Can you explain for people what that means? How it was wrong?

Brent Conway: Yep. So we started by saying, "Well, what is the percentage of students at the end of third grade who are proficient, at grade level or above, on the BAS?" It was like 80%.

Okay, so how come on our state assessment we're 50%? So we knew right away there was a disconnect.

People might say, "Well, it's a different assessment that has different rankings..."

Okay, it's a different assessment, but that's the tool you're using to know whether or not what you're doing is effective and to help you make decisions about how to help kids. And it's not matching up!

I said, "I'll tell you what, I'll correlate it kid by kid." So that's what we did. And I said, "What do you think it correlates as?"

Now the teachers see where sort of the movie's going and it's like, "Oh, probably 60% or something."

I said, "No. Lower." I said, "It's 20%."

They said, "Well, what does that mean?"

It's wrong on four out of five kids! It means that if you identified a student at level whatever the letter is that's at grade level, that is likely to be incorrect as far as a predictor of how they will score on the state reading assessment. In fact, it's only correct on 20% of the kids. One out of five kids have a correct prediction of where their reading outcome is. And it takes an incredible amount of time! Even if you think you have it right, it still doesn't tell you why or what to do to help a kid who isn't on grade level.

So we use an oral reading fluency assessment, we use DIBELS, for instance, K to 6, and I said, "That correlates for us 79% of the time." Nationally, it's about 80% of the time. It's a very strong predictor.

People say, "That's just speed reading."

And I said, "Well, there's more to it than that." However, we know that when students are fluent readers, they are far more likely to be able to comprehend the text that they did.

So these are the things where you get this false sense that students are reading pretty well. So when you ask, "What can you expect to see?" Well, it depends upon what you're using.

Initially, I'm not sure you could measure your results in a leveled assessment and feel like you're actually knowing or seeing anything. In fact, we see a lot of folks who focus early on in K-1 and even into grade 2 to ensure students are reading fluently and building the knowledge that way and they don't see the movement in their Fountas and Pinnell levels.

At the end of the day, what would you expect to see? I think you'll see a lot of student talk. That's what you want to see in your classroom. You want students to be talking about the text, and you want them to be using language and examples from the text.

That goes to when we talk about those three shifts, the complexity. Kids have to talk through some of that and you have to work through it. You want kids to use the vocabulary that's involved with that. You have these richer conversations around the knowledge and the things that they're actually reading about, the topics, and you really experience it that way. That's what we've heard.

When I hear parents come and talk to me and say, "The kids come home and they're talking about this thing they learned about the ocean and this and that." And the parents have to ask, "Is that in social studies class or is that in science class?"

And I say, "Well, no, it's in reading and we're doing ELA!" It's just these rich, rich conversations and the knowledge and the connections that kids make, that volume of reading, and that's the phrase.

When we think about people who become doctors, we ask you to write a dissertation. The first portion of that dissertation is your review of literature. You do this lengthy review of literature to make you an expert in the existing literature on the topic. You become an expert. You gain expertise about reading a volume of information about that topic.

A knowledge-building curriculum that focuses on building that aspect with complex text has kids engaged with topical, volume-of-reading learning.

I think the biggest thing we see too is a move away from things in silos. You mentioned the checklist. I taught grammar today. I had a station for grammar. I had a station for silent reading. I had a station for word work. I had a station for this. It's like you have these things in silos, but things are not connected. That's the piece that's really different. Things really connect more.

I think teachers in a balanced literacy environment were master organizers, fantastic organizers. They had things organized so well. They had this group here, and this station here, and everything is perfectly organized. It's the planning, the purposeful planning, the backwards-by-design planning that was often missing so that things were more connected and purposeful from the text, and that has more connection and authenticity to kids.

Anna Geiger: Well, thank you. That has given me a lot to think about. I know you recommended the Nancy Hennessy book. I've written about that on my website. It's a little tough to get started with, but it's very practical.

Is there anything else that you want to share or things that I should recommend to people who are listening? I know you mentioned that article that I'll link to as well.

Brent Conway: Yeah, the article. Achieve the Core has some fantastic things both on the three shifts themselves, complexity, evidence, and knowledge, those three big shifts. I think when that came out, that really provided more context to what is meant by comprehension. But then also, Placing Text at the Center, that is Sue Pimentel and Meredith Liben, who wrote a fantastic piece on that too. So that is an excellent resource to share.

And a lot of the things that Tim Shanahan has too. He's very generous with his slide decks and availability to sort of get anything he puts up there is a good tool, a good resource.

There's one more, I think, from a writing perspective. It's called, SMARTER Intervention. It's how to teach sentence writing using a research-based approach. I think that is very helpful. There's a blog, and it gives some really good examples, because I think what it does is it connects the idea that writing and reading are a reciprocal process, and we need to teach kids to write at the sentence level, and it connects the grammar. If you're writing about a text, again, all of these things are interconnected.

So I don't teach that nouns are a person, place, or thing. That's a definition. A noun is the who or the what. We don't teach that a verb is the action. What we do is we say the verb is what the noun did or is doing. So you give the meaning, it's the purpose and the function. When you do that in relation to a text as well, it's that reciprocal process. It's how you can break down a complex sentence, and it's how you can get kids to write complex sentences. So those are great tools, because it really is, it's all interconnected. And the more you make it interconnected, the more meaningful, purposeful, and likely to transfer to students it will be.

Anna Geiger: Perfect. Well, thank you. I'll link to that as well. And thank you again for taking time out of your day to talk to me.

Brent Conway: My pleasure.

Anna Geiger: Thank you so much for listening. You can find the show notes for this

episode at reachallreaders.com/episode121. Talk to you next time!