Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here from Reach All Readers, and I'm really excited today to bring

teacher, she's also a wonderfully kind and generous person as I'm sure you'll see from this interview.

I learned about Dr. Vaughn through some books that she's written, but in particular through an excellent presentation she gave for the International Dyslexia Association all about building comprehension. She gets right to the point. She's also entertaining and easy to listen to. I know you're going to like this interview a lot, and I'm excited to get right into it. This is the last of our Old and New Podcast Summer Series. Let's get started!

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Dr. Vaughn!

Sharon Vaughn: Hello, how are you?

Anna Geiger: Very good, and thank you so much for taking time to talk to us today about comprehension, which is kind of a sticky topic for people that are trying to learn more about the science of reading.

Sharon Vaughn: It's hard to comprehend comprehension, isn't it?

Anna Geiger: Yes, it is! Could you tell us a little bit about yourself, how you got into education, and where you are now?

Sharon Vaughn: Yeah, I think I can. I'm a first generation college graduate. I grew up in St. Louis, and I grew up across the street from what used to be a psychiatric hospital.

Anna Geiger: Oh, wow.

Sharon Vaughn: They almost don't exist anymore, right?

Anna Geiger: Right.

Sharon Vaughn: There was a large grounds, largely so that people could walk around. I think it was supposed to be sort of refreshing to be able to be outside. But because it was across the street from where I lived, it was also a nice playground. I would go there and look at the range of people and interesting people and people that would, some of them, be talking to themselves, but there was also a school on the grounds, and I kind of just sort of got interested in the fact that there is so much variation in the way we all develop.

I then decided to be a teacher, and then I got really interested in variation in the way kids learn, and then I got really interested in reading. That's how I got where I'm at right now. It's a long story.

Anna Geiger: Tell us a little bit about what you're doing now.

Sharon Vaughn: Right now I work at the University of Texas at Austin as a professor, and I also am the executive director of the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk, which is a center that really does a bridge between research and practice.

Anna Geiger: Oh, wonderful, wonderful.

I notice that whenever I try to get a definition of comprehension, there's no agreed-upon definition. We've kind of agreed on fluency, but comprehension is a little more complex. So could you explain to us how you define it and maybe talk a little bit about why it's so tricky to nail that down?

Sharon Vaughn: I think one of the reasons comprehension is so tricky is because most of us think of comprehension as something that we teach, much like we teach phonemic awareness or something we teach like we teach the components of phonics. I think what's tricky is that we don't realize that comprehension is a product, it's an

outcome. It's what we get when we do all of the necessary things.

So if students can read the words, if we teach students how to read words, they're on the pathway to comprehension. If we teach students what the words mean so they understand the meaning and therefore can derive meaning from text, they're on the pathway. If we teach students background knowledge so they have a context for understanding how to put the word reading and word meaning together, they're on the pathway to comprehension.

Comprehension really is a result of teaching well those components of learning and reading that should be part of what we do all the time.

Anna Geiger: And I think what we're hearing now, people are saying that you can't actually teach comprehension. How would you respond to that?

Sharon Vaughn: I think you CAN teach students to comprehend. I think there's evidence that you can. Now, if what people are saying is that we don't teach comprehension directly, we teach it indirectly, then I agree. But if what they're saying is that we should give up on teaching comprehension because it's not possible, then I don't agree.

The way to think about this is that if we teach students these really important things like word reading, word meaning, background knowledge, we give students an abundance of opportunities to read a range of texts, then I can tell you what we have to do to promote comprehension becomes less of a lift.

So we're not so much focusing on all these strategies. Anna, you know how people are like, "Oh, we have to teach them strategies before they can learn to comprehend." Actually, I'm not sure that's true.

Anna Geiger: That would be, as I've heard it called, a balanced literacy hangover, where we thought for years that we had to just teach a reading comprehension strategy for a period of weeks and then apply that to all different kinds of text. For example, making predictions or comparing and contrasting. And now we're finding that we really need to focus on the text and then the strategies are in service of the text. Would you agree with that?

Sharon Vaughn: I think the strategies are in service of the text, but I don't like these simple statements. I mean, is that probably true? Yes. But is that all we need to know? No.

I think when we make statements like that, we are often encouraging people to say to themselves, text matters. You want to think about when you are teaching students, particularly ones that have reading difficulties, that a range of texts are necessary. They need to have chance to read easier texts, they need to read texts on their level, but also Anna, they need to read harder texts, texts that are above their level, and especially if they have supports from teachers.

They also need to read texts that cover a range of genres. You want them to read these hybrid texts like biographies that are a combination of information and narrative. You want them to read different types of narrative texts, and you want them to read really sort of enriching information texts, and not just older readers.

The fun thing that students love is to learn facts and to learn information. Sometimes it's about spiders or sometimes it's about everything you want to know about how something moves, but these kinds of information texts can be extremely valuable.

Anna Geiger: You make a good point about how we don't want teachers to give up on comprehension. I think unfortunately some people are sort of feeling like that's where they're landing because they don't have the tools to scaffold complex text and things.

In your presentation you really broke a lot of that down. So maybe we can start with background knowledge, and could you maybe help us know what we know about background knowledge from research first?

Sharon Vaughn: Yeah. I mean, have you noticed that it's really popular right now for people to talk about background knowledge?

Anna Geiger: Big time.

Sharon Vaughn: Yeah. And it's kind of like, well, is this really an invention?

Anna Geiger: Right.

Sharon Vaughn: Hasn't background knowledge always been important? And the answer is yes. So maybe the question is, why is it important now and what do we mean by it?

Maybe a way to think of it is like this, when it comes to the science of reading, people really have the most confidence about the science of reading as it relates to teaching students HOW to read. In those beginning grades when we're really teaching these foundation skills, our knowledge there is very firm. Some of the silly things like triple queuing that people are doing have been disproven for a long time, and the notion that these are persisting is really just a function of the fact that people are propagating ideas that are maybe fun for them. They like the idea of pointing at pictures and having people guess, but they are really harmful to students in that if that's all you do and you don't teach them how to read the words, you've really done a disservice. So those foundation skills are well established.

But I think one of the reasons background knowledge has sort of gotten such a big lift is because after we teach students to read, what we've observed is that as students get older, they do not understand what they're reading. So we've accomplished a big part of the goal, but not all of the goal.

The reason that's the case is because as we teach students to read, we also have to give them access to a lot of texts, and we have to give them opportunities to participate in a lot of knowledge acquisition, because if they have very narrow opportunities to read and very narrow opportunities to learn, whether it's about history, science, social studies, or whatever, when they then begin to read these more complex texts...

I mean, comprehension isn't an issue when you're seven years old. And the reason it's not is because everybody knows what a blue hat is, and they all know what a car is and that it is moving down the road so when you ask questions, background knowledge doesn't play the same role.

But as students get older, and then these texts get really complicated, and even people like you and I have to read them a couple of times because the density of the topic, the vocabulary, what we're talking about, which is the more you know about a topic, the more you are able to learn about a topic.

It's kind of like Velcro. You can start collecting more knowledge and before you know it, you can assemble a huge knowledge bank. And then when you go to read about black holes, it's not hard, because you already know a lot about black holes and you're just now accumulating bits of information you didn't know. Then you read the next thing about black holes and before you know it, you can read very complex things. So that's kind of how it all has to roll.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, and it's really interesting. I remember when my youngest was learning to read, I was using decodable books with him, but on his own he would start to branch out and read these Who Would Win books. I don't know if you've heard of those before, but there are two animals that meet together that probably wouldn't meet together in nature, and then you read they each have these different abilities or parts of their body that would help them win. He could really work pretty well through those because he had heard so many of them and he had a lot of the background knowledge. But if you had some of those harder words in a different book, they may have been tougher for him. So I understand what you're saying about how the more you know something, the easier the text is.

Sharon Vaughn: That's super helpful that you gave that example because I think a lot of people are going to be able to relate to that.

Also what you might notice with your son is that if he's interested in something, if it's a topic where he's interested in airplanes and all of a sudden what he's reading is about airplanes, he can read a harder text. He can read harder texts because he's engaged, motivated, and has background knowledge.

The level of text we can read really depends on both interest and background knowledge.

Anna Geiger: And then we think about when we have a text that we want the whole class to read together, a more challenging text we're working on, and yet the topic is NOT something that many of our students have background knowledge on.

I think as a teacher, I was often under this idea that it was always about activating prior knowledge versus building knowledge before we read the new text. I think you talked about that in your presentation about how to actively build background knowledge before reading with a class. Can you talk about some of those things?

Sharon Vaughn: Yeah. One of the things we have thought a lot about is what we kind

of think of as a springboard for reading comprehension. And the springboard is, are there essential words? Are there essential ideas? Is there an overarching construct that if we can introduce, pre-teach, and provide information about prior to reading, can that serve as a springboard to make the understanding of the text they're reading more approachable?

We've been doing quite a bit of work in that area, and as it turns out, even three to five minute springboards can really help students construct a better understanding or comprehension of what they read.

Anna Geiger: So an example for that would be like watching a short YouTube video that explains the topic really briefly?

Sharon Vaughn: Yeah. What a great example, that's exactly what we do. Two, three minute videos, not long, not fifty minute videos. Sometimes it's showing pictures, here's a picture of an iceberg, here's a picture of a igloo. The story we're reading about today is going to focus on an iceberg and an igloo, so what are some of the features of these? See what I'm saying? It takes a couple of minutes. It just really helps kids kind of prime what they know and build what they don't know.

Now I want to say something because when we talk about background knowledge, what a lot of people think that means is that we say to students, "Take a look at the pictures and tell me what you know about this."

Anna Geiger: Yes, that's what I used to always do. It took so much time too!

Sharon Vaughn: It takes so much time. And here, Anna, is what happens. The students who know something about it get to say what they know about it. The students who don't know anything about it often say things that may not relate to what they're about to read, but we don't have enough time to correct and provide feedback, and so then they get confused.

This guessing and this kind of, if you will, idea popping when we don't have adequate time as teachers to sort out accurate, inaccurate, what you're going to learn, what you're not going to learn, serves to add to confusion. So I don't think it's a particularly good practice, and I would advocate for something more like springboards.

Anna Geiger: So instead of making a giant list of all the things our students say they know about a topic, we should have an active plan to build comprehension for three to five minutes as, like you said, a springboard into the passage.

Sharon Vaughn: That was a good summary. You've been doing this, haven't you for a while?

Anna Geiger: Thank you.

Why is it important for students to set a purpose for reading? I know as a teacher that was always told to me to be important, and I didn't really even know what to do with that exactly. Can you help us with that one?

Sharon Vaughn: Yeah. I'm not sure I know what you do when you set a purpose for reading. I think maybe what the idea is, is that intentionality and goal setting will help you regulate your behavior.

So if I say, "I have three questions that I'm going to answer at the end of this passage, and here's the three questions." Then I have a purpose, I'm going to read, knowing what those questions are. And for information text or learning, that might be a very good practice to put in place.

But I think, Anna, most of the time when we read, we don't really say, "What's my purpose?" I mean, your purpose is always understanding or learning. I think the idea though is that when students are reading deliberately and something we expect them to learn from and remember, we might ask them to look at questions or develop questions so they have a purpose for reading.

Anna Geiger: And like you said, it makes a difference in what text you're reading. So if you're reading a chapter book from a series that you've read a million times, you're just reading for fun. But when you're reading a hard textbook, you read differently. You read more slowly, you read more... You reread if you didn't understand something. So just maybe helping them understand that the type of text you're reading requires different amounts of attention would be helpful.

What does it mean to monitor comprehension, and how can we help our students do that?

Sharon Vaughn: Now that's the one I'm really quite interested in and pretty convinced that it's really important. The monitoring of comprehension for me is really sort of flipping a switch where I'm going to ask myself pretty consistently, "What's going on? What's happening?" I'm not going to ask complex questions. I'm going to read and I'm going to say, "Now, how does that go with what happened before?"

Monitoring means I am awake to what I'm reading, I'm awake to what I'm learning, and I'm aware when I'm confused. So if I'm monitoring, I kind of know if I'm putting the pieces together, and I know if I'm not and I know what I'm missing. I think a lot of students kind of just plow through text. They start at the beginning and they just start reading, but they don't really engage that sort of meta level of what's happening. So I think monitoring while you read is very important.

Anna Geiger: So we have six kids at home, and I would say-

Sharon Vaughn: You do?

Anna Geiger: Yes.

Sharon Vaughn: Good for you.

Anna Geiger: Oh, thank you.

So I'd say two are bookworms, two more are fine with reading, they like to read, and two would rather not read. They can read, but it's not their favorite thing. One of them is my second son, he's thirteen now, but I remember when he was reading at about ten or eleven years old, he would read a page and I would ask him about it, and he just had no idea. I think it just did not occur to him that the point of reading was to understand and not just read it because Mom said you have to read right now.

And so for him, we would stop. It was interesting, we had to stop after every paragraph and talk about it, and I had to keep shrinking the amount of text that we stopped after. At first I tried a page and he couldn't do a page. So it was like, "Well, let's talk about this half a page." No, we still couldn't. So we just had to keep breaking it down.

I think sometimes with kids, you have to explicitly tell them the point of this is that you remember it. The point is not that you said the words, but that it's actually making sense.

Sharon Vaughn: I really like that because, first of all, it's such a good example of what a really good teacher does, which is make a more difficult task easier. But I also like what you said because sometimes it really is telling students not a complex strategy, but that, "Hey, the idea here is that you're thinking and remembering this while you're reading. That's kind of what's up here." I think that was a great example.

Anna Geiger: Do you have any tips for teachers that have students like my son at that time, that they're just kind of getting the words out but not connecting to anything?

Sharon Vaughn: Yeah. We see so much of that and we've been thinking about what you might be able to do about it. So one of the things we do, Anna, is we have this set of practices called, Does It Make Sense? (DIMS). Does It Make Sense starts simply and then gets more complex. So in its simple version, there are sentences that are disconnected and numbered that either have or do not have something that doesn't make sense.

So it could be something like this, "Anna was on the podcast with a pickle that she used as a microphone." So then we would say, "Does that make sense?" And of course, if you were reading it silently to yourself, you would hopefully notice that the word pickle was not the right thing to say, and so you would underline that and then you would substitute another word.

We start kind of simply, and students like this game because it gives them a purpose and they like this game because they have to monitor what they're reading. It kind of gives them practice monitoring their reading. But we don't just say to them, "Monitor your reading," they're monitoring it because they're looking for something silly or trying to solve a problem.

Anna Geiger: So exercises that kind of build up that skill?

Sharon Vaughn: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: Whenever you read about how to help kids with comprehension, it usually comes up with teaching kids to ask and answer questions while reading, and then I think that's definitely not a natural thing for kids to do.

Sharon Vaughn: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: Can you offer any suggestions for how to help kids learn that, to make sense of what they read?

Sharon Vaughn: I really do think that learning to ask questions is a good idea. I don't think you have to ask that many, but I do think learning how to do it is a good idea.

I think one of the ways to do that is, again, to give it purpose. If you have students working maybe in pairs and reading different sets of text, and you have them maybe with index or cue cards, writing a question on one side of the cue card and the answer on the other side. Then they use these cue cards to test students in the class, so they have a purpose for asking the question. And then they want to have the answer so that when they ask the question, they'll know whether the student is right or not. They're sort of a motivation for what they're doing. So that's an example.

But I think learning to ask and answer questions, not too many, and to do that sort of deliberately so that you generalize it when you're reading independently is probably a good idea.

Anna Geiger: I really like that idea too, because that's a fun thing to do and it does give them a purpose versus just asking questions to yourself. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

What about summarizing? I've heard some interesting ways of doing this. I don't know if you're familiar with this, it's called shrink a paragraph. Have you heard of that? Paragraph shrinking?

Sharon Vaughn: Paragraph shrinking. Yeah.

Anna Geiger: Where they have the kids say the who or what, and then say what is the most important thing about the who or what, and then say that in a sentence in ten words or less. I've seen that work really well.

Do you have any other ideas for helping kids with summarizing?

Sharon Vaughn: Yeah. I mean I do think that's a very good way to do it.

I think another key way to do it is to use some of the social devices that students like so much. You can say to students, "Let's read this paragraph, and what I want you to do is write a very brief text to your friend about what this was about." It's not so important that it be a sentence or that the grammar be perfect because what you're trying to do is see what they understand.

Anna Geiger: Get the gist.

Sharon Vaughn: Yes. And so if they write it like a text, you get more and they're comfortable writing texts usually, or at least will be soon. And so then you get an idea if they get the main idea or not.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. Well, I think we got a lot done in about twenty five minutes, just a lot of really practical ways to help kids develop comprehension.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Sharon Vaughn: I think the most important thing to remember is that when students don't comprehend, you have summarized very nicely what the key reasons can be. They can be because they're not attending to the text. They can be because they're not remembering the text. They can be because they don't have background knowledge. They can be because they don't know what the words mean. And it also can be because they're not engaged or interested.

If we remember there are a variety of reasons and we kind of think of the practices that might solve that reason, I think we'll make more progress.

Anna Geiger: Wonderful. Well, thank you so much for taking time to talk with us. Is there any of your work in particular that you'd like to direct people to?

Sharon Vaughn: Oh, I have a new book coming out with Guilford. This book is specifically about teaching reading comprehension to students with reading difficulties.

Anna Geiger: Oh, wonderful!

Sharon Vaughn: It's with Guilford Press, and it will be out I think in a month or two.

Anna Geiger: Oh, fabulous! That's so exciting. Okay, I will keep an eye out for that.

Sharon Vaughn: Thank you.

Anna Geiger: Well, thank you so much.

Sharon Vaughn: Thank you. And I'm sorry it took us a while to get together, but I'm glad we eventually did it.

Anna Geiger: No problem.

Sharon Vaughn: Thanks so much!

Anna Geiger: We did have to reschedule this interview about three times before we were finally able to make it work, but I'm so glad I was able to connect with Dr. Vaughn. You can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode131.

Thank you for sticking with me through this Old and New Summer Series. It's been a crazy busy summer at our house with all six kids home and then doctors, dentists,

orthodontist appointments, not to mention summer camps and vacation. It's been a little crazy, so I'm looking forward to the back to school routine coming soon and a new podcast series, which we'll start next week! I'll see you then!