Triple R Teaching

Hello, and welcome to the 39th episode of Triple R Teaching! I'm going to be honest with you and tell you that out of all the episodes that I've done so far, this has been the hardest one to prepare. Two years ago, I never would have thought that I would be sharing a podcast episode called "What's Wrong With Three-Cueing". That's because, like millions of other teachers, three-cueing is something that I've held very close to my heart.

What is three-cueing? Well, three-cueing is a model that shows that three systems of cues work together as we make sense of print - semantics, syntax and graphophonics. It's often referred to as MSV because semantics has to do with what the text means, syntax has to do with grammar and we use S as the abbreviation, and graphophonics has to do with the visual cue, or phonics. I, like millions of other teachers, used these cues while I was helping children read.

On the surface this model makes perfect sense. In fact, Marilyn Adams, who is a long time specialist in cognition and education, wrote this way back in 1998. She said, "My concerns with the three-cueing system relate, not to the schematic, which I find wholly sensible in so far as it goes. The problem is in the application."

Ever since I was in graduate school in the early 2000s and in the many years of professional reading since, I have, until about six months ago, been a proponent of three-cueing! I was taught to use it as a way to help children solve unfamiliar words. When I was teaching beginning reading with my own kids and in the classroom, instead of focusing merely on sounding it out as a word to text skill, I helped children use the three cues. So I would say, "What makes sense?" "What would sound right?" "Use the picture for help." "Look at the first letter and use the picture for help." I rarely said, "Sound it out," because I had been taught that that should be the last resort. Instead I needed to focus on meaning, because of course, reading is all about comprehension.

Well, a few years ago, as I talked about in another episode, Emily Hanford published what became a viral article that attacked three-cueing. I want to share with you a quote from that article, "For decades, reading instruction in American schools has been rooted in a flawed theory about how reading works, a theory that was debunked decades ago by cognitive scientists, yet remains deeply embedded in teaching practices and curriculum materials. As a result, the strategies that struggling readers use to get by — memorizing words, using context to guess words, skipping words they don't know — are

the strategies that many beginning readers are taught in school. This makes it harder for many kids to learn how to read, and children who don't get off to a good start in reading find it difficult to ever master the process."

Well, this flew in the face of everything that I had learned and believed, but I knew that I couldn't ignore it because a couple of readers of my blog had sent me an email or commented about it. So I brought this to a Facebook group over a year ago, a Facebook group of other educators. This is what I wrote, "I would love it if some of you would chime in on this for me. I promote the three-cueing system for reading with the use of level texts. Of course, I also promote focus phonics instruction. I have received blog comments from a couple of readers referencing this article which refutes the three-cueing system." I then included a link to "At a Loss for Words", by Emily Hanford. I continued, "In responding I have noted that some of the assumptions in the article are wrong, that the use of the three-cueing system inevitably means very little phonics instruction, for example. But I'm struggling with what to say to paragraphs like this..." And then I quoted from the article, "This idea that there are different kinds of evidence that lead to different conclusions about how reading works is one reason people continue to disagree about how children should be taught to read. It's important for educators to understand that three-cueing is based on theory and observational research and that there's decades of scientific evidence from labs all over the world that converges on a very different idea about skilled reading."

Well I told you in another episode that, to my surprise, the reading wars erupted right there in the comments! There were people who, like me, disagreed with the article, people who were thinking more about the article and were starting to study the science, and people who had effectively switched over to a more structured approach and were no longer considering themselves balanced literacy teachers.

I will never forget what one of the teachers wrote. She said, "Finding out that MSV is not in the best interest of reading instruction is sort of like finding out that one of your children is a serial killer!"

I know that sounds over the top and really dramatic, but you have to understand that for many, many teachers, myself included, it did feel extremely personal! This is what we used, this is what we taught, and we really believed that kids needed those three cues when they were reading those early books.

I find it very telling that in over eight years of running my website, reachallreaders.com, in which 31 million different people have read my blog post,

disagreed with the idea of three-cueing. Would you like to guess how many people, out of 31 million, tried to reach out and tell me that they disagreed with three-cueing?

The answer is three. Three out of 31 million. I don't think I'm alone in misunderstanding three-cueing - I know I'm not! And I want you to know that even after this first discussion in the Facebook group, I still didn't think too much about it. It was in the back of my head, but I still thought that because some assumptions she'd made in the article felt wrong to me, I didn't think I had to take it seriously. But over time I started studying more about the science of reading, and I joined a science of reading Facebook group, and it was something that was said in there that really turned the tide for me. It really helped me start to think about things in a different way. Here's what it was, a reading specialist - formerly balanced literacy - agreed that using three-cueing with kids in K-2 often works! She said it works with these leveled books they have because the books are designed for them to be able to use picture cues and what would make sense to read the patterned, predictable texts. It seems to work.

That's what I needed to hear because people were telling me that it wasn't working and I was looking at my kids, and it certainly seemed to be working for all of them! Well, when she affirmed that it worked at first but then broke down later on, THAT'S what caught my attention. She said for many kids it works really well in K-2 because of the texts they're reading. But when they get to third grade or fourth grade, when they don't have those advanced phonics skills to tackle those long words, it breaks apart. And they can't just use the first letter anymore, of course, or find a small chunk, they need to be able to sound out the whole word. At this point many struggling readers, not all, but many have gotten into those habits of skipping words or using the picture. This isn't going to work anymore when you're reading a third grade science book, and those students start to hit a wall. That's what got my attention and that's when I decided to dive deeper into the science of reading.

I think one of the best places that you can go when you're trying to make a switch from balanced literacy to structured literacy, or even if you don't want to switch but just want to hear more, is to go to somebody who's been in your shoes. In Emily Hanford's article, she quotes a teacher who had been teaching with balanced literacy and now had switched over. Her name is Margaret Goldberg, I talked about her in another episode. When she was making the transition, she decided to try it out by teaching some of her kids to read their books with three-cueing and other kids to read the books by sounding out.

Here's what the article says about that, "It was clear to Goldberg after just a few months of teaching both approaches that the students learning phonics were doing better.

'One of the things that I still struggle with is a lot of guilt,' she said. She thinks the students who learned three-cueing were actually harmed by the approach. 'I did lasting damage to these kids. It was so hard to ever get them to stop looking at a picture to guess what a word would be. It was so hard to ever get them to slow down and sound a word out because they had had this experience of knowing that you predict what you

read before you read it.'

Goldberg soon discovered the decades of scientific evidence against cueing. She was shocked. She had never come across any of this science in her teacher preparation or on the job."

If you would like to learn more about three-cueing and anything else in balanced literacy that we need to rethink, this is the book I recommend. This is brand new, it's called "Shifting the Balance", by Jan Burkins and Kari Yates. Down here you can see that it says, "Six ways to bring the science of reading into the balanced literacy classroom." This book is excellent, and they have a chapter in there all about three-cueing.

They address misconceptions that many teachers, including myself, had. One misconception that I had, was that you should start, when prompting kids to read an unknown word, with does it make sense? Because reading is all about meaning, right? So it makes sense we should prioritize meaning and use that cue first. Here's what they write in the book, "Sometimes science, as you know by now, is actually counterintuitive, and sometimes what seems logical simply does not match what really goes on inside a reader's brain."

Two episodes ago, I believe episode 37, I talked about how the brain learns to read. I tried to keep it really simple, and I would go check that out if you haven't seen it yet or listened to it. That episode will help you understand why using these cues to help kids solve words is harmful - it prevents them from adding words to their permanent sight vocabulary. So, as teachers, oftentimes when we say sight words, we typically mean high frequency words, and some people mean words you can't sound out. But to a researcher, that means a word that's permanently in the brain so that when a child sees it they can read it instantly. A lot of times, most of the time, those words aren't permanent right away. They have to sound the word out enough times until it becomes automatic.

So, my little guy, I'm teaching him to read, and now he can see "cat" and know what it is right away. But a month ago, he could not, he had to go /c/, /a/, /t/. If we teach kids to attack words by looking at the picture or thinking about what would make sense instead of directing them to sound out the word, we're preventing them from attaching the phonemes to graphemes - the sounds to the letters. They NEED to do that. It's a process that has to happen for those words to be mapped into their brains.

Now, can kids memorize some words without having to learn them by sounding it out? Sure, because we teach "the", before kids can sound it out. You really can't sound it out anyway. But the point is you can only do that with so many words. There's thousands,

tens of thousands, of words that you and I read automatically, and then maybe a few more that you might encounter sometimes in a technical book or something, that you'd have to slow down very briefly to sound out. We didn't get tens of thousands of words in our mental vocabulary just by memorizing all of them or the shape of them. We learned them by attending to all the letters and sounding them out and that's how it works, those things connect to each other.

Here's a quote from the book again, "Teaching children to rely first and foremost on context for figuring out words is teaching them a process that will eventually fall apart on them." You can only memorize so many words and if you want to save a word for future retrieval you need to sound it out first.

Marilyn Adams, I talked about her earlier, has contributed a chapter in this book called Literacy for All. I really like this paragraph where she talks about the misuse of three-cueing. This is what she wrote, "If the intended message of the three-cueing system was originally that teachers should take care not to overemphasize phonics to the neglect of comprehension, it's received message has broadly become that teachers should minimize attention to phonics, less it compete with comprehension. If the original premise of the three-cuing system was that the reason for reading the words is to understand the text, it has since been oddly converted, such that, in effect the reason for understanding the text is in order to figure the words."

So it's backward, isn't it? We don't have to throw away MSV entirely, but we need to think about it entirely differently. Instead of thinking of it as three different cues that kids can use to solve words, we want them to solve words by sounding them out. But we want them to cross-check by thinking, does it make sense? Did it sound right?

We will get into all of this more in a future episode, but now we have to think about what's next. So we know that MSV, teaching kids to attack words using those three cues, is a bad idea. But so what? What does this matter? Well, it matters because the kinds of texts you use are going to help them use the right cue, the sounding out cue. If you give them a text with all kinds of words that they can't sound out, then you have to use MSV. That's why next week we're going to talk all about leveled and decodable texts - pros and cons, when should you use them, are there limitations? I'm really excited to share that with you next week in episode 40.

In the show notes today, which will be live when this episode is repurposed for the podcast, I'm going to give you some links to some helpful resources. One of those is the "Shifting the Balance" book, which again, I HIGHLY recommend. It's very easy to read and very practical. I'm also going to link to Margaret Goldberg's blog, which she writes with a couple of other teachers, which I love to read because it comes from a place of love. She is not going to be talking down to you, but she's going to be talking about her transition from balanced to structured literacy. I find it very encouraging and helpful. I'll

also link to the original Emily Hanford article and anything else that I think would be helpful for you, including some past podcast episodes that you can go back and review as you're thinking through this for yourself.

Thank you so much for watching or listening, and I can't wait to be with you next week!