Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here. I'm the creator of the Reach All Readers website, The Measured

Every Writer), as well as this podcast, Triple R Teaching. You are listening to Episode 41: Dos and Don'ts for Using Decodable Texts with Beginning Readers.

So, first off, let's talk about what decodable texts are. We talked about this a little bit, I believe, in our last episode about decodable and leveled texts. Just as a review, a decodable text is a text that is written for children to practice their phonics knowledge, so the words are able to be sounded out because they include the patterns the child has already learned.

Now, one text that's decodable for a certain child may not be decodable for another child, because whether or not a text is decodable depends on the phonics knowledge that you have. For example, some children may be reading a book that has CVC words and blends and digraphs, like my five-year-old. He can read those books, and for him, those books are decodable. But he could not be reading a book that has CVCE words in it, for example, and call that decodable because I haven't taught him that pattern. The same thing is true for more advanced long vowel patterns - he knows a handful, but not very many. Whereas if a child is in late first grade or the middle of first grade, that book will likely be decodable because they've learned those phonics patterns.

So just because a book is decodable doesn't mean it's the right fit for a child. It depends on the phonics patterns that they have learned.

I'm going to talk to you now a little bit about the authenticity of decodable books. One reason that I fought against using decodable books for a long time was because I thought they were inauthentic, and that meant I couldn't use them. Authenticity has to do with why the books were written, and it's not a good or a bad thing. Here's a quote from Spelfabet, and I'm going to link to that blog post in the show notes. The author writes, "In linguistics and education, an 'authentic text' is a text written for any purpose other than teaching/learning about language. The word 'authentic' doesn’t have its usual meaning in this context, nor its pejorative opposite 'inauthentic'. It’s not a value-judgement. The opposite of an authentic text is a text written for the purpose of language-teaching. This is a valid reason to write a text. Authentic texts thus aren’t superior to language-teaching texts, they just serve a different purpose."

So what's my point? My point is that decodable texts are written for a purpose. They're not just written because an author wanted to tell a story and get it published. They're written to help beginning readers. So we have to realize that decodable texts have their place, but they're not something that kids are going to read forever and ever. We're using them at the beginning. I've heard some people refer to decodable texts as training wheels, and when kids don't need them anymore, we let them go. But they serve a very useful purpose in the beginning.

So now that we've got that out of the way, what are decodable texts? Here's my first "DO" for decodable texts and that is to use them! That feels rather "duh," why would I even have to say that you need to use decodable texts? But the reason is because for a lot of years, I didn't want to use them at all. The reason why I didn't like using decodable texts was because I felt that they killed a love of reading before it could even begin, and I felt that they didn't tell good stories and they would hurt comprehension. You see what I was using were leveled books, which I talked about in our last episode. In leveled books, there's typically a predictable pattern, kids can use the pictures to solve the words, they can use context, and they tend to "read" more quickly. To me, that felt like authentic reading because as they were "reading the book," it was very smooth and it sounded fluent because with those predictable patterns, they could go rather quickly.

So the book might say, "I have a hat. I have a book," and since they figured out that pattern very quickly, the reading was very smooth. When I heard kids read decodable books where they had to sound out every single word, "I /h/-/a/-/v/ a /c/-/a/-/t/," to me, that was very painful. I thought that it just made me feel really bad to hear kids doing that. It made me think, "Oh, who's going to want to read when it's so much work!?" So I really fought against decodable books for many years because I felt that they were not what beginning readers needed to use. Especially because it took them so long to get to the end of the sentence, how could they even understand or remember what they'd read at the beginning? I was getting a few things backward and that's probably for another episode, but the fact is decodable books are valuable and here's three reasons I want to give you for why you should use them with your students.

Number one, they train your beginning readers to focus on the letters in the words. We have talked a lot about this in the science of reading series. We talked about how in the left side of the brain, there are some connections that we need to make, and those connections can't be made unless we give kids practice connecting the phonemes to the graphemes. In other words, sounding it out. If we're giving them lots of books where they don't have to sound out words, where they can just use the picture or guess based on the context, then we're not letting those connections take place. Remember what we're after here. We're not just after them solving the word in the moment, but we're after them storing that word for future retrieval - not as a full picture, but to have it orthographically mapped. Orthographically mapped means you've connected the sounds to the letters enough times that that word is automatic for you, and that every time you see it, it's a new sight word. It's a word you can just read automatically by

sight. So we've got to give them practice sounding out, and that's what decodable texts are good for.

Another reason, similarly, that you should use decodable texts with beginning readers is it ensures that they can't use the pictures or context clues to solve the words. I used to hate it when people would say that using context or picture cues was guessing! I hated that because, to me, it wasn't guessing at all, it was being strategic! When I had my kids do that, I thought, "Well, they're using all the strategies that are available to them. They're using the picture, they're thinking about what would make sense, they're skipping and coming back to it, and they're thinking about what would make sense grammatically. They're being problem-solvers and isn't that what we want?"

Well, when you teach kids to read using decodable books, suddenly, as you get into it, you realize, "Ah, this is way more efficient." Once they are good at sounding out words, it's way more efficient to read using phonics than trying to use clues on the page. When we teach them to use clues on the page as their first strategy, we're bypassing what they really need to be doing to get those words in their brains and orthographically map them.

So for me, it was understanding that yes, they can figure out a lot of the words using pictures and context clues, but that is not a good strategy because it's going to make them hit a wall in the future. For many kids, sure, they can solve words using the pictures and the context, but when they get to third grade and those supports aren't there anymore, suddenly they're left in a conundrum because now they don't have strategies to solve those words because their phonics skills aren't strong enough. Decodable books ensure that kids are not guessing because they have to use those letters to solve the words.

And finally, quality decodable books can help students have success with reading, and by extension, learn to love it. To me, this was backwards for a while. I thought, "Well, I can't get kids to love reading if they're using decodable books, I have to use leveled texts because those texts have better pictures. They have better stories, and so because of that, kids will learn to love reading." But what I didn't understand was that success breeds enjoyment. When kids know that they are actually solving those words on the page, and they feel themselves actually connecting the sounds to the letters, and they know that they're REALLY reading those words - they're not guessing, that's where the enjoyment comes from! When they can see that, yes, they can do it, then enjoyment can follow.

With my little guy, my youngest, I've been teaching him to read with just decodable books. This is different than I did with all my other kids. He loves reading! He loves it because he knows he's really doing it. He's picked up his decodable books all on his own from the very beginning. A week after we started using decodable books, he was

picking them up and sitting on the couch and reading, "The cat has a hat." He was excited! He knew that he was doing it! So don't think that decodable books will kill a love of reading.

Now, the type of books you use is important and we'll get to that, but I want you to know that when kids really are reading and know they can do it, that's where the love of reading can come from. All right, that was long. That was my first "DO," which was, DO use decodable books.

My next one is DON'T use decodable books that you personally don't like. I really think that if you are not on board with your reading program or reading materials, it's going to show. First of all, you have to be convinced that decodable books are valuable, which really to do that, you should listen to the other episodes in the science of reading series. But once you believe that, you need to find a decodable books that you're excited about and that you believe your students will be excited about. I say this because years ago, okay, about 20 years ago, in my first year of teaching first grade (it wasn't my first year of teaching, but it was my first year in a first grade classroom), I had used a phonics program that I really, really, really did not like. I think even now with all I know, I still would not like the program. Thankfully they've improved it. I checked their website, I'm not going to name it, but it looks a lot better than what it did 20 years ago.

But man, those decodable books were awful! They were all black and white, which does not have to be a problem, but they were little throw-away books, and that's all we had. The only decodable texts we had were these little throw-away books that were SO stilted in their language. It wasn't connected to anything at all that my students would be familiar with because they were just trying to jam in words they could sound out. No one got enjoyment out of those books. It was just something to check off our to-do list. At best, I thought of them as a necessary evil.

I don't want that for you. I don't want that for your students. The good news is there are so many good decodable books out there that you don't have to resort to those "necessary evil" decodable books. So that's my next "DO," is DO choose quality decodable books.

So what makes a quality decodable book? Well, first of all, I want to talk about something from this book by author Wiley Blevins, it's a new book called "Choosing and Using Decodable Texts." In this book, he references the government document "Becoming a Nation of Readers" from 1985. There, they said that these criteria should be present in a quality decodable text:

"#1: Comprehensible. The stories should make sense and follow natural sounding English spoken and written patterns. No sentences should be in these stories that you,

as a proficient speaker and reader of English, have not uttered, written, or read. Vocabulary must be understandable. Words must be derived primarily from children's speaking and listening vocabularies.

"#2: Instructive. The majority of words (you should know that there is disagreement as to what percentage of the words should be decodable) must be decodable based on the sound spellings previously taught. In addition, there should be enough words with the new target phonics skill for children to get ample practice decoding words with that skill. There must be a strong connection between instruction and text.

"#3: Engaging. These connected decodable texts must be engaging enough for children to want to read them again and again. Children need to revisit these texts to develop fluency and increase reading rate. The texts should also be worth writing and talking about. In early texts, some of the engagement and discussion will be derived from the high quality photos and illustrations, but the text must support them."

I love that because, honestly, I've seen some people that have said, well, if it's decodable, then we use it, it's great. I don't think that's true. There are some really junky decodable books out there. So how do you know what's good? How do you know what to find?

Well, first of all, I think a given is that the decodable text has the patterns you want kids to practice. That's a given. So let's assume the text has that because they all do, right? That's the definition of a decodable book.

But how do you choose the good from the bad? I think your decodable books need to tell a story if they're pretending to tell a story. Some books are just collections of sentences, and that doesn't have to be bad, but if it's supposed to be a story, it better be a story! How do you know if it's a story? The answer is if you can ask questions about it. I've had some decodable books that I've had my little guy try or I've read before giving to him, and I've thought, "I'm not going to use these because they don't make any sense at all. I can't even think of a question to ask because it goes all over the place." They're so anxious to use these decodable words that they don't even think about whether it makes sense! A decodable text should make sense.

I'm going to give you an example. This is from Whole Phonics, and I really like these. I would say they're a little advanced for very beginning readers because there are a lot of words on a page, but as kids advance - so after a few weeks or a month or so of reading decodable texts, they may be ready for some of these. This book, my little guy has read many, many times. It's about a dad and his kids and their friend. They go to the beach and they're playing tag in the ocean, and then something scary happens. It

says, "Ah! A fin! The fin will tag dad!" And then of course, the fin is their friend who's a pig dressed up as a shark. They get a little angry with him. It's a really cute story, and you can certainly ask questions about it. And that I think is valuable - a story that has a problem and solution.

Here's another example. These are really, really good. They are the Half-Pint Kids books. I definitely recommend these! At first glance, the pictures might not be your favorite, but I promise you, once you get into using these, you're going to love them. So this is very simple; it's just two kids who are dressed up as astronauts. They have a big job. Their job is going into space. They're getting their seat belts on, lifting off, and off they go. They'll do their job of going into space. It's very, very simple, and yet you could still ask questions. Just listen to the questions in the back of the book. "How do you know Kim and Ross are American astronauts? Why are they going into outer space? What kind of jobs might they perform on the space shuttle? What must they do before the rockets are launched? Would you like to be an astronaut? Why or why not?" That's another plus, when you have books that have questions at the end - awesome! You want books that tell a story.

I'm going to show you an example of a book I just got in the mail. I've been on the hunt for every decodable book I can find that comes in an actual printed book, and I didn't have these on my list. The author reached out to me and asked me to share them or at least to check them out, so she sent me a box of them. I have to admit, at first glance, I wasn't sure. They use Comic Sans font, which isn't my favorite, and the pictures are not super professional, but I fell in love with them right away. First of all, for my little guy, the Comic Sans font doesn't bother him at all, and not once did he say anything about not liking the pictures. He actually laughs at the pictures.

Here's an example. "Bugs sits on a log." This bug, by the way, is on every page in all the books - he loves that. "Bug gets wet. Bug is sad." Okay. So why is bug sad? He cannot go up, his wings are wet. "Bug sobs and sobs and sobs. The sun is up," and I love how she's got these little speech bubbles everywhere - "I can see the sun!" - because it provides even more chances for them to read. They love reading the speech bubbles. "Bug is not wet," and now you read his speech bubble, "I am not wet. I am glad! Bug can go up, up, up."

That book has a perfect problem and solution. There's a bug, he's sitting on a log, and the problem is that it rains and his wings get wet so he can't fly. The solution is that the sun comes out and he can fly. It tells a story. I recommend these, they are called Express Readers, by the way.

Here's one more example, this is from the Alphabet Series. I really like these. The pictures themselves are black and white, but the stories are still really good. "Jud got gum. Jud had the gum. His pup, Pug, did not. Jud put the gum in a cup. Jud had a nap."

Already you have a chance for the child to do predicting. What do you think Pug is going to do? And then you find out that the pup gets the gum, and he chews it. It makes a mess, and the boy has to help him. You can tell stories with good quality decodable books!

Then I also think another important thing about decodable books is that they need to include non-decodable words to keep the story readable - not a lot, but they need to have some. So in the Express Readers, she calls them "sticky words." At the beginning, my son always likes to read this, "Sticky Words: the, go."

"The" is not decodable no matter what and "go" will be decodable eventually, but it's not decodable for him yet. Kids do need to have that small number of words they recognize without sounding them out at first, just so that the stories flow, and when you find a decodable book that doesn't use any words like that, you'll be able to tell right away. They're stilted, painful to read, and painful to listen to. So it's okay to have some of those words, and they should have some of those words.

Another DON'T that I have for you is that you should not keep all your students at the same level. Certainly, I'm a fan of whole class phonics lessons for the whole group that follow your scope and sequence and are on grade level, but I do not think that your advanced readers need to be sitting and doing reading practice with books that they can read with their eyes closed, right? They have been able to sound them out for a long time. There's certainly a benefit to having them practice the one book or text that you're using with the class, but then when they're meeting with you in small groups, give them something different. It may be that they're ready for leveled books because they have the code down, they don't guess, they sound out words, and so they may be ready for that.

On the other hand, you may have students who need to review with simpler decodable texts. Don't think that the whole class has to be reading the same decodable texts all the time. I think that's a huge problem in reading instruction. For example, when the whole class is reading the same basal story. They don't all need the same text. Short bursts of the same text are great and important for phonics practice, but not for extended reading time.

With that said, my final "DO" is that you should have students practice their decodable texts as often as possible! I've seen some charts comparing balanced literacy to structured literacy. One of the comparisons is that in balanced literacy, kids spend a lot of time doing independent reading. In structured literacy, they don't. That's presented as a plus, and I see that and think, "Oh, that scares me a little bit."

Of course kids need to practice their reading, but I totally understand where they're coming from because I believe that, for many years, I did it wrong. I did have a lot of time that my students were reading independently, but they were reading those leveled books. They had to use the pictures. They had to use context. They weren't sounding out most of the words, and so that was a lot of wasted time. I could've been using that time to do more structured, explicit teaching. That does not mean, however, that we should not be giving kids lots of chances to practice their decodable texts, and if they're ready, leveled books.

Here's some times that kids can do that. When you're doing those small groups where you're differentiating your instruction, you're going to have kids at centers, and one of those should be independent reading. I recommend having all the kids have a giant gallon plastic bag or some kind of cloth bag or something where you keep the books that they're responsible for. For many of them, that will be a stack of decodable books that you've read with them before in phonics lessons and that they're ready to read on their own, or that you've taught them in your small groups and they're ready to practice, or more decodable texts that you know are on their level that they're able to figure out on their own. They should have lots of time to read them. Another good time to practice decodable texts is when they're doing buddy reading - reading with a partner. You can send a decodable text home in a book bag for them to practice. Make sure that they get lots of chances to practice those decodable texts, and not just for two minutes at the end of your phonics lesson.

There is a lot, lot more that I could say about decodable books. This episode has already gone rather long, so I don't want to take more of your time, but I do want to recommend a blog post that I've recently published with my favorite decodable texts. I should say that, as of this recording, the Express Readers are not in there. I do want to add that soon, but I just received those in the mail, so I will get them into that post when I can. Here is what that post looks like, "The Ultimate List of Decodable Books," and a quick link to get to it would be, reachallreaders.com/getdecodable. That shares

favorites but you might want to check out, and it has some decodable books that you can get that have already released on my website, and they are free. So go ahead and get to reachallreaders.com/getdecodable.

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