Triple R Teaching

Hello and welcome to Triple R Teaching, Episode 45. I am so glad to be back! I started this podcast back in the spring of 2020, and both summers I was sure I would keep it going all summer long, but real life hits me every time. Having all six kids home, they're ages five to fourteen, gets a little crazy. Especially with four of them being rather loud boys, and it's really hard for me to get quiet thinking and recording time. But I'm back and I'm excited! They're all back at school now, even my baby who just started half-day kindergarten. I'm thrilled to connect with you again here in Triple R Teaching!

Today is going to start a six week series, "The Science of Reading Bootcamp". This series is for you to share with your colleagues who are interested in the science of reading. If they want to know what it's all about, what the key points are, and perhaps most importantly, how implementing the science of reading is going to look in their classrooms.

So, today, in episode one of this series, we're going to define the science of reading and answer the question, why is there so much disagreement around the science of reading?

Let's start with the definition. This is from whatisthescienceofreading.org. "The science of reading is a vast interdisciplinary body of scientifically based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing." I also like a very simple definition: the science of reading is the body of research that explains how we learn to read.

So, as I've stated before, the science of reading is not a curriculum. It's not a fad, the research has been around at least 40 years. It's not a pendulum swing. It's not phonics first and only. It's a body of research. Once you pin that down, it doesn't feel like the science of reading should be so divisive. But if you start a conversation with someone about the science of reading in a Facebook community, maybe even the teacher's lounge, you'll quickly find it deteriorate as people on both sides get rather heated.

Why is that? Today, we're going to give three reasons why there's so much disagreement around the science of reading.

Number one, the cultures of science and education are very different. I told you before that I was a balanced literacy advocate for 20 years, and I have to say that I was very leery of science when it came to what I should be doing day to day in my classroom. I was told over and over in the professional reading that I did and at the conferences I attended that I knew my students best. I didn't need a scientist who'd never met my students and perhaps, never spent a day in a classroom to tell me how to teach my students to read! I had my own experience and intuition on my side.

I felt that a scientific approach would kill the love of reading and make reading a joyless experience. In his book, "Language at the Speed of Sight", Mark Seidenberg, a cognitive neuroscientist, addresses this very thing. This is what he writes. "The scientific perspective is seen as sterile and reductive, incapable of capturing the inevitable character of the learning moment or the chemistry of a successful classroom." He hit the nail on the head with that! This was it exactly. The science didn't talk at all about the joy of learning to read, the excitement of sharing a new book with my students. I was sure that the science of reading was all about rules and scripted lessons and I wanted none of it!

I felt that my experience and observation carried much more weight than something a scientist had to say. Indeed, many teachers feel like this. In Seidenberg's book, he writes, "Education as a discipline has placed much higher value on observation and hands-on experience."

I wish, as a teacher, that I'd understood that the process of learning to read is far more complex than it appears on its surface. I'd been a good reader for as long as I could remember, and I, honestly, didn't really know much about how I did it because most of what goes on into reading is subconscious. To me, learning to read felt natural. That's what it seemed like for me, and that's certainly what my professional books were telling me.

I embraced the balanced literacy approach because I felt that my approach with as-needed phonics instruction, leveled books with predictable texts, and three-cueing to support my students as they read was the way to go. I was passionate about teaching my students to learn to read and love it. I read a lot! I went to a lot of conferences.

What I didn't understand was that my approach would not work for every student, and that I couldn't understand reading by reading. In his book, Seidenberg says, "That's why there is a science of reading, to understand this complex skill at levels that intuition can not easily penetrate."

I'm going to conclude this point with one more quote from Mark Seidenberg. "The methods commonly used to teach children are inconsistent with basic facts about human cognition and development, and so, make learning to read more difficult than it should be."

So, to wrap up this point, science and education are different cultures. In education, many of us feel that our observation and intuition and experience carries more weight than what we're learning from scientific studies. What we don't often realize is that some of the methods we're using are inconsistent with basic facts from research that have been known for a long time. And if we address those, we'll make learning to read actually easier and we'll meet more of our students' needs.

Let's move on to number two, the second reason why there's so much disagreement around the science of reading. Phonics, which is at the core of structured literacy, is a divisive topic! Now phonics is simply connecting sounds to letters and spellings, so you would wonder why that would be controversial. There's a lot of reasons.

Number one is that many people think that phonics is inherently boring. And I think that's fair that some people think that because in some classrooms and some programs, phonics has been, or is being taught in a boring way. Perhaps these teachers were taught phonics in a boring way. Perhaps they were good readers as children, but they hated reading class because of all the worksheets and the workbooks and the things they already knew. Perhaps as teachers, they had to use a phonics program that bored them to tears all over again. You may not agree that phonics is inherently boring. I no longer agree with that, but I think we can understand why some people may feel like it is.

Another reason phonics is controversial is that some people believe English is too crazy of a language and too inconsistent to bother spending time with phonics and phonics rules because they just aren't consistent. I think the answer to this is more education. I used to feel like this as well, but even just a few spelling rules from Denise Eide's book, "Uncovering the Logic of English", helped clear some things up for me. As an aside, I think we need to be careful about overdoing the phonics rules, there's something to be said for too much. But I think everyone should read "Uncovering the Logic of English" by Denise Eide, to learn how consistent English actually is.

Another reason that phonics is a controversial topic is that some people think they learned to read without phonics. But I think what they really mean is that they learned to read without explicit systematic phonics instruction. We actually know that can be true of some kids. If you've never seen Nancy Young's Ladder of Reading, you should check that out. I will link to it in the show notes. You'll see that she breaks down the percentages of children who learn to read through different approaches. In her ladder, she explains that all students benefit from a structured literacy approach. However, for

about 5% of kids, learning to read seems effortless, and another 35% will learn to read no matter what approach we use.

So to these students, it may feel like they learn to read without phonics, but if you are a good reader, you can read unfamiliar words in isolation, like maybe a phonetic scientific word that you've never seen before. If you can do that, you're not using context and you're not relying on memorization because you've never seen the word before, you're using phonics! So somehow you learned it! We all DO use phonics.

Another reason, and I think this is a big one, why the idea of phonics instruction is divisive is because children learning to read using phonics, and not three-cueing (as in using context and meaning and everything else to figure out words), sound like they're making slower progress. I've told you before that I taught my oldest five kids to read using phonics and a balanced literacy approach. I used leveled books and predictable text.

As I studied the science of reading, I made a switch for my youngest and taught him only with a structured approach using decodable books. When I first started teaching him to read and listening to him read those decodable books, I'm not going to lie, it was painful! My husband who has seen me teach all the other kids to read said something to me. He said, "It makes me feel kind of sad to hear him reading like that" because it was just sooooo slow. "S-A-D, sad" - that's what it sounded like! And this was not what I was used to with my older kids. When they were reading their leveled predictable books, it felt like they were reading smoothly and cleanly and they weren't suffering through all of these words.

This is a common concern. When I read in the science of reading Facebook groups that I'm in, I hear people ask this question. They say, "I'm concerned because when I used balanced literacy, my students seemed to be making faster progress. Now I'm using decodable books and they're reading so slowly."

Many people will chime in and say, "This is normal, don't worry, they'll get there."

This was a concern for Margaret Goldberg. I've mentioned her before. She was a former balanced literacy teacher and now she writes at the Right to Read Project. She had the same concern when she had switched to more of a structured approach. A friend of hers, Dr. John Shelfbine told her this, "The kindest thing you can do for beginning and struggling readers is to give them the time and encouragement they need to grunt and groan their way through sounding out words. You're rewiring their brains and it's hard work."

Sure enough, my son got past it too, and I promise you, it did nothing to kill his love for reading. He just started kindergarten. He's reading very well already, and he loves books. But I'll admit, it was scary for me at first.

Next, teaching phonics systematically and sequentially takes a lot of time. If teachers aren't sold on systematic sequential phonics instruction for early readers, these phonics lessons they have to teach may feel like wasted time. They may start to resent them because it crowds out time that they want to spend reading aloud to their students, letting students explore books on their own, meeting with students in small groups, and so on.

If this is a concern you have, don't worry. There are definite compromises we can make, and we can still include all these things in our reading block. We'll address this later in the series.

Finally, as to why phonics is such a controversial issue, there is misunderstanding on both sides. I've seen all the charts comparing balanced and structured literacy. I have a chart on my website, I'll link to it in the show notes so you can see that. In mine I tried to be a little more fair than I've seen in some of the charts. Some of the charts seem to claim that in a balanced literacy classroom, there is no phonics instruction, and frankly, that's just not true for most balanced literacy classrooms. The problem comes with it being systematic and sequential, but to claim that a balanced literacy teacher doesn't teach phonics is not true and not fair and it leads to feelings of defensiveness!

On the other hand, many balanced literacy teachers may think that phonics proponents don't teach fluency, comprehension, or vocabulary because they have this long involved phonics lesson and there's no time for anything else. That's really not fair either, because certainly people who understand the science of reading know that it's more than phonics, it's also about comprehension and they make room for both in their reading instruction.

Let's move on to our final reason why there's so much disagreement around the science of reading. It's that discussions about the science of reading lead to feelings of defensiveness, anger, and fear. When you've got all those emotions coming together, there's going to be disagreements.

I've got to say that as a balanced literacy teacher learning about the science of reading, I felt attacked! I'm sorry to say that instead of leading me to be introspective, it made me feel defensive. The articles said I wasn't teaching phonics. I was! The articles said I

was teaching guessing by using three-cueing, but I felt that I was teaching my students to be strategic! The articles said I should be doing more explicit instruction. Well I felt that my mini lessons served that purpose just as well as a thirty-minute whole class phonics lesson that wouldn't meet the needs of all my kids. The articles criticized my lack of a structured curriculum, but I felt that I knew my students and what they needed way better than a scripted curriculum! The articles said balanced literacy didn't work, but I had plenty of anecdotal evidence that it did!

When one person is feeling defensive, that's not a great starting point for a conversation. It's also true that I had a LOT of fear. What if they were right? What if three-cueing wasn't good for kids? What if it actually taught them bad habits? What if I wasn't reaching the needs of all my students? What if my whole philosophy about teaching reading was flawed? What would I have to admit about the way I taught in the past?

I was afraid of confronting the mistakes I made. I was afraid of thinking back to those students who struggled, knowing I could have done something different to help them. I was also afraid that this structured approach would take the joy out of teaching and learning.

On the other side, there's a lot of anger. There's anger by science of reading advocates who have known the research a lot longer than people who are just discovering it. They're angry because they've seen many children fail to learn to read since they did not receive structured explicit instruction. They shout in Facebook groups in all caps. Instead of rejoicing that someone new is here to learn, they shame people who are new to the game, to people who arrived there later than they did.

The best we can do is gently and kindly share resources with fellow educators. My commitment to you in this science of reading bootcamp is to be clear, concise, and judgment-free.

Today, I gave you three reasons why I believe there's so much disagreement around the science of reading. Number one, the cultures of science and education are very different. Number two, phonics is a very divisive topic. And number three, discussions about the science of reading often lead to feelings of defensiveness, anger, and fear.

Not to worry though, in this series, I don't want you to feel defensive or angry or afraid. I want to encourage you and help you see all the joy and excitement there is in teaching reading using a structured approach. So come back next week, we'll see you for our second episode in the science of reading bootcamp.

You can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/45. If you're

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4th, we are opening the doors to our online course, "Teaching Every Reader".

Several hundred teachers joined us this past spring when we reopened the course and one of our students, her name is Alyssa, had this to say,

"Although I've been teaching vulnerable learners for many years, I found the course to be very informative, as it provided current research and teaching reading effectively. It was more rigorous and comprehensive than I anticipated, but was presented in a really organized and systematic manner. I especially appreciated the guided notes that outlined the videos and made it very easy to follow along and take notes. This will be really useful for revisiting some of the content in the future. Thank you so much for the opportunity for professional development and best practices in reading instruction!"

Go ahead and head to teachingeveryreader.com and get on the waitlist so you're sure to be notified when we open the doors again. See you next week!