Triple R Teaching

Hello, and welcome to Episode 51 of Triple R Teaching! I'm recording this on Friday, October 8th, 2021, and what a week it has been!

This tends to be my busiest week of the year because my colleague, Becky Spence, and I release our training about the science of reading. We give live presentations for two nights, and then we offer our online course.

That's what this week has been, but Monday and Tuesday were the first time in four years of giving live presentations that they totally flopped! We had a terrible technical experience with Demio, and I'm not sure why because I've had good experiences with them before. I don't know what was happening, but I just kept getting kicked out and kicked out. It's a really awful feeling when you're trying to give a live presentation to hundreds of teachers who have taken time out of their day to listen to you! I know how busy they are, and then felt awful to consistently waste their time because the audio kept cutting out!

So we had to give up, and we ended up recording the training so that teachers could watch it. That training is coming down the day that I'm recording this, so it will not be available anymore once you're listening to this podcast, but I wanted to record this podcast in connection with the video because we had a lot of great questions that were asked.

Typically, when we give the live training, our assistant gathers questions during the training and we answer them at the end. We could not do that this year because of our technical issues, so I asked people to submit questions via a Google Form. I've got quite a few. I'm not going to do all of them this week, but I think I'll tackle some this week and then some next week.

This is going to be kind of an off-the-cuff presentation, mainly because we've got out of town guests at our house this weekend, and I'm giving a live presentation again today - thankfully, I'm not hosting it, so hopefully audio is not a problem this afternoon. So there's just a lot going on in my life and I don't have a lot of time to edit this before I pick up my little guy from kindergarten in about 45 minutes. So please forgive me if it's a little less rehearsed, but we're going to answer some of the questions from watchers

of this training that we gave.

One person wrote this, "Just wondering why the 'experts' think that the cueing systems are totally invalid. I am a former Reading Recovery teacher, and Marie Clay researched what 'good readers' did to come up with her interventions, many of which are very much aligned with the science of reading. Could it possibly be that the techniques were just not good for poor readers or dyslexic readers?"

So I totally understand where this person is coming from because this was certainly what I felt for a long time. I think what we have to really understand is what the point is of getting words off the page. It's not just to figure out what the words could be or to figure out what the words are (through using pictures or context or whatever). The point is that we want kids to sound out the words so they orthographically map the words, so that they remember them for the future. When you remember that, three-queuing feels a little counterproductive because yes, kids might be figuring out what the words are, but not in a way that's going to help them for the future.

Now, I want to be clear, balanced literacy does work - for some kids! When someone finally acknowledged that fact to me when I was struggling with this, it really helped turn the tide for me. Once someone acknowledged to me that yes, balanced literacy works for a lot of kids, but it's just that for some kids, they get to third grade and they hit a wall. They can't use those cues anymore because they don't have the books with all the supports. They start to fall apart.

That was what I needed to hear - that three cuing appears to work and does work for some kids. But for many kids, they hit a wall when they get to third grade and they don't have the strategies they need to actually sound out those words. They have three queuing, which only gets them so far.

I cannot speak to the research that Marie Clay did. I don't know if it was just observational research. I'm not sure if the things she came up with would contradict the things we know now about how the brain works and what orthographic mapping is. So I can't speak to her research, but I would like to talk to the last point, "Could it possibly be the techniques were just not good for poor readers or dyslexic readers?"

Well, I used to think about this too. But I think we have to ask ourselves, if they're not good for poor readers or dyslexic readers, why are we using them? There are many, many, many poor readers in the United States. If you look at results of standardized test scores for fourth graders, they're pretty dismal. There's a very low percentage of kids that are actually reading on grade level. I would recommend you check out Nancy Young's, "Ladder of Reading". You can just Google that and you'll find it on her website.

I'm looking it up right now as I'm recording this.

What she did is she followed the research and she found out that for 5% of kids, reading is pretty effortless, right? Those are the kids that kind of teach themselves to read. They exist! Not very many, but they exist. 35% learn to read pretty much no matter what method you use, including balanced literacy. 40% to 50% really need that structured approach, and 10% to 15% have dyslexia.

That's a pretty significant percentage. If our main way of teaching reading is not going to serve a good number of our students, I think we need to reevaluate. So that's my answer to that question.

Another question was, "What are some suggestions you have to help students in third grade who can't spell? Is sounding out still a strategy?"

When I think about teaching spelling or helping kids with spelling, of course you always need to be doing that phonics instruction. A really good thing to remember is to connect the phonemes to the graphemes when spelling.

My little daughter is in second grade, and her teacher gives some challenging spelling words. When we work on those challenge words, we break the word into phonemes, and we draw a line for every sound, and then we fill in the blanks.

One of her words this week was "physical". So we said, "Let's count all the sounds /f/ /ĭ/ /z/ /ĭ/ /k/ /əl/." So we had to put six lines on the paper. We talked about how she knew right away that P-H can spell /f/, so she wrote that down. The next one was harder, /ĭ/, what can that be? I told her that in this word, the Y represents the /ĭ/ sound. Now, when she was trying to spell this word on her own, she was doing P-H-Y-I. That means she was using two different letters to represent the /ĭ/ sound. But when we took it apart into its individual phonemes and represented those on paper, she could see, "Oh yeah, I only need ONE vowel here, and I'm going to use the Y as a vowel." Then for the /z/ sound, we talked about how in this word, the S represents the /z/ sound and so on.

That really helped. I would encourage you to help kids break words apart into phonemes, and then use the phonics knowledge they have to fill in the blanks. I think just that can help tremendously!

Someone else said, "I would love to see what a science-of-reading-based small group lesson in kindergarten would look like."

We actually get into this in great detail in "Teaching Every Reader," our course, which if you're listening to this on Monday, October 11th, closes to the public tonight. I believe it closes at 9:30pm my time, which is Chicago time.

What we say in the course is that first, you should assess students' phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge and then group them accordingly. You may have groups of kids who are still learning letter names, and you'll probably have some kids who are reading, depending on where you're teaching. So you're going to want to group them.

I personally would try not to do more than four groups. It's just really hard to meet with that many separate groups. I know that can be very hard to narrow it down to just four, but if you think about it, that's way better than the whole class, right? They're still getting much more focused attention than they would if you were teaching them all as one group.

Then within those small groups, you want to be following the structure of an effective phonics lesson, understanding that this is going to be a little different with the kids who are still learning their alphabet. But once they're learning their letters and ready to sound out words, it would look like this: You'd start with a phonemic awareness warmup. You're going to connect phonemic awareness to the phonics skill you're teaching. You'd introduce the new skill by EXPLICITLY telling them what you want them to know. No guessing here, just tell them. Then you're going to practice blending words based on the sounds they've learned so far. You're going to do word building with letter tiles or magnetic letters. If they're ready to read (if they're able to read more than a word or two), they can read decodable text. This could be just a list of words if that's where you're at, but hopefully before long they'll progress into quality decodable books. Then you're going to do guided writing, which could just be as simple as dictation where they practice spelling words that have the pattern that you've taught them.

So I go into this in a pretty good amount of detail on my website. There's a blog post called, "Do's and Don'ts for Phonics Instruction," and there I talk a lot more about phonics. There's also a graphic with this layout of a phonics lesson that you might want to download.

Another teacher asked, "For the 'Say It, Move It' activity and the phoneme grapheme mapping, how many chips would you use for a blend, as in F-L for the word 'flip'? Would it be one chip for F-L as you would use for the /ch/ sound, or would it be two?"

Great question! Blends are two sounds. So for the word "flip," it would be /f/ /l/ /ĭ/ /p/ - four sounds, four blanks, four chips. Whereas in "chip" or "ship" or something like that with a diagraph, it would only be three because the diagraph is two letters that make one sound.

Someone else asked, "Where do nonsense words fit into this? We're required to test on them in kindergarten and first grade and use them to progress monitor until our winter testing."

So actually, it sounds like you're using them as you should! Nonsense words are great for assessing phonics knowledge. Sometimes kids can memorize words or they have seen a word enough that they kind of know it because it's a real word, but they don't necessarily have the phonics knowledge to sound out a nonsense word. If that's the case, then you need to go back and practice that skill. So nonsense words serve a very useful purpose, they can tell you if a child has actually mastered a phonics skill. That's a great time to use them.

Some teachers have students practice with them just to make sure they really know the phonics skill that they're learning. I wouldn't do a ton of that, but definitely they should be a part of phonics assessment.

So, in order for me to edit this episode and get it ready for my assistant to upload before I pick up my little guy from kindergarten, we're going to end this for this week. Again, if you're listening on October 11th, 2021, you can learn more about our course. Go to teachingeveryreader.com. If you're past the date, you can join the wait list or email me personally and talk about when you can become part of it. You can email me at hello@reachallreaders.com.

Thanks so much for listening and hope to talk to you again next week!