Triple R Teaching

Hello, hello, Anna Geiger here. Welcome back! We are on our second reaction to the Fountas and Pinnell blog series called "Just To Clarify," in which they react to criticisms of their work.

Fountas and Pinnell, as you recall, are leaders in literacy education in the United States. They have created a very popular reading program that's used in many schools. We consider them the founders of balanced literacy. They may try to distance themselves from that label, but the fact is it came about during their work back in the '90s.

The current situation is that with studying the science of reading and structured literacy, a lot of people are accusing them of promoting methods that do not teach reading well and that do not meet the needs of a large number of students.

Fountas and Pinnell have reacted in a series of blog posts, and today, we are touching on a big one. Question number two is, "Can you clarify what MSV analysis is and why you believe it's important?"

This is all about three-cueing. If you've followed my podcast for a long time, you know I've talked a lot about this. This is kind of the big rotten apple in balanced literacy. It's the thing that absolutely has to go!

Let's review what MSV stands for. M is meaning, S for syntax, V is for visual. So as a balanced literacy teacher, I believed that students use these three cues to help them solve words. They used the context - that's meaning, they used grammar - that's syntax, and they used phonics - that's the visual cue. And they used them all together simultaneously. Maybe sometimes they'd be using one cue more than another, but they'd be using them all together to solve words. It wasn't just about sounding it out.

In my opinion, this has to do with a misunderstanding of how reading in the brain works. Before I get to that, let's go ahead and listen to a portion of Irene's answer: "The goal for the reader is accuracy using all sources of information simultaneously, and that includes processing each letter in words from left to right. If a reader says 'pony' for

'horse' because of information from the pictures, that tells the teacher that the reader is using meaning information from the pictures, as well as the structure of the language, but is neglecting to use the visual information of the print. His response is partially correct, but the teacher needs to guide him to stop and work for accuracy."

Oh boy, there's a lot to talk about just in that little section.

So they talk about the goal for the reader is using all sources of information simultaneously. That's what I'm talking about when I think it's a misunderstanding of how reading works. We've talked about the science of reading in other episodes and we've talked about the importance of understanding that when you're reading, you are matching the phonemes to the graphemes so orthographic mapping can occur.

Orthographic mapping is reading words instantly and effortlessly after repeated exposure to the word, repeated practice sounding it out. You have to remember that we're not storing thousands and thousands of words in our brains as wholes. We're actually matching those sounds to the letters very, very, very quickly as proficient readers. But students can't learn to do that unless they actually HAVE to sound out the word.

Fountas and Pinnell and other balanced literacy advocates are telling us that there are other pathways to get to the word. We could look at the picture. We could use the picture and the first letter. We could think about what sounds right. Those are backdoor ways of getting to the word.

Maybe they'll help us understand that text itself, but they're not going to serve us for the future because those "strategies" are actually not giving students practice doing what they need to do most in these early stages of reading. They HAVE to match the phonemes to the graphemes. They have to sound it out!

We looked at pictures of the brain and how scientists have learned through fMRI that proficient readers are having all the right circuits firing in the left hemisphere. But children with dyslexia often do not have all those areas well developed, and their reading work is happening on the right side of the brain because they're needing that extra practice, building those phoneme-grapheme connections.

If we're teaching them to use context or what sounds right, we're actually having them do their reading work on the right side of the brain, which is the wrong side for learning to read. I often hear from people defending three-cueing that it comes from Marie Clay

and her observations of how children read. Now I can't speak to this extensively because I have not studied Marie Clay's work, even though I have some of her books that I bought many years ago.

But you can see right away, there's a problem, right? If she's making an observation, it's sort of a guess because you don't know what's actually happening inside their brains. Through research and, like I said, fMRI and other things, scientists have learned that students read by matching phonemes to graphemes. That is what they're doing. That is what successful readers do. These things that we're teaching in balanced literacy, which include using context or pictures, are actually reinforcing the habits of poor readers.

Now, back when I was a three-cueing advocate, I did not want to hear this and I did not accept it. And we'll talk more about that next week when we answer their question about guessing. But I want to read some other reactions to you, some other perspectives about three-cueing. Let's talk about where it came from. I think that's really important.

This is a blog post from the National Institute for Direct Instruction, I will link to it in the show notes. Here's what they say: "The three-cueing system is well-known to most teachers. What is less well-known is that it arose not as a result of advances in knowledge concerning reading development, but rather in response to an unfounded but passionately held belief. Despite its largely uncritical acceptance by many within the education field, it has never been shown to have utility, in fact, is predicated upon notions of reading development that have been demonstrated to be false."

Now, someone first brought this to my attention a long time ago, I'm a little embarrassed to say it. I think it was around 2015 in my blog post comments, and I was like, "What?" She was saying to me that three-cueing is not backed by research, but I just learned about it a few years ago in graduate school so I didn't believe her. But I went back and forth with her a little bit and finally I said, "I'm sorry, I can't continue this debate in my comment section." And I just didn't believe her because I wasn't hearing this from other people.

It was about four or five years later where the science of reading really became more prominent as a result of Emily Hanford's article that I felt forced to study it myself. It was really hard, REALLY hard, to give up three-cueing because that basically turned how I taught reading on its head. I have a whole episode about what's wrong with three-cueing that you can find linked to in the show notes.

I also want to share what Lindsay at The Learning Spark had to say. She wrote a blog

post all about her pet peeves about teaching reading, and her pet peeve number two was those resistant to give up three-cueing. I want to read to you the paragraph from her website:

"I have always tried to be careful with how I bring this up, because people get so upset and defensive when confronted with the fact that there is no research to support these reading strategies and, even worse, they are doing harm to students. But my patience is wearing thin on this topic. Just when I think that the tide is turning and that the majority of educators now realize the problems surrounding three-cueing, I hear an edu-celebrity tell teachers on Facebook to simply “tweak” the strategies instead of get rid of them or a reader emails me asking me to take down this post stating that it’s only my opinion and that three-cueing works. This particular reader told me not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, but three-cueing is exactly what needs to be thrown out."

I could not agree with that more. You'll definitely want to check out her whole blog post, which again will be linked in the show notes.

I want to also talk about how embracing three-cueing denies the Simple View of Reading, which has been backed by research and it's been around for about forty years. It is a model of how reading works. If you picture a multiplication problem, we've got decoding times language comprehension equals reading comprehension. So, in other words, for reading comprehension to occur, you must be decoding the words and understanding them.

With the early leveled books that are what they use to teach reading to beginning readers in the Fountas and Pinnell system, kids must use three-cueing to solve the words because they don't have the phonics knowledge to sound it out. If you are "reading" a word by using context, or picture cues, or the picture and one letter, you're not decoding.

So if you're not really decoding, you get a zero for that part of the multiplication problem, times a one because you do understand the text, but you still get a zero. Reading comprehension is not occurring because you're not really reading!

But I did not believe this as a balanced literacy teacher and I'm sure Fountas and Pinnell don't believe it. They think that having kids use context and pictures to solve the words in those early books IS reading, that it's a natural stage of development for these early readers. But I'm here to tell you, it's not. It's not really reading.

Here's a great quote from Mark Seidenberg on his website and I'm going to link to this in the show notes as well. Here's part of his reaction to the article: "The best cue to a

word is the word itself. That's the great thing about alphabetic writing, the spelling of a word tells you what the word is. B-O-O-K is the word book, pronounced 'book,' rhymes with 'took' and 'look,' similar in meaning to 'text' and 'magazine.'

"The spelling is far more informative than strategies such as look at the picture, take a running start, skip the word and go back at the end and other ways to 'solve words'. Readers who have gained the ability to recognize words quickly and accurately from the written code do not need the Fountas and Pinnell strategies. The proof is that they can do this for words in isolation, with no context and no strategic options. This ability carries over to reading words in sentences, where skilled readers recognize with little dependence on context."

I've got to tell you, the light bulb went off for me when I taught my youngest to read. I've talked about this, how I taught my oldest five kids to read at home before they started school using a mostly balanced literacy approach, and I used phonics too, but most of the reading they did was in leveled books.

And then I switched to teaching my youngest and I realized I can't do both. Now that I am understanding structured literacy and the science of reading, I can't have him learn to read with leveled books and decodable books because it's confusing. With the decodable books, I'm teaching him to sound out the words. But in the leveled books I'm saying, "Oh, you can't sound that out yet, so use the picture or use what would make sense."

And you know what, having him sound out the words in those decodable books was so much more efficient. We were just reading, we weren't playing this kind of game to try to figure out what the word could be.

And then, what is this about when Irene Fountas says that kids are partially right if they substitute "pony" for "horse?" How is that partially right?! That's not right at all. That proves that they're not looking at the letters. Because any child who has even a basic understanding of letters and sounds would know that the word "horse" cannot be "pony." The first letter doesn't even match.

Fountas is telling us that if students read "pony" for "horse," that's a clue to the teacher to help them to stop and work for accuracy. Actually, it's a clue to the teacher to help the student learn to sound out words. And if we're giving them books full of words they can't sound out yet, guess what? They're going to not sound out! They're going to realize that that is way harder than these other things they're learning to try, which is using the picture and using context.

Unfortunately, you'll find a lot of students who have learned to read with three-cueing will often open a page and look right at the picture versus looking at the words which is where their eyes should start. Now, are these pictures useful? Absolutely. They're great for helping you check meaning and get more information. But they're not where you should start. The words are where you should start.

I know this podcast is running long so I want to conclude by reacting to the last sentence of the blog post from Fountas and Pinnell in which Fountas writes, "The development of the child's ability to use all sources of information will take time and skillful teaching. It is impossible to boil down this process to something as simplistic as 'don't think, just sound it out.'"

Okay, that's not fair. Because that is not what science of reading advocates are saying. They are not saying that we want kids just to sound out words and not think about it at all. That's just not true. If you think about the Simple View of Reading, you can see it's about decoding AND language comprehension.

For reading comprehension to occur, we know they have to understand those words at the same time. But we also understand that learning to sound out words and then becoming fluent at this is a process. We can't rush the process by giving them books in which they can "read the words using context, pictures, and patterns." We have to give them the hard work of sounding out words and the rest will come. It will come!

As you can guess, there's a whole lot more I can say about this, but we have eight more episodes. So we'll get into more of that next week.

Thanks so much for listening and be sure to check out the show notes at reachallreaders.com/episode58. Talk to you next week!