Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here from Reach All Readers, back for the third episode in our

You remember that Fountas and Pinnell are big names in literacy education here in the United States and around the world. They have created a very popular reading series that is used by many schools, as well as an assessment system and other things.

The problem is that a lot of the things that are foundational for their program do not align with the current reading research. They have been under criticism for a long time, and just recently they have published a series of ten blog posts basically defending themselves against the criticism. Now I am responding with a ten-part podcast series reacting to each of those posts.

Their third post reacts to this question that has been sent to them, "Some have suggested that you support the use of guessing. Can you comment on this?"

Here is their response: "We do not use the word 'guess' in our writing, nor with children in instruction. As readers process texts, they often make attempts at difficult words, using their experience and knowledge. They make predictions based on information in the text and information they bring to the text.

"For example, a child who cannot yet sound out the word 'elephant' from his knowledge of syllables and the “ph” digraph can read a story about one following print, left to right, and making sense of his reading and using the letter-sound knowledge within her power. When she uses the picture information, the letter sound information actually becomes more available to her. Calling this 'guessing' fails to recognize the complexity of what she is really doing.

"Again, the goal for the teacher is to demonstrate and encourage the reader to persist in using all sources of information together; meaning, language, and letter-sound information."

This goes back to our episode last week, where I said that teaching students to read using three-cueing shows a misunderstanding of how reading works in the brain. We're coming back to that again here. Do you see how important it is to really understand how reading works?

If you think that kids read by combining all these cues at once - meaning, language, letter sounds - then three-cueing makes perfect sense. And it makes sense to give them books that require them to use three-cueing. But when you understand that the three cueing model is popular, but not backed by research, and that teaching students to read using three-cueing may look like it's working, but is actually bypassing important things that need to happen in the brain, then you realize that yeah, having kids solve words with three-cueing IS teaching them to guess.

The definition of guess is to estimate or suppose something without sufficient information to be sure of being correct.

So if a child is "reading" a leveled book, which includes words they are not able to sound out, and they use the picture to help them solve the word, they can't know for 100% sure that they're right, because the only way to know 100% sure that you're right is to be able to match the phonemes to the graphemes. If they can't do that, if they can't sound it out all the way through, then they're not 100% sure if they're right. That would be the definition of a guess.

This accusation of teaching kids to guess bothers balanced literacy teachers. Like I said, it bothered me when I taught with three-cueing. Did you notice what Irene Fountas said at the very beginning of her reaction? She said, "We do not use the word 'guess' in our writing, nor with children in instruction."

I hear that a lot. "Well, I don't tell my students to guess!" You may not be telling them to guess, but by the cues you're giving them, that's what you're expecting them to do.

In the last sentence of Fountas' answer, she says that calling this reading process "guessing" fails to recognize the complexity of what the reader is doing.

Now, I would never want to say that learning to read is simple or that teaching reading is simple, because it's not. It's very complicated. In fact, Louisa C. Moats has written an article called "Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science."

However, when we try to say that learning to read is complicated because we're integrating all these cueing systems, we've missed the mark. Instead, I recommend learning more about the four-part processor, and I'm going to link to a YouTube video that explains this very well in the show notes.

So to conclude, we may not want to admit it, but if we're teaching students to read with three-cueing, we are teaching them to guess because if they don't have the phonics knowledge to read the words, they really don't know for sure if their reading is accurate.

Next week, we're going to get into the fourth post by Fountas and Pinnell. We're going to talk about guided reading and leveled texts, so stay tuned!