Triple R Teaching

Hello and welcome! You are listening to Triple R Teaching, Episode 61. This is the fifth in my series of reactions to Fountas & Pinnell's "Just to Clarify" blog series, in which Gay Su Pinnell and Irene Fountas, two popular figures in literacy in the United States, react to criticism of their work.

They've been very prominent since the '90s, and many consider them the founders of the balanced literacy movement. They might not agree, but that's what many people would say. They promote teaching reading using leveled texts. That's just one part of their overall program, but that is a big piece of it.

Today's question is, "In your view of early literacy development, what is the role of decodable texts?"

They have a long response here, so I'm not going to play that for you, but I'm going to take out pieces of it. To summarize, they're not fans of decodable text. They do not feel that those texts are useful to kids. But let's take out some pieces.

First of all, they tell us that back in the 1800s, kids did use decodable text, and yet, the literacy rate was below 50%. I'm not going to try to speak to that specifically because there are a million other factors in there, for one, the idea that many kids couldn't even go to school because they were helping on the farm. I think we need to really look into many reasons about why the literacy rate was low. So we won't use that as support for their argument.

They talk about how, in the '50s, there were a lot of sight word books using the look-say method. I've talked about that before when I've talked about the history of the reading wars and how there was this switch to the memorizing of lots and lots of words. I've talked about how that's a bad thing, because that's not how your brain works. We don't store up thousands and thousands of words as holes. Rather, the way that we learn to recognize words is by connecting the phonemes to the graphemes, through a process called orthographic mapping.

They don't talk about that here, but they just address those two things. That in the past, kids used decodable books back in the 1800s, but the literacy rate was low. We cannot connect the two, necessarily. Then they address the idea of these look-say books, where the story would not be very exciting, right? "See Jane run," and so on.

Their point of doing this is to let us know that both of those options, those decodable books from the 1800s, and the look-say books from the '50s, those are contrived, as in they're not really real. The books are just written for a particular purpose, and they aren't real stories. Kids cannot engage with them.

I would like to counter with the argument that leveled books, the early books that they provide for our earliest readers, are also contrived.

It really isn't until students get up to Level I or J that the books start to sound more like regular books. Those early books have patterns so students can easily pick up on them. They have pictures that match the text so that you can easily get your cue. Those books are also written for a specific purpose.

I used to think this! I used to think that decodable books weren't real books, but leveled books were. Now I understand that both are contrived, but for different reasons. I'm going to quote now from their response, in which they're describing the problem with those other options, the decodable books and the look-say books: "In both of these approaches, there was something wrong with the language in these books because children were encouraged to read, and not really to think of the meaning. And in some cases of some texts, the meaning was so elusive that almost no one could make sense of it. But pre-teaching phonetic elements and patterns then resulted in these extremely contrived texts."

Okay. So this was something I could've said, word-for-word, back when I was a balanced literacy teacher and really was against decodable books. And I understand why some people might say this, because some decodable books are bad. They just are; some are not good! If they don't make any sense, and they're so stilted because they're trying to fit in all these decodable words that you can't even tell if you read it right, because it doesn't sound like we talk, then that's a problem. Decodable books should sound like we talk. If that means you have to add a few words that are not decodable, I think that's a good trade-off.

Wiley Blevins has said he'd rather have a book, I can't quote him exactly, but it was something like, "I'd rather have a book that's 60-65% decodable than 80% or more, if it's going to make sense." So I'm not of the mind that every book should be 100% decodable - I don't agree with that. The books we read should make sense because we

want students to be able to go back and correct it if it doesn't make sense.

So I guess, there I'm just acknowledging the concern that Fountas & Pinnell have. It is a real concern that kids aren't making meaning from decodable texts. So I think we need to be very conscious of this and choose quality decodable books. I actually spent a long time curating a big list of the decodable books that I think are the best. It's on my website. I will link to the post in the show notes, so you can check it out.

The next part of their blog is interesting. They write,

"All of the contrived texts were created by adult scholars who based their work on assumptions about their own material reading. They assume that reading means recognizing or sounding out the words or memorizing sight words. And that leads to the assumption that children should learn the words first or the letter-sound patterns first, and then read them in words strung together. This could, with some children, lead to the confusion that they're reading nothing more than a list of words."

All right, let's unpack this. Back in the 1800s, and back in the '50s, I'm not sure exactly what was known about how the brain learns to read. It may be entirely possible that people were basing their reading material, and how they thought reading worked, based on their own personal experience.

I think it's fair to say that when Marie Clay was developing her own system, her ideas about three-queuing, she based that on observations of kids. She wasn't basing it on a scientific study, not that I know of. So I think it's fair to say that maybe all of these people had misplaced ideas about why they chose the texts that they did.

However, now we know!

We have a good forty years of research that helps us understand how children learn to read. We know that for orthographic mapping - instant recognition of words - to occur, students must be good at phonemic awareness and phonic decoding. They cannot become good at those two skills unless they're actually sounding out words in the books they read.

Fountas & Pinnell say the concern is that if they're reading these decodable books, they'll think reading is just saying the words.

If you have a quality decodable book that does tell a story, even if it's through the pictures, and has text that kids can sound out, you can certainly talk about the story. I don't recommend long lists of words that don't make any sense. Certainly that's good practice, but I think it needs to be applied in a meaningful story, which you can actually find in decodable books.

Now, is the book going to be a great piece of literature? No, that's not the purpose. Fountas and Pinnell have something right here, decodable books are contrived. They are. They're created for a specific purpose, to help beginning readers learn to sound out words. That's the whole point of them! BUT creative authors and illustrators can create engaging decodable books. If you check out that blog post that I'm going to share in the show notes, you'll find out how true that is.

I find it very telling that in this blog post by Fountas & Pinnell, they do not allow for decodable books. Basically they're saying that their books are decodable because of the consistent patterns. I cannot agree with that.

Let's listen in to a little of their audio blog post about the types of books that they recommend you use instead of decodable books:

"What we recommend is easy texts with many words that we could call “decodable” because they are regular phonogram patterns such as, “can,” “see,” “be,” mixed with enough sight words that the language sounds a bit like talking. It isn't really exactly the same as talking, but it makes sense to kids. And good stories with interesting illustrations, fiction and non-fiction, so that they have the opportunity to behave like readers and choose books and enjoy books. At the same time, we sometimes have a repeating pattern of a sentence structure to give them more practice. In the books that we have produced, we put in these recognizable repeating elements, but the reader does not depend on or memorize the books. It's a real story, and they're decoding as much as they know and have been taught in phonics lessons in these easy books."

So there're some problems with that, quite a few problems.

First of all, a decodable book is a book that includes phonics patterns that a student has been taught. So I totally understand that "see" is decodable and "be" is a decodable word, but if you haven't taught them that "ee" represents the /ē/ sound and that open syllable words, like "be," have a long vowel sound at the end, then it's not decodable to the child.

Now can you teach a few sight words without getting to the phonics pattern? Absolutely. I've talked about that in the past. That's fine, but we're not going to overdo it.

So this is NOT true, that these books are decodable for the individual reader, not unless they have studied that phonics. This is not a true claim, that these books are decodable for the readers, because the words themselves are phonetic. They're decodable when the students have learned the pattern!

They talk about how these books are good because the language sounds a bit like talking, and I totally get that. That is why I really, really, really, really resisted switching from leveled to decodable books. That's the joy of leveled books, especially for the teacher, when you're hearing kids "reading" these books. It sounds like they're fluent because they're just remembering the pattern and then adding the last word from the picture. It's a good feeling to hear them do that, because it feels like they're developing strong reading habits and abilities.

On the other hand, when you hear them work really hard to sound out each word, it's rather painful and not very fun. There's a really, really good blog post by the Right to Read Project. It's called "The Drudgery (and Beauty) of Decodable Texts," and I'll link to that in the show notes. And I believe that she addresses this there, or maybe I heard it on a podcast somewhere. But Margaret Goldberg talks about how this is really hard at first, to listen to kids struggle through sounding out words. It feels like they're never going to get there, but they do. They do! And fluency will come.

When we try to push fluency early, by giving them these contrived books that make them rely on the picture to solve the words, we're going about things backward.

In the recording, you may have heard Pinnell say that they put in these repeating elements, but that readers don't depend on them or memorize the books. That's wishful thinking.

There's a really good video on YouTube about the "Paint It Purple" book. I actually had this book and used it with my kids as beginning readers. It's from Reading A-Z. It's a leveled book, and they solve the words by using the pictures. In the video the mother records her daughter reading it and then shows that she doesn't remember any of those words later, because she wasn't using phonics knowledge to sound them out. But then, when her mother gave her a very explicit phonics lesson, then she could read a

lot more of those words in isolation. That is a really big eye-opener! Definitely watch that two-part video on YouTube, I'll link to it in the show notes.

To conclude their blog post, Fountas & Pinnell ask us to think about the contrived texts, as they call them, that we're using for beginning readers. Do they have a real story? Do they provide interesting information? Do they engage the child? Does it sound like language? Does it also provide the opportunity to sound out words?

It should do both; they're right about that. It should sound like language, as much as possible, and it should provide the opportunity to sound out words. I will not say that all their books do that because most of them, those early books, only provide a couple of examples where kids can sound out words. And guess what? They don't even need to, because they have the picture to help them.

I had this conversation with a principal when I was really struggling with switching from balanced to structured literacy. He was very kind. He sent me a Facebook message when I had made a comment in a large science of reading Facebook group. He offered to hop on the phone with me, and so we talked. He teaches at a school with a lot of kids who struggle to read. They had switched to decodable books, and I said, "Well, doesn't that just make them not like to read anymore, because you're giving them these awful, boring books?"

This is what he said to me. "You've got to understand these kids can't read. When we give them these books that they can read, because we've taught them the skills they need to read it - we've taught them to actually identify each individual word on the page - that's where the love of reading comes from. The love of reading comes from the success they have, the seeing that they can do it.

"On the other hand, kids know when they can't read, right? If you give a child a book that's leveled, and they're supposed to solve everything by the picture, I think they know that they're not really doing the reading. They're kind of guessing at the words, because that's the only tool they're good at. They haven't had a chance to really hone their phonics skills because they're not using them much. They may be having a phonics lesson way over here, but then they're not applying it to the reading that they're doing. And if a child struggles with reading, I can guarantee they're going to pick the thing that's easier to do, which is guessing with the picture versus actually sounding out words."

So yeah, I've got to say this blog post was a definite miss. It's disappointing to hear that they don't see any value in decodable books, when really that's the primary reading material that our youngest readers should be reading. Will they be exposed to other

quality texts? Absolutely! They'll be exposed to them in whole class read alouds, and the comprehension discussions that follow. But, for their actual instruction and practice, they should be reading decodable books.

If you're not sure about that, if you're still holding back on that one, I understand. I'm going to provide a bunch of episodes and blog posts for you, in the show notes, that will help you. So thanks, so much, for listening.

I'll be back next week with another Fountas & Pinnell reaction. You can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode61. See you next week.