# Triple R Teaching

Hello, this is Anna Geiger from Reach All Readers. You are listening to Episode 64 of

and Pinnell's blog posts in which they defend themselves against criticism of their work. In addition to responding to criticism, they also answer questions and one of those we're going to address today.

The question is, "What do you mean by 'responsive teaching' and why is it important?

This is part of Gay Su Pinnell's response to that question:

"Responsive teaching meets students where they are and takes them where they need to go next in their learning. It's a highly complex process. It's a constant cycle that takes place across multiple instructional contexts. The teacher would notice the language children use during oral discussion of books that they hear read aloud, what they write in their reader's notebook about books they've read, what they write in the writing process, what they write in response to reading in guided reading, read aloud, and their own choice books. So the teacher is always gathering data across five contexts for teaching reading and five contexts for teaching writing, as well as a daily direct, explicit, and systematic teaching of phonics, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary and spelling.

"So, you're really looking across the language arts with the best knowledge of how readers and writers and spellers develop over time. Just to be very clear, responsive teaching is not a label and it is not a relabeling of anything called 'balanced literacy' or even 'whole language approach' to literacy learning. We have always advocated for a child-centered, responsive approach to literacy learning, not a program-centered approach. A child-centered approach. One that focuses on observation and assessment rather than holding to a script is much more than a label. This approach, focusing on the child, enables teachers to be constructive, inquiry based, language based, and to engage each child's strength and curiosity.

"With responsive teaching, educators can respond to and meet children where they are in their learning — to teach the child, not the program, not the book. In this way, teaching reading is a science, a science of observation, decision-making, and

knowledge. And this is what we call responsive teaching."

Sounds good, right? And a lot of that IS good because we don't want a script that we refer to constantly without veering off script, right? We want to be aware of the students in front of us and not follow a list of questions without paying attention to the students' answers.

My first year of teaching first grade, I was required to use a scripted phonics program. I will be upfront with you, I hated it. I thought it was awful.

Looking back, I still think it was awful, but it would've been helpful if I understood the value of some of the pieces. I think if I understood how important a lot of those basic skills were, I would not have been so unhappy about implementing the program. I think that would've been conveyed more to the students, and I could have made it more exciting.

The teacher next door loved the program. She thought it was great because of all the foundational skills it was teaching. I have a feeling her class did a lot better with it than mine did!

That experience soured me on scripts, but I have to say, probably a big reason for that is I was immersing myself in books by Fountas and Pinnell, Regie Routman, Lucy Calkins, and others in the whole language or balanced literacy general field who tell teachers over and over that they're the ones who know their students best and they are the ones that should make the decisions. I would never want to take away from teachers or tell them that they don't matter, that anybody could go in and teach this program because that's just not true!

Still, I think we need to be aware that this idea that we're just watching the students, taking notes, and then deciding what to teach next can be problematic because it requires a great deal of skill on the part of the teacher to do this well.

I think so many teachers are thrown into these balanced literacy classrooms, perhaps as brand new teachers, and they don't have that experience yet. They're not really sure how to have all these organized, observational assessments and then act on those. It's really hard to do, even for an experienced teacher.

So I think that this all sounds really great, but it's really hard to put into practice.

I also want to address that the structured literacy approach is NOT against working with students in what they know. In fact, diagnostic teaching is an essential piece of the structured literacy approach.

On The Big Dippers website, which is all about the science of reading, they write this, "Diagnostic: A characteristic of reading instruction where the teacher monitors the progress of their students, being alert to where skill gaps exist, and adjusts instruction based on students' immediate needs."

Did you catch that, "immediate?" That sounds a lot like what Fountas and Pinnell are talking about. They want you to be attuned to the students in front of you. A good structured literacy teacher will do that.

The Big Dippers website also goes on to explain what that looks like. They write, "Teachers use formal and informal data to inform instruction. When working with students in small or large groups, the teacher is consistently monitoring the progress of students in order to measure effectiveness towards the specific target. Educators are also able to intervene appropriately so students can achieve automaticity and mastery of a skill or concept. Information about a student's understanding and mastery is used to inform how a teacher plans explicit instruction in a thoughtful manner. Teachers can look for patterns in student errors to pinpoint specific deficits in reading skills or concepts and determine if a change in instruction is needed."

Now when I taught with a balanced literacy approach, I had a lot of ways to collect informal data. I have to say though, most of it was just stored in my head because I was so busy managing all the pieces of our day. I didn't do a lot of formal reading assessment, probably because I didn't see the value in it and I didn't know what to do with the results.

There's a really good blog post recently published on the Right to Read Project by Margaret Goldberg and it's called "Data: The Closest Thing We Have to a Crystal Ball." She is talking about how, as a balanced literacy teacher, she resisted these formal assessments. She didn't think they told her what she really needed to know. She thought it was a waste of time.

At the end of the post she explains what she wishes she had known, as a balanced literacy teacher, about data and data collection. One thing that she notes is that

screening data tells us whether our approach is working. Families have a right to know if their child is likely to experience difficulty with reading.

This is getting a little off topic, but I'm currently reading the book "Overcoming Dyslexia" by Sally Shaywitz, and she says over and over in there how important it is to give early screening to kindergartners so that we know if it looks like they're likely to have challenges with reading. That way we can address that head on from the very beginning.

SO many times I hear people say, "Oh, they'll catch on," or "By third grade, everybody catches up." I don't know where that comes from, by the way. I've never seen any research to back up that idea. In fact, I see things to the contrary all the time.

The fact is screening assessments are important. They help us know if there are certain students who would benefit from extra intervention. They help us know if what we're doing is working. They help us know if our students are getting closer to meeting their goal.

So yes, responsive teaching is important, but it's not just observation. It is also specific, formal assessment that we give at different periods of the year, and then we use that to inform our instruction and thereby help individual students.

So that's my reaction to the Fountas and Pinnell "Just to Clarify" series episode eight. We have two more to go. If you want to find the show notes for this episode, you can head to reachallreaders.com/episode64.

Thanks for listening and we'll see you next week!