Triple R Teaching

In today's episode I got to speak with the wonderful Nancy Hennessy, who has written "The Reading Comprehension Blueprint" and co-wrote "The Reading Comprehension Blueprint Activity Book." She really is an expert on all things reading comprehension, which is so helpful because, as we know, comprehension is so complex it's hard to break down, and she really does that very well.

In today's episode we narrow in on sentence comprehension, talking about specific ways you can help students understand sentences. As Nancy Hennessy quotes Cheryl Scott in this episode, sentences are the worker bees of the text. When we're trying to get students to understand text, we often have to narrow it down to the sentence level, and this episode will help you do that, so let's get started!

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Nancy!

Nancy Hennessy: Thanks so much! I love this opportunity. You're doing such good work.

Anna Geiger: Thank you. I'm so pleased that you joined me to talk about reading comprehension, but before we get into that, could you talk to us about your history in education and what brought you to what you're doing now?

Nancy Hennessy: Well, first and foremost, I'm a teacher. I began as a teacher of children and adolescents, and now primarily I work with adults, with other educators learning together. I worked in public school for many, many years, everything from the classroom to the central office, regular and special education.

Along the way I realized that when I was a special ed teacher at the middle school, I didn't know how to teach those boys that were in my class how to read, so I connected with what was then the Orton Dyslexia Society, which became the International Dyslexia Association. I became the president at some point in time, along the way making many friends and learning so, so much from the researchers and other

practitioners. Ultimately I became one of Wilson's lead trainers a number of years ago, and I have some background in Orton-Gillingham as well.

Along the way, certainly continuing to work with teachers, teach teachers, and ultimately connecting with Louisa Moats and becoming one of the original group of national trainers, then having the privilege of working with her on the second edition module that had to do with comprehension.

That really launched my interest. Up until then, many people I think would describe me as "the decoding queen" because of my interest and my passion for making certain that young people and adolescents learned how to read. But I began to realize how deep comprehension, and as I was leaving public school and retiring, I began to really focus on comprehension.

I developed a full day training, The Blueprint, and as I worked with teachers, as I consulted with educators in schools, they kept asking me, where's your book? And I kept saying, what book? I'm not writing a book. But eventually I did write a book.

I continued to work with educators. I've certainly developed workshop courses primarily focused on comprehension, and of course, most recently I co-authored an activity guide to go along with The Blueprint.

I think first and foremost, I want people to know that I'm still a teacher, that I truly believe we all learn together and that we all need to continue learning. It is our work.

Anna Geiger: That's very interesting that you started out, like you said, "the decoding queen" with all of your Orton-Gillingham training and everything, but then you went off in a different path as a main focus, which is a blessing to teachers because there's a lot out there for us on decoding, but not as much on comprehension.

I think, like what you said, it's so complex and you've managed to distill it, or summarize it, in your Blueprint. So can you walk us through what The Blueprint is exactly?

Nancy Hennessy: Sure. All right. Stepping back and thinking about the science always informs what it is that we do, so what is it that we knew about comprehension?

We could turn to several different models. We could turn to that wonderful visual metaphor, the Reading Rope. As I began to dive more deeply into that, I realized that not only is comprehension complex, but we have to acknowledge all of the language processing skills that go into comprehension.

I began to think about a framework, and that's what The Blueprint is. It's a framework, it's a master plan. It is not a unit organizer or a lesson plan. One can derive those from The Blueprint, but it is a framework that reflects really those research models with a focus on language comprehension, the importance of developing oral language early on, and then thinking about how one goes about translating.

The Blueprint provides a scaffold structure for educators. It begins by asking educators to think about what are their goals, what is the purpose? It identifies the need for content goals. If we think about what's the ultimate goal of comprehension, it is to learn. It is to gain knowledge. It is to use that knowledge in our lives to participate fully. It's thinking through what are the critical understandings, what's the knowledge that you want students to take away?

Then what are the literacy goals that we need to put in place in order to accomplish that? Processes equal quality products. It's thinking about vocabulary, sentence comprehension, knowledge, that includes text structure knowledge and background knowledge, and then the ability to work at these different levels of understanding including imprints.

The Blueprint provides direction in terms of what are the critical contributors, how do you go about designing and delivering instruction, but it also provides educators with some sense of what are the questions they need to ask themselves in terms of each of those different components of The Blueprint.

For instance, with vocabulary, what are the words we need to teach? What should we intentionally, on purpose, teach? How do we go about doing that? What do we need to do in terms of developing independent word learning strategies and so on? The questions that go along with those contributors really come right out of the literature as well.

It's very much based in the science and hopefully provides an opportunity for teachers to think through the curricula, because it's curriculum agnostic, and the programs that they're using, and to be thinking about what is it that our students need? What does the curricula or the program provide? Where else do I need to supplement and enhance my instruction so that all of my students are able to read with meaning?

It's quite complex. I love what Hugh Catts says about comprehension. It is not a single skill, it's not a strategy. It involves a broad range of skill and knowledge, and I think we have to keep that in mind.

Hopefully it's helpful!

Anna Geiger: When I think of your Blueprint, what I love about it is that you focus on the content first, not like many of us did in our balanced literacy days where we picked a strategy and that was the focus. We would say, well, our goal is that our students learn to compare and contrast. Whereas your goal might be for students to learn the difference between frogs and toads or whatever they're reading.

What I like about The Blueprint too, I think, is that it provides basically things for teachers to consider as they're about to teach a text. I don't remember learning very much about how to teach comprehension except for to ask questions, and the book really dives deep into things like syntax and things that we don't give a lot of thought to, because as good readers and comprehenders, we may not know what's going to trip our students up. Your book helps teachers figure that out.

Nancy Hennessy: Yeah. I think one of the things we have to step back and think about, and certainly the RAND Reading Study Group kind of provided direction for us, is what is it that goes into the making of meaning and then this ability to walk away with this overall understanding of what it is that you've read? When the reader comes to text, they really have to be thinking about what are the ideas that the author has provided for us? The author does that initially through the use of vocabulary and syntax sentences. Beyond that then how do those ideas link up? How do they connect with one another, that cohesiveness that's so important? Then what's the knowledge that we have to integrate?

I don't mean to say this in a sequential way because this is really very much a recursive process, but what's the background knowledge, including our knowledge of text structure, that will allow for us to go deeper, to go beyond the surface of the text, and then what do we walk away with?

All of that connects back to these different components of instruction, and knowing your students, knowing what your students need, what they're bringing to the text, and what the text demands is particularly important.

Anna Geiger: Like you said, there's just SO many things that go into it. There's text structure, there's vocabulary, etc.

I thought today we would zero in on sentence comprehension because I think that's a tricky one for teachers to really look at a sentence and know what about the sentence is tricky. I thought we'd talk about some specific ways to build sentence comprehension, and maybe we could start with why it's important to break down an individual sentence for students and why teachers haven't maybe done this traditionally.

Nancy Hennessy: Well, I think that the program and curricula that perhaps we've used in the past have been very focused, as you said, on strategy. We've not thought about all of these different levels of language processing that are necessary in order to make meaning of the text.

One of the individuals that I've turned to in the past in terms of her work is Cheryl Scott, and she talks about the fact that if in fact we're not able to deal with the complex sentences that we find in academic text, and that begins with read-alouds, if we can't deal with that, no amount of comprehension strategy is going to help us out because the sentences really are the worker bees of the text.

Then Richard Zipoli points out for us the fact that we really don't attend to this in curricula or program, so how can we expect our teachers, our educators, to be thinking about this? We have an emphasis on vocabulary and background knowledge, which is very, very important, but the reality is these things are all interconnected. They work, as the Reading Rope would tell us, in concert with one another.

Thinking about, again, Cheryl Scott's words, the sentences are the worker bees of the text, one by one they add up to the gist.

Anna Geiger: That's very interesting.

Nancy Hennessy: Yeah, we have to be thinking about can the students not only pull out the meaning of the words, but can they understand how those words work together in order to convey an idea? Those idea units, we successively aggregate those as we read, and that's what allows us to walk away with an overall understanding.

Anna Geiger: One of the activities that's becoming popular for helping kids learn about sentence structure is sentence anagrams where you have the words all mixed up and they put them together. I think too often kids just get those and then they're just supposed to do the work without any guidance. Can you give some tips for how to get students started with those and how to support them as they do them?

Nancy Hennessy: Yeah. Well, I think even prior to working with the anagrams, if we can just back up a little bit, I think one of the things that has to happen is we need to begin to teach students how we build sentences. That happens somewhat, I think, when we're teaching them about writing. When we teach them about the parts of speech, the phrases, the clauses, and so on, the building blocks of sentences, there tends to be a focus on form. What I would call form is their names, noun, phrase, clause, independent, dependent, and so on. There tends to be focus on form instead of on function. What do they do in terms of meaning?

We begin, first and foremost, with teaching them where's the who in the sentence? Oh, that's a noun. Where's the do? What's happening? That's a verb. Where's the which one? What kind? Explicitly teaching that and giving them opportunity, modeling that, even through sorts and so on, through organizers, structured organizers.

Then when you give them the words on cards, scrambled sentences, you can say to them, all right, look for the do words, look for the happening words, find the verbs. You can make the connection then to the label, to the form. Now go and see if you can't find the who words or the what words that connect to those do words and any describers, which one, what kind, how many, where, when, how. Using questions that connect back, I think, allows for them to use anagrams. I think anagrams can be very powerful.

The other thing I would say is, I think sometimes when teachers begin to think about instruction, they think about this as separate from the text. It needs to be from the text. Again, choosing sentences from the text to work with. I think that's particularly important. Sometimes we need to modify the sentences a little bit, dependent upon where the students are at. I always talk about fidelity with flexibility here.

At the same time, I think it's very important not to make this an isolated activity. The integration, I think, with the current curricula, with the program, is particularly important.

Some steps would be capitalization and punctuation, look for that first. That's a good clue. Now look for your verbs. Now look for your words that connect your who or your

what, your nouns, your describers. Then look for those words that link up, that connect up, like your conjunctions, your prepositions.

To do that, they have to understand how those words actually convey meaning. In the words of Louisa Moats, a sentence is a linguistic frame in which these categories of words kind of slot in, and we have to understand how those words contribute to the meaning.

Yeah, anagrams can be lots of fun, but there's some instruction that has to happen in order to use them meaningfully.

Anna Geiger: When I think of teachers getting started with those, in the primary grades they might be reading a text and then afterwards they put the words of the anagram up and they work together with the class. I like the idea of starting with a verb versus the noun, and I think we might think we should start from the beginning of the sentence, but nouns can appear in many places in the sentence. That may not be the smart place to start, but we know that the verb kind of anchors it. Thanks for explaining that.

Let's talk about questioning. So you have talked about having a sentence, perhaps from something that you've read to the students, fiction or nonfiction, and then you're looking at the sentence and you're asking questions about it. Could you walk us through what that would look like?

Nancy Hennessy: Sure. If you took a sentence from... Let's say you're working on a unit that has to do with personal identity, and we're working with little ones maybe in first grade, and we're reading "Chrysanthemum." We might have read that aloud to them, dependent upon where they are with their reading skill. We would be modeling for them, having them listen to the sentence.

Here's a sentence from "Chrysanthemum," because I pulled one so we'd have an example, "On the first day of school, Chrysanthemum wore her sunniest dress and her brightest smile."

Now if we've directly taught them about the who and the do words and the which one, what kind, how many, and when and where, we could go back and we could use the phrasing, "Let's listen again to the sentence, 'On the first day of school.' What question does that answer? What does that tell us about Chrysanthemum? Oh, that tells us when this happened, on the first day of school. Who's this about? Who wore her sunniest

dress? Oh, Chrysanthemum did. What did she wear? She wore her dress. What kind of a dress is it? She also wore her brightest smile. What kind of smile was that? Her brightest smile."

It's just working through a sentence, and pulling a sentence that perhaps is a little longer as students work through the grades, but even beginning with read alouds, the sentences are complex. They're long, they may have phrases, clauses, embeddings within them, and we need to kind of parse them for the students, separate them out into these varied components.

The other thing that I often think about as they move through the grades is using a structured organizer. It looks a lot like a sentence frame. It's got a column for the who or the what, a column for the which one, what kind, how many, and so on. As they're capable of reading, we can give them the words on cards.

An example might be something from "The Founding Fathers," which is expository text. It would be more like sixth or seventh grade. We could give them varied words and we could have them do the sorting. The reality is once they do this sorting...

Here's a sentence, "The founding fathers are a group of men who were key figures in initiating American independence from Britain and establishing American government." That's a pretty long sentence, and that's what begins to happen as they move through the grades, the sentences are more dense, there are more ideas, they're longer, again, they have more embedding.

Pulling out words, having them sort words, putting them into structured organizers, and even saying to them, can you make a sentence now from this, orally and then perhaps in writing, begins to allow for them to deconstruct these more complex sentences that they encounter.

It begins early on though, it has to start with those read alouds early on. As we're developing that word recognition capability with decodable texts we also need to be reading to them these texts that are age and grade appropriate and parsing and modeling for them how we can work our way through the text with questions.

Anna Geiger: A nice thing about this activity too, taking the sentences apart, is it doesn't have to take very long and this can just be part of your routine. After you read aloud, you pull out a sentence. Building up over the year, that's an incredible amount of experience they've had working with sentences.

I know about what you said too, when you see what kids have to read in third grade, like with my own kids, and then I see their fifth grade social studies book, it's a big leap!

Nancy Hennessy: It's unbelievable! Cheryl Scott and then Richard Zipoli, they talk about the fact that we've got these long sentences. We have sentences where sometimes the who is separated from the do because of embedding, sometimes it's active versus passive voice. We have to be aware of all that. That's what our children are going to encounter if in fact, they're going to be able to work with texts that go beyond decodable.

By the way, we can use decodable text as a base for building this understanding as well. We can reinforce with our decodable as we are developing these language comprehension capabilities. I always talk about intentionally teaching and incidentally on purpose teaching. It begins early on.

Anna Geiger: Can you talk to us about another strategy in your workbook called Picture Prompted Generation?

Nancy Hennessy: For Picture Prompted Generation, the examples in the activity book really come from my co-author, from Julia Salamon, who is currently still working in school, and so it has that connection to students that's so important. She particularly likes using pictures from the Library of Congress, National Archives, and so on, but always, always connected back to what it is that you're reading.

I know one of the examples we have in the book is a picture of the pioneers moving westward. We would be reading "Westward Ho," for instance, and different texts, both narrative and expository text, but we'd be using a picture to begin to talk about the experience, and what one sees within the picture, and then the construction of sentences.

I think what's important is we're always thinking about not only understanding the sentences that we are reading pulled from text, but we're also thinking about how we can compose sentences based on our own understanding. It's this integration of reading and writing, and visuals are a wonderful way of doing this.

I think we also have an example of one for sentence generation, and it happens to be

the Wright brothers. Of course I live right here in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, so I'm very familiar with Wright Brothers National Park. But again, it would be connected back to thinking about the texts that we are reading, why they were pioneers, for instance, and always connecting it back to a big idea of critical understandings.

Then thinking about can we use a picture of the plane taking flight? Perhaps we can provide a prompt then, a kernel sentence, and this is very frequently something that's done in writing instruction, explicit writing instruction. The picture then helps to prompt both oral, to talk about it orally, and then the written component.

Questioning is very important, structured organizers are very important, pictures are very important. There are a variety of strategies that we can use to help students parse the sentences.

Anna Geiger: Pictures are so useful even in the primary grades, right? Like you said, the oral language is so important.

Nancy Hennessy: Oh, absolutely. I think we have another picture that has to do with puppies. Sometimes our critical understanding might be revolving around animals, the treatment of animals, the characteristics of animals, and so on. Even just taking a look at these puppies as we read stories about puppies and generating some language around that.

I can't stress enough this connection between oral and written language. I mean, we can't be forgetting about that.

Yes, in the early grades we're developing those word recognition skills. If we know the Reading Rope, we're developing the lower strands, but at the same time we have to be focused on those upper strands as well. Then throughout the grades, giving students opportunity to have conversation about what it is that they're reading and then moving to their writing.

Anna Geiger: So start with that oral sentence building and then move to writing when they're ready to do that.

One thing you talk a lot about, and one thing I read a lot about when it comes to syntax and things, are phrases and clauses, and I think a lot of teachers don't know the

difference. I have to remind myself! How does that come into teaching kids, and when do we start being explicit about phrases and clauses?

Nancy Hennessy: Well, I think we can begin to be explicit early on. Even as we're doing read alouds, we can be talking about a phrase that describes a who or a what or a phrase that describes what's happening.

"The little boy," that's a noun phrase, "ran quickly," that's a verb phrase. Again, focusing on function first. "What's that telling you about what's happening? Oh, he ran. How did he run? He ran quickly."

Phrases have everything to do with a group of words that work well together. They don't have both a who and a do, they have either one, and I think that's important, but they answer the same questions really as parts of speech. That sort that I was talking about, even word cards, you can put phrases on word cards and you can have students begin to do the sort, or you can do that orally with them. I think you can begin early on.

The thing is we have scope and sequence for writing, but we don't have scope and sequence for comprehension. The reason is because the texts that we're reading don't follow a scope and sequence. Oftentimes people will say to me, where's the scope and sequence for comprehension? It isn't there, it isn't there.

As much as possible, we should try to align what it is that students are learning about in written expression, but it doesn't always totally match up. It may call for a stopping for a moment and doing a little bit of pre-teaching and explicit teaching so that students are able to work their way through.

I will say this, if I were thinking about a sequence in terms of sentences, I would start always with the parts of speech. Look at how those words convey function, move to phrases, and then clauses.

Then of course, clauses have both the who and a do, so we need to teach them about that. There are varied types of clauses, and so we can start with whether it's independent/dependent, that type of language, but it gets a little tricky when you get into the upper grades, like a relative clause. In that "The Founding Fathers" quote that I just read to you, "who were key figures," is a relevant clause.

We have to keep thinking about what it is that's being introduced in written expression that we can connect to and what's not. We do some mini lessons then so our students are able to parse those sentences.

Anna Geiger: So would you say the point of learning about phrases and clauses is to understand their function within a sentence?

Nancy Hennessy: Always, always, always. Because within a clause, you're going to find, for instance, you'll find a who and a do, whether it's a subordinate clause or not, or a dependent clause, whatever we want to call it. What's really important, though, when we teach clauses, is we need to teach those signal words, and we need to directly teach the meaning of the signal words.

That comes into play when you begin to talk about complex sentences. Oftentimes, again, in written expression, we're teaching students about those complex sentences and what those conjunctions mean, but we need to carry that over into comprehension and remind our students that those are signal words. They're telling us something about the text, and of course, and some of them are very specific to expository text.

Anna Geiger: When I think about the phrases, and like you said we can start very young, it might make sense when teachers are doing sentence anagrams with young kids to maybe have a noun phrase on a card and a verb phrase on a card.

Nancy Hennessy: Yes! They absolutely could do that. That's a very good idea. They absolutely could do that. That would be a nice way to start for them.

Anna Geiger: Let's move into types of sentences and when and how to teach them.

Nancy Hennessy: Okay. Again, if we begin to think about scope and sequence for written expression, we know we begin with simple sentences, but that's not going to really be the case when we are reading academic texts. So yes, we want students to understand, first of all, that simple sentences convey an idea, but even that gets complicated when we begin to talk about, well, how many whos are there and how many dos are there?

I think we have to think about this in a systematic way and pull sentences again from our text and have some conversations about how many who's do you see here? How

many do's do you see here? How many what's? Then thinking through and teaching them that, again, when we think about complex sentences, we're going to have one thing that depends on the other, and what's the word that signals that? What kind of relationship is it signaling? Is it signaling time? Is it signaling that there's something connected, additive? That's the simplest one, and time is not so difficult, but when you get into "because" or "although," that becomes more difficult.

That is somewhat developmental and sequential and we should understand that about our students, even though we may find those types of signal words early on in even read alouds.

Then of course compound sentences conveying again, how many ideas are you looking for here? You can separate them out; they're independent of one another.

Those are sort of key things to be thinking about so they understand the logical relationships that occur within the ideas in those types of sentences. Again, it is not so important to me that you teach them that it's a simple compound/complex sentence. It's more about how many ideas are we looking for, and how do the ideas relate to one another?

Anna Geiger: You talked about signal words, and I think one of the great ways to work on recognizing and understanding how signal words connect parts of the sentences is through sentence combining and expansion, which I think are getting a lot of attention these days. Can you talk about those?

Nancy Hennessy: Yes. Well certainly when we think about sentence combining, there is a scope and sequence for that. It's Bruce Saddler's work and he gives us a very nice sequence. He begins by saying to think about combining adjectives and adverbs, for instance. That's the very first thing he talks about.

I often think about, can we pull sentences from the text? We can also modify them a little bit. For instance, if we're reading "Tuck Everlasting," a lot of fourth and fifth graders read that, you could say, "We know one of the characters is Winnie, and we know that Winnie felt afraid and she felt disheartened, but those are represented in different sentences in the text. How would one combine that? Oh, Winnie felt afraid AND disheartened. We're using that little combining word, that word that signals combination or additive."

Then of course, we can look at some of our other texts, particularly expository text, and

there will be other types of signal words that we see there that will allow for us combining.

When one looks at his scope and sequence, you begin to see combining compound subjects, predicates and so on.

The other thing about those signal words, and this is kind of interesting, is they're also cohesive devices. What do I mean by that? Well, one of the ways that authors combine ideas or integrate ideas within the sentences or between sentences is by using what are called cohesive devices. They fall into two categories, one is conjunctions and sometimes prepositions. It's the tying up of ideas. If we say something like, "when this occurred," well "when" is a signal that we've got some time going on here and it's going to connect up with the rest of the sentence.

Here's another one, "When the grasshopper found itself dying of hunger, it saw the ants distributing..." and it goes on. That's obviously from a fable, and what it's signaling to us is there's a connection here between when the ants were distributing and what happened when the grasshopper noticed this, so that's a tie-up.

The other type of cohesive - making things coherent, organized, hanging together - would be what we call cohesive ties. The most popular one among that would be pronouns. So again, "When the grasshopper found itself dying of hunger it," who's "it"? Oh, it's the grasshopper. We can find lots of examples of that.

We also use synonyms and substitutions. If we went to, "The founding fathers are a group of men." Who's a group of men? Oh yeah, it's the founding fathers. That's something that's very difficult for struggling readers, by the way. Some readers that are more proficient get that, struggling readers usually don't. We need to directly teach that, explicitly teach it.

Anna Geiger: A good way I've seen to do that is where you have a text that you're reading, a complex text you're reading with the class, and you have yours displayed so that everyone can see it. You're identifying those cohesive ties and then having them circle and draw back to the word or phrase that it's connected to.

Nancy Hennessy: Yeah, that's right. That's right. I've seen teachers actually do that. They take varied text, whether it be something that's narrative, expository, a newspaper article, and so on. It's that coding. Oftentimes I'll talk with teachers about coding. You can underline certain things, you can circle other things, and so on. Yeah,

that needs to be taught directly, explicitly, and in a systematic way.

Anna Geiger: You've really helped us narrow in on sentence comprehension which is such, I think, a hard thing to wrap your brain around. Thank you for all those examples. Those were super helpful.

I want to give an encouragement to anyone that is listening to make sure they check out your book if they haven't already. "The Reading Comprehension Blueprint," which talks about everything reading comprehension, but also sentence comprehension, and then your activity book, which you co-authored and recently, very recently, published, which gives really specific examples for teaching these skills across the grades. I highly recommend both.

Nancy Hennessy: Thank you so much. I greatly appreciated the opportunity to talk with you. I love talking about sentence comprehension!

Anna Geiger: I can tell!

Well thank you so much. People can also find you online. I'll be sure to link to as many workshops as I can find on YouTube, but I know there are a lot that you've given that people can check out to learn more, and there are other podcasts you've spoken on as well. Thanks for all you do for teachers!

Nancy Hennessy: Thank you for all that you and your colleagues are doing as well.

Anna Geiger: Thank you so much.

Nancy Hennessy: Bye.

Anna Geiger: You can find the show notes for today's episode at themeasuredmom.com/episode163. Talk to you next time!

Closing: That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources

visit Anna at her home base, themeasuredmom.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.