



Glean Education's Research to Practice Podcast Episode #21 - Nancy Hennessey (Literacy Consultant)

Nancy Hennessey: As an educator, and I'll include myself in this group, I really hadn't thought about how complicated comprehension is. I think for many of us, there's kind of this misleading sense of ease when it comes to making meaning. And the reality is it's extremely complex and complicated. As the reader is progressing through the text, we're making sense of word meaning, we're integrating word meaning, we're integrating sentences. So it is a very dynamic interaction that's occurring between the reader and the text.

Jessica Hamman: Hi and welcome to Glean Education's Research to Practice Podcast, where we talk to education experts from around the world about their latest work and bring their fascinating findings out from the journal pages and into your classroom. First, a word from our sponsors.

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Jessica Hamman: I'm Jessica Hamman, founder of Glean Education. And today we are with Nancy Hennessey, an educational consultant and past president of the International Dyslexia Association. Nancy is an experienced teacher and administrator who provided district leadership in the development of professional learning systems and innovative programming for special needs students. Nancy has consulted on various topics ranging from professional practices to effective student instruction and assessment.

Jessica Hamman: She's delivered and designed keynote addresses as well as virtual and live workshops, training courses for educators nationally and internationally. Nancy was the national trainer for Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling, LETRS, and co-authored module six of LETRS, Digging for Meaning: Teaching Text Comprehension, second edition, with Dr. Louisa Moats. Her



chapter, *Working with Word Meaning: Vocabulary Instruction*, can be found in the fourth edition of *Multisensory Teaching of Basic Skills*.

Jessica Hamman: Most recently, Nancy authored a book on comprehension, *The Reading Comprehension Blueprint: Helping Students Make Meaning from Text*. In 2011, Nancy received the International Dyslexia Association's Margaret Byrd Rawson's Lifetime Achievement Award. So, wow. That's quite an amazing bio. Thank you for being here, Nancy.

Nancy Hennessey: Thank you so much, Jessica. And I certainly appreciate the opportunity to talk about comprehension today. Something that I think is very misunderstood and perhaps not addressed as deeply as it needs to be for our students to achieve. I also want to applaud the work that you're doing with Glean Education, providing opportunity for educators to learn more so that they can better serve their students.

Jessica Hamman: Well, thank you so much. We're mainly here to talk about *The Reading Comprehension Blueprint*. And this is such an important book for teachers, because as you said, it's an area of instruction that's so critical for our students. Can you tell us a little bit about the background behind how this book came to be?

Nancy Hennessey: Well, I think those who know me know that for many years I was very focused on word recognition because of my involvement with



the International Dyslexia Association. And while that certainly is critical, it's the on-ramp for reading achievement and reading success I think that as I became more and more involved in the world of professional development, I realized that not enough was being done to call attention to comprehension. That comprehension is quite complex and that we as educators often tend to think about comprehension in terms of product, the outcomes, what our students are able to demonstrate in terms of their understanding.

Nancy Hennessey: And while I was working with Louisa Moats as a national trainer, one of the modules that we were delivering, first edition, certainly was a module on comprehension. And as a trainer, as someone who teaches other teachers, you're always learning yourself. So I began to dig much more deeply into comprehension. It led me to certainly the work of Hollis Scarborough, Walter Kintsch, Oakhill and Cain, just to mention a few. And I began to realize that we really needed to dig deeply into this topic. And so Louisa provided an opportunity for me to work with her on co-authoring the second edition, which certainly went deeper than the first edition.

Nancy Hennessey: And that set me off on this journey. And I developed then, a trainee for teachers, the blueprint and started delivering that at least 10 years ago. And had teachers then saying to me, "Where's your book?" And I was like, "What book? I'm all about working directly with you and talking with you and thinking about your practices." But that's really what set me on the journey.



Jessica Hamman: Well, and in their question of “where’s the book,” really what they’re saying is, “How can I take this home and work from it?” Because they needed some materials to back up the training they got from you. So clear that they were looking for a resource.

Nancy Hennessey: And I was fortunate to have the opportunity along the way to work with teachers in public school. Of course, I was in public school many years myself as both a teacher and administrator. But to work with teachers, to learn from them. And then I had an opportunity to consult at an academy in Pennsylvania. And it really became a learning laboratory in terms of taking the blueprint, implementing the blueprint and being able to think through what did this look like in those classrooms, in that particular setting.

Nancy Hennessey: And then I’ve had some opportunity to work with other teachers in public school system on book study before the book was even published, but also through workshop. And so all of that, all of my experiences, both personal experiences as well as those working with other educators really became the foundation for the book. I have a colleague who said to me not so long ago and I particularly love this quote, “We are the sum of all our teachers.” And really the book is the sum of everything that I’ve learned from the researchers as well as practitioners.

Jessica Hamman: And I think it’s an interesting journey that you started kind of in the decoding and word based sphere, working so closely with IDA and then through practice and through working with teachers also came to the understanding and through all the research that you



quoted as well, that comprehension is just a core component. Making sure that if students don't have that comprehension, then nothing really matters. So it really does all need to tie in together. So can you tell us a little bit more about how a student arrives at comprehension? Can we start there?

Nancy Hennessey: So I think first of all I like to think about the fact that comprehension is the end goal. It is the reason that we read, right? And so I think that's really important for all of us to keep in mind. Comprehension is really all about learning. It's about acquiring and being able to apply knowledge. So that comes to mind first and foremost. What also comes to mind is the fact that, as an educator and I'll include myself in this group, I really hadn't about how complicated comprehension is. And so for a student to come to text to make meaning of the text, multiple things have to happen.

Nancy Hennessey: Comprehension is not one thing. It's not a single entity. Because it seems effortless, I think, for many of us, there's kind of this misleading sense of ease when it comes to making meaning. And the reality is it's extremely complex and complicated. So when the student comes to text or when we come to text, what we're actually doing is working with and engaging in multiple language and cognitive processes. And we're interacting with the text, bringing our own knowledge base, our own capabilities, usually for a specific purpose.

Nancy Hennessey: So there are multiple definitions out there of comprehension, extracting and constructing meaning and so on. But the one that I



think read best for me that explains the complexity is something that Anne Castles and her colleague wrote the way in which she describes comprehension or they describe comprehension. Talking about it is not a single entity, right? That, yes, it's a product but that product, it's an orchestrated. Those are the words that they actually used. An orchestrated product of linguistic and cognitive processes that are doing one, that are operating on text, right?

Nancy Hennessey: So we have to consider the fact that text brings its own features and demands, right? Interacting with background knowledge and certainly other processes, the reader is bringing something to the text. And then of course we're setting purpose and goals for our readers. And so this is very much in line with what the [inaudible 00:10:02] reading study group report talked about in terms of different dimensions of reading comprehension.

Nancy Hennessey: So coming away from this understanding that, "Yes, we want our students to be able to produce a product. We want them to demonstrate understanding. For instance, a summary, identify main ideas, talk about different elements of plot and so on." But the way that they get there is through having these language and cognitive processes and skills in place and interacting with the text. And I think that's particularly important to keep in mind because you don't get a high quality product without high quality processes. So that then I think kind of brings us to as an educator, "Well, what are the processes? What are you talking about, language processes?"



Nancy Hennessey: And so of course we want to turn to the science, we want to turn to the research. And we certainly can think about Hollis Scarborough's work. In which she talk to us in her wonderful visual metaphor, The Reading Rope. She describes skilled reading as this ability to be able to read the words, yes, and make meaning simultaneously. And so she talks about what goes into word recognition, but also what goes into language comprehension. What are those things that the student needs to bridge in order to be able to make sense of the text?

Nancy Hennessey: And so things like vocabulary, background knowledge, what she calls language structures, which has everything to do with semantics and syntax. And then of course, literacy knowledge, knowledge of the genre. Of how print works and the genre. And last but not least, she talks about verbal reasoning, which I think for educators really transfers into this deeper understanding, this ability to inference.

Nancy Hennessey: And so, thinking about those language comprehension capabilities, and then, Oakhill and Cain go a little further with this in terms of describing levels of language processing and say, "Well, what happens when the reader comes to text?" Well, yes, they have to read the word. Okay. They have to make meaning of the words. So there's your vocabulary. They have to work out the syntactic structure of the sentences. There's your sentence comprehension. How those sentences relate to one another, the integration of meaning.



Nancy Hennessey: But that alone is not sufficient. They also have to bring their background knowledge so that they can understand what's not explicitly stated in the text, what's implicit. And ultimately they and others that have looked at the ultimate goal of comprehension is this creation of a coherent representation of text, a mental model, this kind of overall understanding. And really, this takes a great deal of effort on the part of the reader.

Nancy Hennessey: And then you might say, "Well, what about those cognitive processes? You talked about language." Yeah, there are cognitive processes involved as well. We have to think about attention and working memory and executive function and so on. So, that's pretty complex. And I don't think that's something that most of us who have taught comprehension... And I started my career as a regular Ed-teacher. I taught fourth, fifth and sixth grade from the book. I never thought about comprehension this way. I thought about it as, "Could the kiddos answer the questions that I was asking them about what we just read?" So that's how a student and that's how we arrive at comprehension.

Jessica Hamman: I think it's really interesting when you go through all that. It does sound highly complicated. I think something I read recently by Mary Ann Wolf broke it down in a way that I was able to make a connection that seemed so obvious and simple actually. She talks about comprehension in terms of the importance of the reader having a conversation with the text and how you kind of evolve in your processes, your cognitive processes get engaged and you're communicating with the text.



Jessica Hamman: And it occurred to me that, that's comprehension. Is actually allowing students to become fluent, just like in another language, with text as if it was a foreign language. So that they can communicate with the text and have that conversation that allows them to engage those cognitive processes and learn from it. Just as we would to learn from a conversation like I'm learning from you right now. Once I started thinking about that, sure. Is a conversation that's verbal complex? Sure. But when we put kind of reading comprehension in that context, it felt much simpler and more attainable to me. Thought that was interesting.

Nancy Hennessey: I think that's a very good way of thinking about it. I think that it's this kind of dynamic interaction that's occurring between the reader and the text. And of course you have a task or a purpose in mind and hopefully your context is supporting you, but it's really the reader and the text. And the text is bringing certain demands and you're bringing certain capabilities. And how well that conversation goes depends upon whether or not there's, I don't want to call it a match, but that you're able to at least surface those abilities that align with what the text is asking you to do.

Nancy Hennessey: And we build that meaning over time. So when I talk about this mental model or this overall understanding, as the reader is progressing through the text we're making sense of word meaning, we're integrating word meaning, we're integrating sentences, we're bringing forward... So it is a very dynamic interaction that's occurring.



Jessica Hamman: Can you think of some misconceptions or myths that teachers may hold about comprehension that interfere with their instruction?

Nancy Hennessey: Yeah, one I think is that they tend to think of it as a product. And don't necessarily think about the fact that we have to consider what are these processes that the student has to have in place and then surface in order to work with the text. And so if we're very focused on product, oftentimes then our strategies and activities are very focused on product. And I think that we have to be thinking about the fact that our strategies and activities also have to focus on the development of these processes and skills. One goes hand in hand with the other.

Nancy Hennessey: I love the way that Danielle McNamara describes strategies. She talks about them as strategies made automatic or skills. So strategies are always the means to the end. And the end is that we have these processes and skills in place in an automatic way. We don't always talk about automaticity as it pertains to things like vocabulary and understanding of sentence and surfacing background knowledge. But the reality is we do want those processes to be more automatic. That frees up some of those cognitive processes, the working memory, to attend to other issues that may arise with the text.

Nancy Hennessey: So I think misconceptions around product versus process around how we use strategies. And then the fact that comprehension is really so complex and that it's not easily addressed. I don't want to



say word recognition is easily addressed. It's certainly not, for many students, but we do have many answers regarding word recognition. And I think in terms of comprehension, we're still searching for some of these answers.

Jessica Hamman: Interesting. It maybe that's kind of all the complexity you're talking about is one of the reasons that a lot of teachers rely on programs that may be placed in front of them to build comprehension. They know it's a component that they want in their instruction. And so they look to publish programs that kind of are a box of comprehension and done. So can you just talk a little bit about if you don't have access to a program like that where publishers kind of put thought into how to build comprehension in students. Is it possible to use texts themselves and build off of the text as a robust method of instruction for comprehension?

Nancy Hennessey: Yeah. And in fact, that is what I talk about in *The Blueprint*. Thinking through what your choice of text could be that could accomplish these goals. So let me backtrack just a little bit to this idea of having program, having curricula. I think that teachers need this knowledge base, the science of reading specific to comprehension in terms of making good decisions about how curriculum gets written. If in fact they have that opportunity, what programs get chosen, all right? What professional development they need.

Nancy Hennessey: And then given that oftentimes they already have a program in place that they need to use, how do they take that program and how



do they use their context to apply all that we know about informed comprehension instruction? So one of the things that I've attempted to do is to provide kind of a master plan or blueprint that guides instruction for teachers, for them to be thinking about, if in fact they can choose their own texts. Or if they have texts already in place, how can they enhance or elaborate on their curriculum?

Nancy Hennessey: And that blueprint is a master plan that certainly can be used flexibly. It calls for thinking about or preparing for instruction, all right? And calls attention to the fact that regardless of whatever program you're using, or if you're choosing text, first and foremost, what's the purpose for reading? And I know oftentimes we think it's about the development of these processes and skills. Vocabulary, and background knowledge and so on. And that's critical. Those are literacy goals and objectives.

Nancy Hennessey: But I also think that our teachers need to be thinking about what are our content area goals? What are the big ideas? What are the enduring understandings? What's the knowledge? Because in fact, comprehension is knowledge and there are some researchers that define it that way. So what are our content area goals? And then secondly, what texts do we have in place that allow for us... So what programs, what readings do we have that allow for us to develop both of those sets of goals?

Nancy Hennessey: Now, I think it's important if you have the opportunity and perhaps there's a way to do this in a supplemental way, if you have a



set curriculum, that you choose texts that convey enduring understandings knowledge. That allow for your students to develop academic language, because here's the reality, as students move into third, fourth, fifth grade, and up the texts that they're going to be encountering are going to be written in academic language. More precise vocabulary, syntactic complexity, many different discourse structures. So you want to be able to choose texts that accomplish that goal. The goal of developing the understandings. The goal of also developing these language processes and skills.

Nancy Hennessey: And that you have to think about providing access to your student. So access from the perspective of those students who perhaps don't yet have word recognition skill, allowing for them to read by ear as well as by eye. And then there's one other thing that I didn't directly or as explicitly as I think I should have, addressed in within the book itself, that is consideration of the identity of the student and being culturally responsive. And so, thinking through it's implicit, I think, in some of the selections that I note throughout the book. But really thinking about whether or not the students can make connections to the text. Do they see themselves represented within the text? Can they make connections to their culture, their backgrounds, the conditions in which they live, the language in which they speak and so on. And I think that certainly aligns with this idea of enduring understandings because some of our big ideas or common ideas. That we have to look at them from different perspective.

Jessica Hamman: You have a chapter, I believe it's chapter six in your blueprint that focuses on text structure. And I think that particular chapter lends itself to cultural responsive teaching particularly well. Because



there's certain structures that are relevant in certain cultures that are kind of prized over others. For example, oral tradition in indigenous cultures or in certain Latinx cultures. So potentially that could be a diving off point or an inroad to making your instruction more culturally relevant. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Nancy Hennessey: Yeah, I absolutely think that's true. And it's interesting because I recently had a book talk specific to that chapter. And it provided us with some opportunity to do just that. To talk about some additional ways of thinking about how texts are structured in different cultures, but also the selection of books that connect. And so, as we had at discussion, and as I think about it, I think that an addendum to this would be creating a resource list of additional texts that could be accessed.

Nancy Hennessey: The other thing, since you brought up text structures, just let me briefly say this. In choosing books for comprehension, one has to be very concerned with the fact that oftentimes we turn to narrative and we need to be using more expository and informational text. Because if one of our goals is knowledge building, we have to build knowledge in varied areas across disciplines. And so, I think that's critical. The other thing I would say is, as you go up through the grades, you have to start thinking about disciplinary literacy and how that affects genre and text structure. So anyway...

Jessica Hamman: Can you tell me a little more about what disciplinary literacy means?



Nancy Hennessey: Yeah. Well, disciplinary literacy has to do with the fact that certain texts are written in specific ways dependent upon whether they're history, texts, whether they're science texts, whether they're math texts and or if we're accessing additional materials like primary source documents. So the way in which the text, then, is structured tends to be different. For instance, if you'll looking at historical documents, history texts, you have to be thinking about the author's perspective. You have to think about the context, the historical period of time. You also have to be familiar with the kind of language that might be used or the specific text structures that are used.

Nancy Hennessey: So it's a little different than content area literacy, where it's more about, "Can I identify main idea? Can I make prediction? Can I write summary?" This kind of digs into the fact that some of these texts are going to be written from the viewpoint of a historian or a mathematician or a scientist. You were asking me about choice of text and I kind of dove into the blueprint. Let me just finish talking a like about the blueprint.

Jessica Hamman: Please.

Nancy Hennessey: So certainly in terms of using the blueprint as this framework or master guide, one can focus on these big ideas, knowledge building, the development of literacy skill and then choice of text, if possible. Or examining what you currently have in looking at how you can use those texts or supplement. But then also being very cognizant of the fact that if we want our students to be able to work with the



text, then we have to have ways of addressing strategies and activities for the development of the vocabulary background knowledge and so on, that's found within the text.

Nancy Hennessey: And so what the blueprint does a for teachers is looks at all those different levels of language processing and says, "Well, here's some questions you should ask yourself based on what the science has told us about those particular areas and the strategies and activities that will allow for you to develop those capabilities and then produce the products." So an example would be vocabulary, right? So, all right, we want our students to have word meaning because we know that you cannot make sense of the text without knowing the meaning of the words. So what should we ask ourselves as educators?

Nancy Hennessey: Well, you have to ask ourselves which words will we teach intentionally, directly, explicitly? Which words will we incidentally on purpose pay attention to? Which words lend themselves to independent word learning strategies like the use of morphology and context? And then how, and when within our instruction, are we going to address instruction that is both direct, explicit as well as incidental on purpose. So each of the components of the blueprint looks then at vocabulary, background, knowledge, inference, literacy structures, and so on and asks those kinds of questions. So how do we get our kids to where we want them to be? We used an informed framework to think about prepping our text and preparing to teach.



Jessica Hamman: And another focus that the blueprint puts on instruction is that it should be direct and explicit. So can you tell us a little more about the importance of explicit comprehension instruction?

Nancy Hennessey: Of course, we know that effective instruction is explicit. And within the book I think I quote Anita Arch's work. But there's certainly a good deal of work out there that tells us that we need to directly teach students how to work with, whether it's words or sentences. Or if we're building background knowledge, for instance. And we do that by providing the information and then giving our students some opportunity to practice and process. And then giving them opportunity to apply and generalize.

Nancy Hennessey: So if you took something like vocabulary, choice of word, and then having a vocabulary routine that's very explicit in nature. So each of these kind of required thinking through what has the research told us in terms of best how to teach this and then bringing to it a principle of instruction, explicit instruction. So if I'm doing a vocabulary routine, I need to explicitly tell my students what the word means. I have to provide a context, usually from the text that I'm working with. And then I have to give them opportunities to practice and process. And with vocabulary, oftentimes that will involve making semantic connections, visual representations and then use expressive use.

Nancy Hennessey: So explicit, it's foundational. It underlies but then you have to look at each one of these from the perspective of what does the research, what does the literature tell us is the best way to go about



accomplishing your student's capability to use that process, use that skill? I hope that answered that for you.

Jessica Hamman: It does. Is there anything I haven't asked you about the blueprint that you'd like to share or things that you feel are just really pivotal for teachers to understand?

Nancy Hennessey: I kept thinking about what teachers really need to know. They certainly need to know the science. There's no doubt that our knowledge base, what we know should inform all that we're doing. But I think it's very important to go back to this idea of language comprehension and the thought that everything begins with language. And so, really, our responsibility as teachers is really to teacher students how to use their oral language capabilities and translate them into print. And that's particularly true here in terms of comprehension. So understanding these different language systems, the phenology, the semantics syntax and morphology and so on, and what role they play.

Nancy Hennessey: And being very focused on having opportunities built into the classroom to do develop oral language, right? So not enough just to be reading the books and writing written response, which is wonderful. But also having conversation about each of these different aspects. These things, I'm talking about them in separate ways, but the reality is these processes and skills are all interrelated and they work in concert with one another. So opportunity for oral conversation for use of that knowledge base, I think, is particularly important.



Nancy Hennessey: Knowing the science of reading, knowing what these contributors are and taking something like the framework, which is not a lesson plan. So I didn't say that, but I want to say that now, it's not a lesson plan. It's a guide, it's a master plan to guide your development of unit organizers or lesson plans, individual lesson plans. So you can't teach everything in one lesson. So be thinking about being flexible in terms of know your students, know your text, know what it is that you want to accomplish. And then flexibly using a framework. Or recognizing the importance of implementation science. And that's not something we often talk about, but I think something that we need to be thinking about.

Nancy Hennessey: Oftentimes we ask our teachers to attend workshop or training and say, "All right, now, go forward and do this. The reality is they need time and they need support. And so implementation science tells us, if you want to make change, first of all, it's not going to happen overnight. So you're not going to change your comprehension instruction in two days, in six months, maybe not even in a year. One bite at a time or a few degrees at a time.

Nancy Hennessey: The other thing is it takes organizational support. So know your context, all right? It takes leadership, so involve your administrators. And it takes competency, which means that we all need to be learners. That we have to be continuously learning much as our students. And we have to advocate for our own professional learning. So you need a continuum. We all need a continuum of learning opportunities. And that support might be book talks, it



might be PLCs, it might be coaching. It can take varied forms, but the reality is it isn't enough to just have the information.

Nancy Hennessey: And so I want to encourage teachers as they think about change to advocate for themselves. Talk about being tempered radical sometimes. So we have to let people know we'll learners as well. And that in order to make change over time, in order to implement, there are certain conditions that have to be in place, or we won't be successful.

Jessica Hamman: I appreciate that kind of gentle release of pressure on teachers because we want to do what's best for kids. So if we hear there's something new that can enable us to do it feels like a heavy burden to implement right away. But I think thinking about this as a path of understanding and having that understanding inform your practice is a really kind and more mild way to approach changes in your classroom.

Jessica Hamman: And I also think it's such an important topic, what we're talking about with comprehension. All the state testing really focuses on comprehension. And yet oftentimes the work done in our curricula doesn't have a intense focus on how to teach comprehension. So we're, in a way, penalized as a society for our lack of comprehension instruction. So you've given the teaching field so much to about in terms of how to support high quality, explicit comprehension instruction. It's very, very important for teachers and kids.



Nancy Hennessey: Thank you, Jessica. It is very important. And I think that we're often held accountable for our students' performances. But the reality is we need the knowledge base. We need the supports in order to make changes in terms of how our students can perform on these outcome assessments. And if not science, then what? If not the research, then what? I'm not going to say we know everything because we don't. But we certainly need to use what we know and think through how what the researchers are telling us can be applied to our practice. To become those translators of research.

Jessica Hamman: Well, thank you so much, Nancy, for joining us today. This was really a pleasure to chat with you about your book. So thank you.

Nancy Hennessey: It was lovely having this opportunity. Thank you, Jessica.

Jessica Hamman: To learn more about Nancy Hennessey, you can find her book, *The Reading Comprehension Blueprint* at Brookes Publishing or wherever books are sold.

Jessica Hamman: Thanks for listening to Glean's Research to Practice Podcast. If you're interested in learning more, head over to gleaneducation.com to listen to more episodes, access teacher resources and join the movement to make in-service teacher education more dynamic and accessible. Bye for now. This episode was edited and produced by Nida Sharis.

