Triple R Teaching

When I heard Martha Kovack give an incredible presentation on a webinar all about structuring a structured literacy first grade classroom, I knew we had to have her on the podcast, in particular to talk about oral language. As you'll be able to tell, Martha is an expert in many areas, but we haven't talked a lot about oral language on this podcast, in particular, DLD, developmental language disorder.

Dyslexia is a word reading disorder, but DLD is a brain difference that makes talking and listening difficult. According to the DLD and Me website, it affects about two children out of every classroom, so it's really important that we as teachers understand what it is and learn what we can do to help all of our students with oral language.

At the beginning of this episode, Martha shares her background and how she came out of balanced literacy, and then she talks more about DLD and what we can do as teachers to support all of our students.

Welcome, Martha!

Martha Kovack: Thank you!

Anna Geiger: In looking at your bio, it is very long. You've had so much experience in education. Could you talk to us a little bit about how you got into education, how your understandings of how to teach reading have morphed over time, and what you're doing now?

Martha Kovack: Yes. So back in 1990, I just came out of teacher's college where whole language was all the rage, and I started teaching. My first classroom was grade two, and I was so excited about the high quality children's literature, helping children express themselves through their writing, creating themes, engaging children, and just basically making a love of reading. I mean, I spent literally $2,000 that summer - how I did that, I don't know. I was looking out and seeking out the best high quality children's literature I could find. I set up my classroom with language experience charts, calendar routines, journals, pencils, crayons.

I was excited, but within six weeks I knew that something was wrong. I had five out of twenty of my grade two students who still did not have a grasp of the alphabet. So that made me really curious right from the start.

I did what I could. I made up spelling lists because that's what I remember doing when I was little, only my spelling lists were astronaut, space, spaceship, martian - nothing anybody could really decode. I didn't know what decoding was because I just wasn't taught that, and it just was mind-boggling. How on earth do I get these students to read and write? I was not given any information on that.

So I asked about this, and the response I got was really typical, "They'll catch on, don't worry. They'll catch on. The parents don't read to them. The parents don't buy them books. They're stubborn. It's just their personality. They're not trying. They have poor visual memories. They're not developmentally ready." You name it, there was an excuse, but I just couldn't buy those excuses. I didn't see that.

So then my next stage was when I moved to a new school with a new principal who offered us a couple of different programs. She was just a fabulous, organized, progressive principal, and she offered us a systematic and explicit phonics program. That is where I learned the structure of English, that double E says /ē/ and EA says /ē/. I had just never seen that before.

Then I started teaching my grade one class and by the end that year, over 80% of my students were reading fluently, which was HUGE because it was a very needy, high poverty area, yet I had them reading!

So just like a snowball - when you build a snowball in the perfect snow and then you roll it and you get a success - you just want to keep rolling that snowball. You just want to keep pushing that snowball, making it bigger and bigger. So the more I learned, the more curious I became, and my whole entire career has been about this. I'm curious about how all of this works.

In fact, I then drove myself to the University of Toronto to OISE, to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and I went to the library with my little photocopy card, and I found the research myself. I pulled it off, and I photocopied it. I still have it! It was so exciting because it was talking all about phonemic awareness and the structure of spelling patterns, and I was really excited!

As soon as I mentioned anything to do with this, though, there was tension. I couldn't understand the tension. The people were worried that this was going to be boring kids, and this was going to kill their love of reading. We've heard all the stories.

My solution to this tension was to make games. So I made card games in sort of the late 90s, early 2000s, and I thought let's make it playful, and that will solve all the problems. Still, no.

I got really excited! I ended up doing parent workshops, reading buddy programs in schools, I had the older students in grade seven and eight read with the K and ones and do phonemic awareness, I even got a contract to teach all of my kindergarten teachers in my school board about phonemic awareness.

But anytime I mentioned systematic and explicit phonics, that was the end of the conversation. So I knew that I was not going to be successful going back to school. I had to leave the system. So I left and I started tutoring and researching and learning as much as I could.

In fact, that principal who provided us with that program, when I came back from maternity leave, she had been removed from the school and put into a two-room schoolhouse out in the country, and the whole program was dismantled.

Anna Geiger: Oh my goodness. That's very sad.

Martha Kovack: That's how resistant and how much tension there was around all of this at that time.

Anna Geiger: So this was the 90s when this was happening?

Martha Kovack: It was decade number one, that was the 90s for me.

Then balanced literacy sort of started, and I did not notice a change. Balanced literacy came along and it almost fortified the systems against any kind of formal, systematic,

and explicit teaching of anything, let alone phonics. Yeah, we do phonics, and we'll do it over here on a worksheet, but then texts that we were giving children to read didn't match up. Three-queuing took hold, and for twenty years, that was that.

If I tried to speak up about the research that I'd read or the experience I had, I was literally put down, humiliated, spoken to with condescension, and definitely ignored.

I just left the system. I left the system, and I thought "I'm going to go where I'm wanted." I started tutoring so that I could practice what I was reading about in the research, and I continued to do parent workshops, and I was making these card games and trying to make it hands on, trying to make it playful, trying to make it fun.

I became an early literacy specialist with the Ontario Earlier System, and I did that for sixteen years. It was here that I learned all about the critical nature of oral language. So this is where I learned about receptive language - taking in information and words, and expressive language - being able to talk and speak, and vocabulary, and background knowledge, and all of those things in the top half of Scarborough's Reading Rope.

I spent my days, for sixteen years, talking to parents and families and working with children directly from birth to age five. I spent a lot of time with birth to age three where oral language begins, and I worked with a lot of speech language pathologists. And so I learned about asking good questions, just getting conversations going, knowing just how critical pretend play is to oral language, because that's how we get children having conversations with each other and learning to initiate conversation. I learned so much over those years.

But anyway, over the years I ended up teaching English language arts. Now I teach English language arts for a community college early childhood education program, and I teach English language arts at university, a university here in Canada, at the teacher's college level.

One of the major assignments I have my students do is three interactive story charts so that they can practice nurturing oral language. The first thing they have to do is locate and understand what high quality children's literature is.

The second thing they have to demonstrate is how to nurture receptive language. So they would learn to do things like use their body language to explain what they're talking about, use eye contact, use sound effects, point to the visuals, point to the pictures. They're really simple things, but things we don't think are that important. You

can't just hold up a book and read it and expect children to get it. Just because you've read a book doesn't mean they've taken it in. Just because you've said something to a child doesn't mean they're able to understand what you're saying. So we learn how to use real photos and build background knowledge, and we learn how to relate the story to the children's lives and what's important to them and so on.

And then the third thing is nurturing children's expressive language. Some people do all of that well, body language and enthusiasm in the voice and pointing to the pictures, but we also need children to express themselves through pretend play, using props, by answering questions, by thinking and wondering together. Even leaving off the last words is a way to get them to express themselves.

Children express themselves with their words, and their bodies, and materials. So we have to understand that children express themselves in these three ways, and some children have a very difficult time with oral language.

I learned about something called DLD, developmental language disorder, which incidentally my son has, but I was told he had a specific language impairment, and I was given a 1.5 page report, but it didn't explain what that was or what to do about it other than sit close to the teacher and all the usual things. It was 1.5 pages, but that didn't help me at all.

Just like dyslexia is a brain-based difficulty with reading and spelling at the word level, DLD is a brain-based difficulty with understanding and using language at the sentence or paragraph or story level or discourse.

It's a new term, it just started in 2017, so that's why you haven't heard about it. Up until then it's been called developmental aphasia, dysphasia, specific language impairment, primary language impairment, language impairment, language learning impairment, language disorder, specific learning disorder, developmental delay, speech language impairment, specific learning disability. I mean, it was ridiculous that we had all these different terms and nobody knew what they were!

One of the reasons no one knew about it is that we had too many terms for it. Now, like dyslexia is like an umbrella term, DLD is an umbrella term for all of these struggles with language at the sentence paragraph level.

Think that if you can catch it in the first year or two of life, then you can make a profound difference. In the same way that with dyslexia, if you can catch it in

kindergarten, you can make a profound difference to the point where they wouldn't even know. But with DLD, by the time that you reach kindergarten, they've had five years of oral language experiences that have formed their brains. We need more emphasis on that zero to three age range, which is hard because there's no school there to sort of systematically do this. It really depends on families and what's happening with childcare.

It's really complex. It's a little more complex than dyslexia. Dyslexia is reading, spelling, here's the structure of the language, and then it's done, right? There's an end to it. Here's the morphology, here is the Latin, here are the Greek combining forms. Done. Whereas DLD is conversation, it's vocabulary, it's knowledge, it's all of these things that are never done.

Another reason why people haven't heard of it or focused on it is that it's completely hidden. Dyslexia at least shows up in the reading and writing. But with DLD, you could actually be okay with words, reading and spelling at the word level, and still have DLD.

These students talk like this, "Um, like, well, actually, well, sort of like, um, well, okay, actually, right?" They do all of these things.

I have one little guy, he used to say "basically" all the time. "Well, basically, basically, well, basically I think the E, but basically..."

They're not stuttering. Stuttering is different. Stuttering is on the first sound, like "I l-l-l-like..." It is a sign when children are struggling to speak in coherent sentences, gather their thoughts, and put them out together.

It's not that they don't understand the material, it's that they struggle to get it out, to express themselves. And sometimes it IS that they don't understand the material because they need so much repetition. They need us to slow down.

It's full of shame and doubt for these students because they don't understand why they can't say what they know.

I have a little one I'm working with now who knows the vowels, and he knows open and closed syllables, but do you think he could tell me that in his own words? No. All he can do is say "/ō/, that says /ō/." I know that he knows why because he can demonstrate his

knowledge by reading the correct sound, but he cannot formulate sentences that would easily explain what he knows.

It's really, really hard when you have this. 7% of all people have DLD, adults included. One out of ten kids in every class.

The other reason it doesn't get enough traction in the field is because we have things like dyslexia, which is in the realm of education, and then we have ADHD, which is in the realm of medicine. Then when you put those two together, there's something in the middle called DLD, and it sort of falls to both sides. It's a bit educational and it's a bit medical. Do you see? So all of the funding slips through the cracks, and DLD affecting these children has not had as much research.

As a mom, it's heartbreaking because I didn't know any of this, and I see my adult son now, he's doing okay, but I see that any struggles he does have come from this, it's really hard.

Anna Geiger: Well I think you hit the nail on the head when you talked earlier about how with phonics and the structure of language, there's an end point, and I think that's very comforting.

I was just talking to some teachers earlier this morning about how when we have an older reader who's struggling, if we can pin that down, if it's the phonics part, that's a lot easier to remediate than the comprehension, because comprehension is so complex. There's so many things that go into it, and we know that it's something that keeps growing your whole life. It never ends, so it can feel very overwhelming to teachers. They wonder, "What do I do?"

And then, especially when it comes to teaching oral language or including oral language in their classroom, particularly let's say kindergarten through second grade, you might not even know where to start just because it's such a huge thing.

I've looked for books about teaching oral language and there's just really not a lot out there. What would you say would be some good routines that primary teachers should have that will benefit everyone, including kids who have DLD, and just everyone in general, because we know that oral language is so important. It's the top of Scarborough's Rope, the Simple View of Reading, the language comprehension piece has to do with understanding oral language. So how do we even begin?

Forgive me, that's a little bit of an awkward place to stop, but I wanted to break the podcast episode up here because next week we're going to talk a lot more about the practical ways to build oral language and fluency in the primary classroom. So come back next week for that one.

You can find the show notes for this episode at themeasuredmom.com/episode112. See you then!