Triple R Teaching

Hello! Anna Geiger here from The Measured Mom. Welcome to Triple R Teaching. Today, we're talking with Wiley Blevins. If you're familiar with the science of reading, then you've definitely heard his name because he has written so many wonderful practical books about teaching phonics.

Today we got to talk about a lot of things. We talked about decodable books, differentiating phonics instruction, syllable types, sound walls, and a whole bunch of other things. It was fascinating to hear more about his background and all the amazing people he's gotten to work with over the years.

I know you're going to love this interview, and I've got to say, it was the easiest one I've ever had to put together because I didn't have to edit a single thing. He knows exactly what he is going to say, there are no ums, he just gets right to it, and I must have been on top of my game too because I didn't have to edit myself either.

I hope you enjoy it, and at the end of the episode, I'll give you a link to the show notes where you can get lots of extra information.

Anna Geiger: Hello everybody! We are very fortunate today to have the opportunity to talk to Wiley Blevins, an educator, researcher, and author who has been known among the science of reading community for being an expert in phonics for quite some time. Today he's going to talk to us about what brought him into education, as well as mistakes that people make when it comes to teaching phonics, and he'll share some updates to his Phonics A to Z book that have been made and are going to be available by the time this episode airs.

Welcome!

Wiley Blevins: Thank you! Nice to meet you.

Anna Geiger: I'm so glad you're here. I got to hear you speak a few months ago at The Reading League event in Wisconsin, but I've also watched many, many of your workshops online, and I also own, I think, probably all of your books.

I've heard you talk about your interesting background where you grew up in West Virginia. Can you talk to us a little bit about your childhood and what brought you into education?

Wiley Blevins: Sure! So I'm originally from a very rural community in West Virginia. I like to say that I'm from a legacy of illiteracy because my grandparents on my father's side never learned to read or write, and my grandmother on my mother's side only went to school to fifth grade because after that you had to go into town, you had to have nicer clothes, and buy books, and things like that, so she just stopped going to school.

So I wasn't one of those kids who grew up in a home with all these experiences with books, and so on. I was really affected by the fact that I grew up in this environment of illiteracy because I had a sense of what reading was because my parents did know how to read, although they didn't do it for pleasure, at least my mother didn't, and I was really attuned to my grandmother's shame about not being able to read.

She would make excuses in public, like, "Oh, I didn't bring my glasses," and we all knew grandma didn't wear glasses. Or we'd go to a restaurant, sometimes, and she'd hold the menu upside down, and she would always insist on being the last to order. I was very curious about this. Because she was the matriarch of the family, the waiter or waitress would always ask her first, and she would go, "No, no, no, I'll be last."

My sister finally queued me in. She said, "Grandma doesn't know what's on the menu except what we order, so let's always choose something grandma loves." When we went out with her, that was our strategy. We would choose grandma's favorite dish so she knew that it was available at that restaurant.

In fact, over the pandemic, I started doing some of my genealogy research, digging in more deeply, and years ago, the census would actually record if you were literate or illiterate. On my father's side, it's "Illiterate, illiterate, illiterate" for generations and generations. I'm not entirely sure why. So reading was not a part of our lives until my parents went to school, and they did finish school.

As a young child, I really wanted to grow up to teach my grandma how to read, and

that's why I wanted to become a teacher. That was my motivation as a young child. I had a chalkboard at home, and I would pretend like I was teaching children how to read. I knew nothing about it back then, but that was, really, why I became a teacher. So I wanted to be a teacher from a very young age, and that was what I wanted to do.

Anna Geiger: So did she ever learn to read?

Wiley Blevins: No. The sad part is, when I finished college, by that point, my grandmother had Alzheimer's. All of her brothers and sisters had Alzheimer's, the entire family, and so she was not capable of learning to read at that point, but I dedicated my first book to her and so she lives on.

Anna Geiger: Oh, cool.

So what happened that you made it out of West Virginia? I know you went to Harvard. How did all that work out?

Wiley Blevins: I did my undergraduate work in Ohio to study to become a teacher, and I taught both in the United States and South America.

Right away, I knew I didn't know how to teach reading. My very first year of teaching was second grade. It was a really panicky feeling. I knew lots about how to create a great learning environment, and do great centers, and what have you, but I realized immediately, I had no idea how to teach a child to read, and that was my main responsibility. Back then, we didn't have the internet so we couldn't type in and find these things, and it was a very isolated feeling, if you didn't know what to do.

And so I was always looking for how I could go back to school, to grad school, where I could go to find out how to teach children to read. I was lucky enough to get into Harvard and study with Jeanne Chall, who wrote Learning to Read: The Great Debate. She is the one who really helped me understand the process that children go through to learn to read, and it all made sense.

If we just explain it in the way that teachers can really take advantage of that knowledge, the process, and the sort of phases that we go through, and so on, it all begins to make sense, and we can really benefit our students far more than what is, sometimes, happening.

So my panicky feeling led to me really trying to figure it out.

Anna Geiger: So you were already a teacher, and then you went back to school to learn more.

Wiley Blevins: Yeah, I had to.

Anna Geiger: That is an incredible privilege that you got to work with her. I've read her book, and I know she wrote that to settle the debate, but which still rages on...

Wiley Blevins: Yes.

Anna Geiger: So you knew early on that an explicit phonics approach was important.

I know a lot of people I talked to that got their graduate degree just a few years ago were still learning more the balanced literacy way, so not an explicit phonics approach. Did you see that happening at the time? Was this unusual that she was talking this way?

Wiley Blevins: She was not in the mainstream during part of her career. She was very well respected, but there was a lot of resistance to some of the things, but she was just doing data. She was just doing research. She had a reading lab at Harvard, and she would watch children read. She had this intuitive sense about what was going on and what they needed. It was just fascinating to watch her operate.

Then, once I finished graduate school, shortly thereafter, I got to work with Marilyn Adams for about five years.

Anna Geiger: Oh, wow! Wow!

Wiley Blevins: I know. I've been very, very lucky. So that was like five more years of grad school. She had just come out with her book, Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print, and so I was digging into phonemic awareness and even more about phonics. I was really lucky, early in my career, to be attached to people who knew so much about the process of teaching reading.

Then, years later, I got to work a little bit with Louisa Moats and Isabel Beck, and Tim Shanahan.

Anna Geiger: Wow.

Wiley Blevins: I keep getting incredibly fortunate, and my feeling has been that I just want to be a sponge around these brilliant researchers and brilliant minds.

And so I saw my role very early on, as someone who would translate the research, to try it out in classrooms, and to really fine tune it so that we could scale up that research, because not all researchers do that. They do the findings that we have to pull together, and try it out, and see how we can scale it up.

Then as I was doing that, I started having my own questions in things that hadn't been answered by the research. That's what led me to do my own research, just trying to uncover some things that I needed to know with the children I was working with, or if I was consulting with the publisher, the questions they had.

So we know a lot, but there's still more that we need to know, like decodable texts. I do a lot of work in decodable texts. There's, surprisingly, little research around decodable texts, and so I've done some of it. There's more that I'm doing, and there's more that I want to do, just trying to keep moving forward.

Anna Geiger: That is a wonderful thing about your books, which is why I recommend them so often, and especially to people who are new to the science of reading, because you do have a very wonderful way of translating everything, and it's very practical, which is what teachers are teachers are really looking for.

I know this would take a long time, so we won't talk about all of it, but if you could, maybe, distill a little bit of the wisdom that you learned from Jeanne Chall and Marilyn Adams that got you started. Then we can talk about some of the research that you did.

Wiley Blevins: It was really so basic. Basically the concept was, we have an alphabetic language, we have an alphabet, and these letters, by themselves and together, stand for sounds. If we teach children those basic letter-sound combinations, they have access to a huge percentage of English words, so why would we not give them that information?

It's not only information that's necessary to read, but also to spell, understanding how English words work. We often forget about the encoding piece when we're talking about the phonics or decoding piece.

I remember, and I've said this in a lot of my presentations so you probably remember me talking about my first grade teacher, Mrs. Warshaw. How we had Dick and Jane, but she also gave us a phonics workbook, and she explained it that way. "We have these letters. I'm going to teach you the sounds they stand for. You're going to be able to read." It was so exciting! It felt like a puzzle.

She taught it like a system. I understood how the system worked, and I ran with the system. I even talked my presentations about how because I was a great observer of words, and she really set that up, I started learning sound-spellings before she taught them. Phonics, if you teach it like a system, can be very generative, and very, very powerful.

It's not just teaching the sound-spellings, but also creating an environment where children are talking about words, and observing words, and noticing commonalities across words. All of that is important in becoming a really strong reader and writer.

The phonics instruction that I like is really fun. It's active, it's engaging, it's thought-provoking. Children are doing things, and they're talking about words and what have you.

I think some people who are not necessarily fans of phonics see it in an old traditional, boring kill-and-drill kind of way, and it really isn't. It doesn't have to be that way at all.

Anna Geiger: Speaking about that, really quickly, I know you talked about how it is basic. It makes perfect sense. So how do we get so off track where a lot of teachers have been told, "Use phonics as the last resort. We don't want to overdo it."

How did that happen, in your opinion?

Wiley Blevins: Honestly, I've never really understood that because I feel like the messaging, when I hear people talk about it, is very romantic. We want kids to love books, and we want them to love reading.

Everybody wants that to happen! But they will love books, and love reading, when we teach them how to DO it.

I've worked with other researchers who are more from that mindset, and whenever I would hear them speak and look at their work, I always thought they must be working with children who already know how to read when they come to school.

It just never made sense how kids got from point A to point B if we don't teach them the basics. I never understood how that was going to work for so many children.

I was a kid who came to school with very, very limited literacy background. We had one book in our home. I talk about it. We had the Bible. I talk about how, in our Bible, we had pictures of family members who had died, in their casket, and so I was afraid to open it because there were dead people inside!

So I had NO book experiences prior to school, and I depended on the public school to do everything I needed it to do. Public schools are capable of doing that, but we really have to be committed to doing all the things that children need to become skilled readers and writers. Of course, we want them to love reading, and we want these rich literacy experiences, but along the way we have to teach them the basic tools to have access to it. I see access to books as access to the world of possibility.

So for me it's really, really important that we do it well early on, and we get children all the tools that they need.

Anna Geiger: So as you came out of your work with Jeanne Chall and Marilyn Adams, what are some questions you still had? And what's some research that you've done?

Wiley Blevins: Well I started doing a lot of research on decodable texts because back in 2000 I was doing some consulting with a publisher, and they were doing reading programs for California and Texas. It was the first time, in a long time, that states had required decodable texts to be a part of their reading program. California said they need to be 75% decodable and Texas said 80%, and the publisher was like, "Why would it be different if it's research based?"

Here, again, we didn't have much internet and what have you back then, so I went back to Harvard and had lunch with Jeanne Chall and said, "I'm looking for this research, and I can't find it."

And she said, "Well, it doesn't exist."

I was like, "What do you mean, it doesn't exist? These state departments of education are saying do X and Y!"

She's like, "Well, you know, they made it up."

But publishers have to do what they say until someone does the research and basically they said, you have to do the research. That's really what led me to look at all the research on decodable text, which there wasn't.

So I did my first study here, in New York City, and it was just, what's the impact decodable text has on reading growth for our beginning readers in terms of reading, in terms of spelling, and in terms of motivation to read?

So I set up the study where all the teachers were teaching the exact same phonics lessons the same day. The only difference is what they read. One group read decodable text, one group read patterned text.

Both groups made progress. That was an interesting thing. It wasn't that everyone who read decodable texts learned, and everyone who read patterned didn't learn. Both groups made progress, but the group with decodable texts made significantly more progress faster.

For me, throughout the efficiency of our teaching, we have a very short window to teach these basic skills to get them firmly rooted and mastered so that children can transfer them to all reading and writing experiences. So anything I can do to accelerate that learning, I want to.

The decodable text is just a tool. It's a practice tool to get to mastery quickly and to have lots of opportunities to transfer the skills so you have it as one of your key tools that you can use to access words as you move forward.

Then I started becoming, really, sort of an evangelist for decodable text. I would travel around, and teachers were like, "I hate decodable texts. I'm not using any of these awful stories." And I was like, really? Because I always had a really great set that I loved.

Then I did research on all the decodables that were out there and found there were a lot of huge mistakes publishers were making. There were reasons why teachers hated these books. There were reasons why kids couldn't understand these stories.

So that research led to me sharing with publishers so that they can avoid these issues. These little books should be as beautiful and well written as any leveled book or trade book you have in your classroom. There's no excuse for lower quality.

We're kind of in that phase right now where there's still a lot of really poorly created decodable texts out there, and people aren't doing, with decodable texts, what they need to do.

One of my big concerns as we transition to using more decodable texts is that there aren't enough in classrooms around the scope of sequence. We probably need to create many more. If we aren't having kids read a TON, this phonics instruction isn't going to stick. It's in the application where the learning sticks. So we need more of them, and we need to do more things with them.

A lot of teachers who haven't used decodable text, I jokingly say, they think of them as unicorns. They do all these rich experiences with leveled books, and have for many years, and then they get a decodable text and they don't know what to do. They just have them read them, and maybe reread them.

So part of my training is to look at ALL the things that we can do, not only with decoding and fluency, but what about vocabulary? What about writing? What about syntax? What about comprehension? What about early reading behaviors? We can show them the wealth of literacy experiences we can have with these very simple texts. They should be as richly used as any other text that we have.

So that's sort of where I am now, trying to get that message out so that these texts really have the impact they need to have.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. I've heard you talk a lot and read your books about things to look for in decodable books. Can you share some of the things that are a warning sign that maybe you shouldn't go with these books?

Wiley Blevins: Yeah. First of all, I have a very high bar for beauty. I want it to be interesting-looking, and engaging, and well crafted, great photographs or great illustrations. I know not everyone has the beauty bar that I have, but I really think they should be gorgeous, and kids should be excited when they pick them up.

But there are a lot of issues. One is what happened, interestingly, and this is a very common thing in education. We have a really great idea. Let's have a really strong practice tool called decodable text, and the state said 75%, 80%. We don't know if that's the right percentage, because there's no percentage, but okay this is what we have to do. Fine. But what publishers did is they got very competitive. So they're like, "Well if the state says 75, we'll do 100, or we'll do 95. We'll be better than a 75% decodable."

We don't know. But what we know is that these texts that were 95% or 100% made no sense. They didn't sound like English. When you're learning to read, you're transferring your oral language into print, so they need to sound like English and use English sentence construction. They're a lot of decodable texts that aren't English.

I work with a lot of multilingual learners. You're trying to teach them to read in a language and the sentences don't sound like the language they're trying to learn. It just is not acceptable.

The other thing is, they started loading in tons of words, these weird words, just to get more decodable opportunities. So there'd be words like "rud," and "bap," and "bid," things that children wouldn't know, and it just was a mess. They couldn't make any

sense of it, and the whole point of reading is to make meaning! We're going to sound these out, and talk about them, and talk about what they mean, and write about them, and what have you.

One of the big issues I have with the state adoption criteria is that any word that can't be fully sounded out counts against you in your decodability count. The word "the" is the most common word in English, and it counts against you. Publishers will write these books, and it'll have too many "the's," so they have to take them out, so it doesn't sound like English.

We have to be more realistic about it. There's nothing magical about 75% or 80%. We don't even know if that's correct. So let's have text that's highly decodable, a really great practice tool, but it sounds like English, and it makes sense, and it's a fun read.

We just have to loosen up a little bit and be more realistic about what children need in these texts.

Anna Geiger: So there are many people in the science of reading community who really feel, very strongly, that the texts should be almost 100% decodable, except for those high frequency words you've taught, and shouldn't ever introduce anything.

For example, I write decodable books for my website that I give away, and from early on I use the -ed ending even though it hasn't been explicitly taught because I don't like it when it says "did hit it" or whatever.

Wiley Blevins: It's so common.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, and maybe that's a bad example because you don't say "hit it." But anyway, that sort of thing.

I feel like the teacher can just tell them because we need to make it sound like a book. That's what I would say, but what would your response be to people who say, "Well you can't put words in there at all that they haven't been introduced to."

Wiley Blevins: So I've had this conversation as well. There are people who feel very, very strongly that every word has to be fully sounded out and some of those high

frequency words.

Those high frequency words are important, by the way. Those are regular words. When I look at the top 250 words in English, there are about 60 that are irregular, like the words "the, what, who, they, you." Children need to learn those right away as well. So never 100% decodable. There's no research to support that, but highly, highly decodable, with these high frequency words.

Now, the state adoption criteria allows for story words to make the stories more interesting. In California, now they say 75-80% decodable where it can be fully sounded out, which is about three out of every four words, and the other 20-25%, about one out of every four, can be an irregular high frequency word or a story word.

Maybe you want a story about these animals slipping in mud. You have a pig, and a cat, and a dog, which are decodable, but it's really funny if an elephant slips in mud. So you throw an elephant, and the children laugh, and it's really cute, and it's not a big deal. It's the big word that starts with E.

Because we're so focused now on content knowledge and building knowledge, you might have a simple decodable, but you want to use a content word, like "frog," that they can't decode yet, or maybe it's "plant," or whatever. So it's okay to have those.

The thing is what we do with the words that are in these texts when we're teaching. If it's a word that you can fully sound out, I use decodable corrective feedback. I'll point out the missed sound-spelling. We'll re-blend the word, and then we'll reread the sentence now that we know the word.

If it's an irregular high frequency word that I formerly taught, then I'll deal with it a different way.

If it's a story word, we look at the word, we look at the parts we know, and we use all the knowledge we have. If we can't figure it out, then we look at the illustrations, which a lot of people in the science of reading community would pass out now that I just said that, but we're trying to make meaning, and sometimes there's information we can use. We use all the resources to make meaning. Then if the children can figure it out, I reinforce it by modeling how to sound it out. Then we'll reread the set.

So I look at the letters and sounds first, and we start there. People are afraid that if they look at the pictures, ever, they're going to start guessing, and it's not true. If the majority of the words they can sound out, that's going to be their primary strategy to attack words, and that's the habit we want to develop. The occasional word to make a really interesting, engaging story isn't going to mess that up.

What it will do is teach them that as they develop as readers, there are going to be some words that they can't figure out, and they are going to have to do other things. It might be looking in a dictionary, it might be asking the teacher, it might be looking at chunks, or whatever, but it really sets up what real reading really is, so it doesn't bother me at all. The state criteria allows for it. So those words are there. So I would rather the conversation be about how we help children with those words. Like you said, if a teacher just wants to give it, fine.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. I really appreciate you talking about how you're teaching the habit of looking at the words first. I think that's really the big differentiator because for many of us, me included, who taught kids to read using leveled books initially, they went to the picture first. They kind of had to do that, the first letter and the picture. But when they've got the habit of always knowing we start with the word, the pictures can help. If the book is mostly decodable, and they're getting lots and lots of practice, they HAVE to look at the words, so they get used to doing that.

Wiley Blevins: Absolutely. When I work with a child I haven't worked with before, the very first thing I do is open a book and see what they do. Do they put their finger on the first word and start working through? Or do they scan the pictures? That tells me they don't have the tools to tackle the words, and that's really problematic.

Anna Geiger: Mm-hmm. Speaking of problems, in your A Fresh Look at Phonics book, you talked about some problems when it comes to teaching phonics, some mistakes that teachers make. I'm going to jump to the end of that first. You wrote, "Waiting too long to introduce multisyllable words."

Can you talk a little bit about how teachers should approach that, even in first grade? And maybe what you do and don't recommend?

Wiley Blevins: When I was doing that work, I think it started back in around 2010, districts were transitioning to the common core standards, looking at all the things they needed to do for these shifts, and were evaluating all areas of their reading instruction. Every school I went to, they were having issues with foundational skills. They were like, "It doesn't make sense. We have phonics resources. Why is that not working?"

I think that's a really important question. If we're doing everything everyone tells us, and it's not working, something is wrong.

So I really began looking at instructional materials and watching lots of teachers teach to see what would bubble up to the surface as possible obstacles that we can unplug or remove to really maximize student learning.

The whole thing about multisyllabic words really jumped out at me with second grade. Second grade is a really complex year when it comes to phonics learning because in second grade children have to master all of those skills in K-1, and there's a lot that's covered: short vowels, long vowels, complex vowels, and so on, in one syllable words.

But when I looked at the text that children were reading in second grade, they were filled with multisyllabic words. So the instruction for a huge part of the year was working on mastery of these skills in one syllable words, and then they would give kids books where they were tackling multisyllabic words. That mismatch was really tripping up children and causing some of them to shut down.

So I started, at the first week of second grade, doing some very easy transitioning to multisyllabic words. So if we're doing short vowel words, like "cat," and "run," and "rat," and what have you, I will take some of those words and add word chops. Maybe I'll add a syllable type, or add a prefix, or add a suffix. So we take a word they know, and we just slightly go to a harder word. So I'm exposing them to more complex words that they might encounter in their text, but they already know a chunk of it, so it's not so overwhelming.

I think we need to transition much earlier on. We can start having some of these conversations in first grade. So in kindergarten and first grade, it's like one letter - one sound, one spelling - one sound. We do that for a very long time. But in the second half of grade one, I think it's really important that we start having children see larger chunks of words so that they're ready to see larger, recognizable chunks in multisyllabic words.

So I do a lot of things that second half. We'll work sounding out words, and then maybe we do a sort with spelling patterns, like phonograms. So they start seeing instead of just, "OA" for long O, and "OW" for long O, they start seeing "OAT" and "OAK" Whatever the most common spelling patterns are. So I start doing that kind of work.

We start having conversations about larger pieces of words so that when we move into longer complex words, they start seeing recognizable chunks. Because the point we want, when a child sees a really long word, prefixes should jump out, suffixes should jump out, common phonograms should jump out. It could be so overwhelming, but we have to get that ready starting in the second half of first grade and moving into second grade in a slower, transitioning kind of way to ease that movement toward being able to read longer words.

Anna Geiger: I think it's in A Fresh Look at Phonics where you talked briefly about syllable types, and there are so many debates in the science of reading world. Some people will say, "Syllable types are a waste of time, too many rules." And others say, "No, they're really important for reading and spelling." I personally like syllable types, but could you give your perspective on that?

Wiley Blevins: Yeah, I do too. I do too. But I think some people go overboard with syllable types, which I think is what some of the frustration is. They'll have children mark up words for a very, very long time. It's okay to do that as a scaffold, but the whole point of syllable types is just giving children a tool to chunk words, and then knowing how to pronounce the chunks.

I think that is what's missing in the conversation. It's not that they can state the syllable types, and mark them up, and do all that. You might want to do that to just, like I said, gain some familiarity, but the whole point is to chunk and pronounce.

For me, there's some really good strategies. Keeping certain spellings together in a syllable, or knowing if it ends in a consonant then it's probably a short vowel sound. All those things are really, really helpful, I think, when we're chunking.

But one of the things that Dr. Kearns talks a lot about is when we teach syllable types, be very flexible. When you model it, model it different ways of chunking, because a child doesn't know how to chunk it right away. You have to try a couple ways until you get to a word that sounds close to a word you know.

That's the rub with the multisyllabic work. You can only take these approximations and transfer it a word you know if it's a word in your speaking and listening vocabulary.

There's been a fair amount of research that talks about students' vocabulary really impacting their ability to tackle multisyllabic words, which is why I talk a lot about it.

Even though I'm brought in to talk about phonics, I always ask, "What's your read aloud program? Are you doing these text sets around concepts where there's lots of repetition and vocabulary and deep ideas?" Because we need to flood students with knowledge and vocabulary in those first few years. And continue, obviously, but especially in those first few years so that when they start seeing these words in print, they can make those approximations more easily.

We aren't doing that systematically yet, and that's a real issue for a lot of our children. Many children have vocabulary needs.

There's just so much in the science of reading for us to talk about and think about, and how it works. And there's so much room for improvement. It's an exciting time. We have a lot of things to think about how to do it better.

Anna Geiger: Well people are listening now, including me. I wasn't for a while. So yeah, it is a very exciting time.

I guess I could talk to you lots and lots about your other books, but I would like to talk about the updates that are coming to your fourth edition of Phonics A to Z. I saw it on Amazon, where I pre-ordered it. By the way, we're recording this in December, but this is going to come out in the spring. According to Amazon, the book's supposed to be ready in February, so hopefully by the time people are listening to this, it will be available to get in your hands.

It said you included something about sound walls, and when I heard you speak in October of this year, in Wisconsin, you talked about how it bothered you that people were covering up the skills in their sound walls. This is what I've been taught to do, and what I've probably mentioned on my website to do, before you actually teach them.

Hearing you say that was the first time I heard someone say not to do that. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Wiley Blevins: It comes from a very personal perspective. When you do that, you're assuming no child in that classroom is above where you are in that instruction, and that is a faulty assumption.

There are children who are beyond where you are. One of the things we often forget is our "above grade-level expectations" students in phonics. Our responsibility during a whole group phonics lesson is to have some challenge experiences, words, and opportunities so those children are engaged and getting something out of that whole group.

Our responsibility is to find out how much they do know at whatever grade we're teaching. Then during small group time, start them further in the scope and sequence, and systematically teach them those other skills to get them as far as they can go, instead of ignoring these children.

When you hide information, you're basically telling them, "You can't go on. You can't go as far as you can go, and I want to limit your learning."

That would've been incredibly frustrating for me as a student. I get why teachers do it to try to focus on what we're learning and what have you, but I personally would not. It's my preference, and you don't have to have the same preference, but I personally would never do that because I know I have a wide range of student needs in my classroom. Some of that are those students who need to be accelerated.

Here, again, I talk about Mrs. Warshaw. She taught these sound-spellings at the pace that was required, but I wanted to know more, and I started seeing things in words that she hadn't taught.

So I remember, I tell this story in one of my presentations, where I was in church, and the preacher was reading from the Bible. There were all these weird words, "thee," "thou," "doeth," and I looked at him, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, they all have TH!" I figured out how to pronounce TH long before we ever got to it because I understood how the system worked.

Allow children to take advantage of that. It becomes incredibly generative if we teach it as a system, and we start doing that systematically. Some children will really run with it, and that's a really powerful thing to allow them to do. So that's my bias on that.

Anna Geiger: No, I appreciate hearing that. That makes a lot of sense.

Is there anything else you want to tell us about sound walls, and what you've looked and been thinking about?

Wiley Blevins: Yeah. At first, I was really skeptical. Maybe skeptical is too strong of a word, but I was like, "Why are we just putting mouth pictures on the wall?" I understood because a lot of teachers were getting training in linguistics, which is incredibly helpful when you're teaching phonics to know these things. I thought, well this is their way of showing they're learning these things. They want to incorporate things about how we form sounds, which can be very valuable for children to distinguish sounds that are made in similar ways.

Because, keep in mind, when we're spelling and we're kindergartener or a first grader, we're isolating the individual sounds and attaching that to a spelling. A lot of children's spelling errors reflect sounds that are formed in very similar ways, so it's really great information.

But I was skeptical about just having mouth pictures on the wall. I've always used the vowel valley when I create scope and sequences. I won't choose sounds that are made in similar ways. I won't put them close together in a scope and sequence for that very reason.

But then I started seeing where teachers would have the articulation photos and do the articulation work, but then they also had the sound-spelling card where the letter was formed and the different spellings. They would add some words, some keywords, as they were doing it.

It became a living, breathing, useful tool both for instruction and for students when they're working. So the sound walls that have moved in that direction, I think, can be a really valuable tool. So I talk a little bit about that in the book.

Anna Geiger: I noticed something else you talk about in your book is the decodable text routine. I have your book, Choosing and Using Decodable Text, which is pretty recent, I think, and that's a really good one.

Is there additional stuff that you're going to share in your new updated version?

Wiley Blevins: Yeah. I've included all of that information about how we can do more

with decodables and make them more impactful, like I preteach a Tier 2 academic word that we use to talk about the book. It's not in the book, but we use it to talk about the book to elevate language. I'm looking for every opportunity to elevate language.

I talk about what I do when we revisit the book to develop deeper comprehension and early reading behaviors.

I talk about what we do with writing to really give students opportunities. Students always write about the decodables after we read them because it forces them to apply that skill. It's really great encoding work, but it's hard when you're first learning a skill. So the book provides this amazing scaffold that the children can go back into.

Now I've started doing a lot of work around syntax, looking at difficult parts of decodables where we connect ideas across sentences, which some children find difficult.

There could be a sentence with very explicit nouns, and the next sentence will have that replaced with pronouns, and some children aren't making those connections. So we stop and say, "Who is she?"

"Oh, it's Pam."

"Let's reread that sentence with Pam. Does that make sense?"

That habit of connecting ideas across sentences, we need to develop in kindergarten and first grade so that when children get to second, third, and fourth, and they have these complex paragraphs, then they're better at connecting those ideas and unpacking those ideas.

I do a lot of work with taking long sentences and chunking them by meaningful parts. So I'll say, "Who is this sentence about?"

"Oh, it's Pam."

"What did Pam do?"

"She ran."

"Oh, where did she run?"

"She ran to the bus."

So they see different chunks of sentences carry meaning.

Then, we start creating. After we deconstruct sentences, we construct sentences.

I ask them questions, and we'll combine sentences. They start seeing how easy it is just by me asking "Who," "What," "Where," "Why?" They start creating these massive sentences, and we start moving pieces around so they see book language is different from spoken language.

All of this can be established, these habits in K and 1, so that when they get to 2, 3, 4, or 5, where they really need to have deep understanding, that language and those habits are in place.

We're still very silo in our work, where we kind of just do what we have to do in K, what we have to do in 1, and not thinking deeply about how we can plant the seeds for really important behaviors later on. My hope is that we start doing more of that planting seeds work in K-1.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, that gives me a lot to think about.

One thing I like is that you talk about differentiating phonics instruction. I know this is another big area of debate. Some people have really switched over, completely, to whole class phonics lessons. They really feel that's the best use of time. Others would say, "I've got kids all over the place. I really want to meet them where they are." And

then others would say, "You really should give a whole class phonics lesson to everybody, so everybody can get grade-level access, but then you can differentiate."

Can you speak about your perspective on that, and how to be a good differentiator?

Wiley Blevins: So that comes from two things that you mentioned. One, the movement towards more whole group instruction, which, in almost every curriculum I look at, just teaches to the middle, so it doesn't meet the wide range of students' needs.

The other thing is, for... So I do a lot of work, or did, before the pandemic, I worked with the Universal Literacy Coaches here in New York City. I would go into a lot of schools where they would assess the students and place them on the phonics continuum, and they only received phonics in small group. The thinking behind that was, we will just meet them where they are and march them up.

But what happened in reality was children would come into first grade, and they hadn't mastered some of the kindergarten skills, so they'd be put in that part of the continuum, and they would move very slowly. So when first grade ended, they hadn't even been exposed to a fair amount of first grade skills, and they went into second grade, even further behind.

We just can't do that anymore. Both have to happen. We have to expose all children to grade-level content.

Unfortunately, most of the instruction has no differentiator, or no scaffolding. We can't just tell teachers to expose them to grade-level content. I hear that a lot with reading, just have them read grade-level text.

But if we don't provide resources and techniques for how to scaffold it and support it, to make sure that those whole group lessons for children who are below grade-level expectations, we don't want it to be frustrating. We want them to get some learning, but manage that frustration, and manage those expectations so that they get some learning, but they aren't overwhelmed.

That requires some finesse. And it's not an instructional program, so we have to layer that in.

So a lot of the work I do now, when schools feel like they have their phonics in place, and they're doing a lot of this whole group, I will go in and look at, what do we do during the lesson, to meet the needs of the students who... If we're doing long vowels, they're still working on short vowels, or the students who already know what you're teaching, so they're not... Children who are frustrated or bored don't sit quietly and smile. You know what I mean? To be realistic about it. And we want every minute to count. And what about our multilingual learners?

So there are lots of things we can do during a whole group so that everybody gets something, but some of it requires a little bit different of what they're practicing, or what have you.

Some of it requires a little bit of support before they get to the lesson. If we're doing a decodable text in first grade and we're doing long vowels, and I have students who are still trying to master short vowels, that book's going to overwhelm them. So the day before I have them listen to an audio recording of the book, all these decodables, almost all of them, have an audio recording, and they follow along.

Right before the lesson, I will just take maybe five or ten minutes and do an echo read with them, at least a portion of the book. And we'll talk about the big ideas so that when they get to the whole group lesson, it's their third experience with the book. They can talk about the book. They can do a little bit of reading about the book. They can certainly write about the book, but it isn't an overwhelming experience for them. They can manage what's happening during that whole group. I've set them up for success.

When we're rereading the book on subsequent days, I know that whole book might overwhelm them. I might have them practice fluency with just a page or two because I know they can handle that. I want them to learn something about that new skill, but not overwhelm them. Then, during small group, I really hit those skills they don't know yet, that they should know. We really target those and do some intensive work to try to get them caught up. So it's happening on these two layers. That's when it really starts to work.

Anna Geiger: Thank you for explaining that. I think that is a place I've come to just in the last year or so, understanding that everybody needs to be taught grade-level content, but like you said, with support. Otherwise, it's just going to feel like a waste of time for some of the kids, and it's going to be very boring for other kids.

Wiley Blevins: It's happening everywhere, where there's these directives. "Only use grade-level complex texts, or only do this," and without the scaffolds in place, it's going to fail.

Anna Geiger: What would you say for teachers who have... Let's say they've got a group of early first graders. So some kids are fluent readers, they're doing really well, and then some kids are struggling with CVC. How do you challenge those advanced readers during those whole class lessons?

Wiley Blevins: Yeah. When I do my lesson, I'm introducing a skill. I have my blending lines, and that's a whole thing that I do with words, new words, and review words to extend the learning, building, reviewing, repetition. But I always have challenge words in those lines.

When we read the text, I like my students to read it the first day, even if they're above-level, so I can confirm they really have mastery. But on subsequent days, when we're rereading the book, maybe we're rereading it to a partner, and I'm listening in, or what have you, I just have those above-level students read a different book during that time. They're not going to some other part of the room, but they just have the book from small group that's more advanced. And so they're getting practice with what we've already taught. That all has to be set up, and make sure the resources are there, and so on.

When we do dictation, a lot of above-level readers are not above-level in spelling.

Anna Geiger: Interesting how that works. Yeah.

Wiley Blevins: Yeah, they're at different places. So some of them, exactly what you're doing with spelling is exactly what they need. You really have to look at decoding and encoding differently for different students. They can be at very different places.

So I look at those adjustments, and I work with teachers to start differentiating. It can be really overwhelming because it's not an instructional resource. My suggestion has always been, take a high-impact routine, like blending, and differentiate that, and work on that for maybe a month.Then take another routine, like dictation, and differentiate that for maybe a month, and so on. Just slowly build the capacity throughout the year.

These things become habit, how you approach your whole group lessons. They just become very natural.

And teachers will figure out what's easier for them to do, and resources, and all that because you want it to be very smooth. You don't want children running around. You just want everything there. If you're doing a sort, it can be as simple as writing some additional multisyllabic words on the board and saying, "Blue group, you need to add these words to your sort." Or it could be your red group. "Red group, I only want you to sort these four words," not ten because that would overwhelm them. But these four really important long A words, I want you to know. So just sort those, and I'm going to check on that. We're going to do some work with them a little later.

Not a big deal, but you just do it, very naturally, during the lesson.

Anna Geiger: Yes. Thanks for making that so practical.

Closing out here, can you talk to us a little bit about your phonics program? Is that, exactly, your phonics program? I know your name is associated with Sadlier Phonics. Is that correct?

Wiley Blevins: Yes, I'm the author of that, and I'm the consultant on the Benchmark Phonics, their most recent stuff.

Anna Geiger: Oh, okay. So can you tell us a little bit about how long that program's been out, and what do you think makes it stand out?

Wiley Blevins: So the Sadlier, From Phonics to Reading, it got all green on EdReports, which was a thrill.

Anna Geiger: Oh, great!

Wiley Blevins: How hard is it to get through that system?

It's been out a few years, and it's meant to be a really efficient program where it doesn't have a ton of stuff. It's really efficient and manageable, and what have you. What I did when I created that is, I looked at those ten reasons why phonics instruction sometimes fails for my research, and I tried to unplug those obstacles.

So, for example, one of the biggest issues is a lack of review and repetition. You teach a skill one week, you do another skill the next week, and what have you. That results in exposure-focused learning, and the learning begins to decay or slip away.

I wanted to correct that. So after I introduce a skill, I systematically build application opportunities for the next four to six weeks. The DNA of the program is designed for mastery and checks for transfer.

And so a lot of those underpinnings of those ten reasons why phonics instruction sometimes fails has been adjusted. The decodable texts have higher quality texts that children want to read. They've recently added more decodable texts because I said, "There aren't enough. I want more." And so they added more.

There are things that, as we use it in schools, there are some modifications that I have made, making sure that after teachers get the program in place, the next year we go in and we work on how to differentiate that more effectively. And so those kinds of things.

It's been really exciting to be able to provide a resource that's reflective of my work and my research. And when we're doing decodable text, we're teaching vocabulary, and we're doing rich comprehension. We're writing about it. We're using those writings to connect to other parts of our literacy block. All of these things becoming habits and intertwining with the other resources teachers are using. That's my goal.

Anna Geiger: Awesome. So are there any projects you're working on that you're willing to talk about or able to share? Any things coming up?

Wiley Blevins: Well I'm actually writing a book on differentiating phonics instruction.

Anna Geiger: Yay!

Wiley Blevins: I spend so much time talking about it. It's a really complex topic, and I have these little handouts that I give. I've been so focused on doing that, I thought, if I just had a book I can give, that would be easier. Then if I can't be there at the school, the teachers will have a resource. So that's what I'm working on now. That will be out sometime in 2023.

Anna Geiger: Yay, all right!

Wiley Blevins: I'm also working with Benchmark on a set of new decodable texts, and they're my dream decodables. I know we have to have these decodables that are instructional, and what have you. I wanted decodables that feel like trade books that are really fun and engaging, and fun, and silly, and about fascinating topics, and all of that, and so I'm creating those with them. Those can be in your classroom library, or they could be in book bags for kids, or you could use them instructionally. So those are two projects I'm really excited about.

Anna Geiger: That is very exciting! Well I could have talked to you all day long, but I'm sure you have other things to do today. Thank you so much for taking time to talk to us. I know people are going to come back to this. The show notes will have links to all your books and anything I can find online that people would appreciate.

Wiley Blevins: Thank you so much!

Anna Geiger: So thank you again.

Wiley Blevins: Yeah, I appreciate it. Have a wonderful, wonderful day.

Anna Geiger: Thank you so much for listening. You can find the show notes for today's episode at themeasuredmom.com/episode119. Talk to you next time!