



## Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here. Welcome to Triple R Teaching. This is part of our Summer Old And New series. Last week we listened to an old interview from Jessica Farmer, an experienced first grade teacher who also has a presence on TikTok and Instagram with loads of helpful resources for teachers.

This week I have a brand new interview with Jessica. She has recently left the classroom to serve teachers, and you'll be able to find out how you can learn from her in some webinars and other areas, and also how you can get on her email list so you can get loads of freebies. She's here to help, and I really like that in today's episode she shares some troubleshooting tips for common issues we face when teaching primary grade phonics. Here we go!

**Anna Geiger:** Welcome back, Jessica!

**Jessica Farmer:** Thank you so much for having me. I am so excited and really thrilled to be chatting with your audience again today.

**Anna Geiger:** Today we're going to tackle some common issues that first grade teachers have when teaching reading.

So you taught first grade for thirteen years. You have a lot of experience, shared a lot on social media and other places, and I know that you can give some really good solutions to our teachers.

One problem that some teachers have is that the year starts and their kids are all over the map, and they have some kids who actually still are struggling with letter names and sounds. What do you do as a first grade teacher when you start the year with someone who's that far behind?

**Jessica Farmer:** First grade is such a foundation-building grade that you really have to

start back at the beginning with everybody. Even if you have kids who are solid with their letter names and sounds, reviewing all of that at the beginning is so important.

You might think, "Oh no, most of them know it. I'll skip over that and I'm going to jump into blending words right away," but really in those first couple of weeks while you're doing routines and procedures, review those alphabet concepts again. Go through A through Z again, one letter a day, and make sure kids really are solid with knowing the name, the sound, they can recognize it, and they can write it. Go through the letter formation. Everything. Because you might be surprised, even kids who maybe perform well on an assessment are not fluent even if you think they might be.

I think that constant review right at the beginning of the school year and really getting the alphabet down pat is super important.

**Anna Geiger:** What about when you have kids... Like you said, you're starting to teach blending, and you have some kids who are getting it right away or maybe already got it in kindergarten, and then you have some, they'll say the three sounds and then they'll come up with a completely different word.

**Jessica Farmer:** Yeah, I talk about this a lot on my page. It's videos that I do all the time because blending questions come up often. I always share about three different versions of blending.

You have that typical blending where you're segmenting, and then you're blending together, and some kids do great with that. They have great phonemic awareness, but other kids do not.

First of all, you can pull away the letters and just be working on phonemic awareness only, maybe with some manipulatives, and dropping back to two sounds, seeing if they can put TWO sounds together at first. If they start to get that and you're ready to start putting some letters with it, then doing that continuous blending where you're really stretching and holding, and it is easier to do those two-sound words like, "at," because you can hold the vowel sounds long, so you can go, "aaaaaaaaaaat. Say it fast, at." And just really letting them know that you can really say those sounds really long and stretch them out and then push them together. You don't have to say them separated when you're learning how to blend.

We want to segment when we're learning how to spell, but I think a lot of teachers think they have to segment before you blend and you don't have to.

Then if that doesn't work, then I always go to successive blending where you show one letter and do one sound at a time. I even created these blending pyramids that worked really well for my kids and I have them in my TPT store because I love them so much. It just really breaks it down and scaffolds it for kids that just maybe don't have that working memory that other students have, and they're struggling to hold on to all those sounds at once. So breaking it down one sound at a time can be really helpful.

So those are strategies that work, and the last step is to use a whisper phone or some kind of listening device, because maybe they're just not really paying attention to those sounds. We know there's a lot going on in the classroom, and sometimes when they're at the small group table, they want to know what their friends are doing over here at the center. So using a whisper phone and getting them to really listen into those sounds can be helpful to isolate just that sound. "Do you hear the sound you're making? Let's put those sounds together." I've seen great success with whisper phones during intervention groups.

**Anna Geiger:** That's really interesting. I've never thought about that as using them for helping them with blending. I just usually think about it as using it while they're reading so they're not distracted, but that's a great idea.

**Jessica Farmer:** Yeah.

**Anna Geiger:** Have you ever used any physical things to help them when they're first learning to blend, like blocks or something, before you use letters? Just that visual of pushing things together. Have you found that to be useful at all?

**Jessica Farmer:** Oh yeah. A lot of your math manipulatives are great. Take out your math kit and use those math manipulatives, because having something physical to put together to give them that concept of what we're doing. Sometimes thinking about a sound is very abstract, so giving them something physical to move and work with is great.

Even if you don't use a manipulative, even just having a hand motion is really great. So if you're blending and you're using finger stretching to count the sounds, and then maybe close your hand to make it look like you're putting them together, or counting on your fingers, just different hand motions.

I know programs like Heggerty and Open Court, they have hand motions to go with the different sounds or the different actions, but those hand motions can be really great reminders. Even just taking their two hands and pushing them together shows that, yeah, we're going to smush these sounds together to make a word.

I always like to move my hand across fast to show we're going to say it quick. So I know that people can't see me right now, but I'm taking my hand and I'm just running it as if I'm racing it along the bottom of the word.

And also even using cars, I've seen that as a really great tool. Rush the car under the bottom so that you can see we're going to say it fast now.

Sometimes you just have to tell them, "You just need to say it fast," and that's enough to make it click, because they've heard so many people segmenting the sounds that maybe they don't realize they're supposed to put them together. So sometimes it's just saying, "Say it fast," and they're like, "Oh!" The light bulb went on and they say it fast. It can be as simple as that.

**Anna Geiger:** What about when you've got kids who can blend them, but every time they get to a word, they stop and segment it first? They say, "/b/-/ă/-/t/, bat," instead of just, "bat." Have you found anything that helps them push to the next level? Is it just more an issue of practice? How do they get to that?

**Jessica Farmer:** I think the amount of practice kids need, we don't realize it as adults, but it takes SO many repetitions, especially for a beginning reader. Anytime you learn to do something new - most of us didn't hop on a bike and just ride it right away. We fell off several times.

There's this really great article by Spelfabet that talks about the sweaty sounding-out phase.

**Anna Geiger:** I'll have to check that out.

**Jessica Farmer:** Yeah, they call it the sweaty sounding-out phase, and that your brain is like a muscle and you're working that muscle and that's the really hard work that's happening, but your brain is making those connections.

We know that the reading brain has to be built. Your brain isn't set to read automatically, and so you have to build those connections. That sweaty sounding-out phase, that's what they're doing. They're working really hard, but they're building those connections and it will pay off.

So I think in the beginning, don't panic if they're sounding out words on every single page, even if they've seen them before, if they've had enough practice.

And you're also working on connecting to meaning, because that's really important for orthographic mapping as well. Do they know what the book is even about? Are you reading about baseball and they're talking about the bat, or are you reading about an animal that's a bat?

And talking about vocabulary with students. A lot of those CVC words sometimes are challenging vocabulary - words like "rod." They might not know what a rod is, and you're reading a book about fishing or something, and they have no experience with that, no background knowledge.

I think recently in a video I said, "Phonics cannot just be decoding. You have to attach meaning to it as well, or it's not going to stick." I think that's another key point. What is this story about and what is a bat? Are we talking about a baseball bat? Are we talking about an animal bat? And maybe just going through the vocabulary of the story because maybe they just don't understand what's happening, and sometimes decodable books can be a little abstract. I think definitely connecting back to meaning as often as you can will help students become more fluent.

**Anna Geiger:** That's wonderful. I appreciate that. Now we're going to talk a little bit about... This is our last question, but it's kind of a deep one, and that is how do you manage what every first grade classroom has, which is a huge variety of ability levels?

So I've said this many times, but when I started my first year of first grade, I had a little girl who didn't know all her letters, and I had two boys who were reading at a fourth grade level and then everything in between. I had a phonics program that year that I was expected to teach whole-class. It really didn't go very well. I didn't know how to differentiate that program, and it really turned me off to basically structured phonics in general, unfortunately.

If you could talk to us about how to manage all those different levels, in your opinion, because I know there's a lot of opinions about this, maybe not as much research, but in your opinion, what's a good balance between whole group and small group and how do you tackle that?

**Jessica Farmer:** Yeah. My first year teaching a very structured phonics program, luckily it started with that really strong review at the beginning, so we could try to close some of those alphabet gaps right at the beginning, right at the start.

I love a quote by Anita Archer where she says, "Everyone does everything."

Your phonics block should kind of be a noisy time in your classroom. So if it's a quiet time in your classroom, that could be why it's not working so well, because kids need to hear what's going on.

When we're all blending words on the board, even those students who don't have it yet, they're hearing other kids do it, and they're copying them and they're mimicking them.

I also find that placing them near you, giving them maybe an alphabet arc in front of them while you're doing some of the blending so that they have something in front of them to reference. Or maybe you have a sound chart that you use as part of your program or a mini sound wall or something that you can give them access to so that they have a reference to go back to. "Oh, that sound is /ō/, that sound is /ă/." Something that they can reference.

Going over those short vowel sounds with students. Those tend to be very tricky for students who are struggling. So making sure in small group we're teaching that to mastery. Mastering those short vowels, which is something that I learned when I got my OG training through IMSE doing the vowel intensive. That is so helpful for students and listening for that vowel sound.

I think in whole group, just making sure you're there to support those students who are still struggling, and then noticing where they need to fill in those gaps and pulling them for small groups.

Don't give up on your phonics program even if you have some students who seem to be

struggling, just make sure that they are participating and trying to do the routines with the class and then scaffolding as needed.

I try in a lot of the resources that I make to show how to scaffold. So if you're doing dictation, instead of just a blank piece of paper that the other kids are using, you have a paper that has the alphabet at the top of it for those students that need to reference those letters. Instead of dictating three-sound words to those students, you're dictating two-sound words to those students.

So that's kind of where you have to think about how you're going to differentiate. Can you do that whole group or do you have to do that in your small group? It really just depends on how large those gaps are.

Again, if they don't have those basic alphabet skills like we talked about at the beginning, that is really where you need to spend your time reviewing daily, going over the alphabet daily. I know in the beginning of first grade, I would play an alphabet song and a letter sound song every single day. Even if all my students didn't need it, we did it every single day, that repetition. And by three weeks in, no one was missing a letter sound. Not a single kid.

Even those kids who came in struggling, because they know the routine, they know the drill, they know what's going to happen, and there's nothing wrong with repetition. They love the song and kids thrive on routine. You don't have to do some fancy activity every single moment of the day. Kids thrive on routine.

So if you are looking at Instagram and you're thinking, "Oh my goodness, I see all these beautiful activities and I'm not doing that every single day." Or if you ARE trying to do that every single day and you're burning yourself out from trying to do that, think simple. It can be very simple. It does not have to be complicated and simple works better.

So that's my advice. Keep it simple. Keep going because especially your first year with a detailed phonics program, you yourself are going to learn a lot and maybe struggle a little bit if you didn't have that type of training in school. A lot of us had whole language or balanced literacy when we were in school. We didn't learn that way. So give yourself some grace, but keep at it. Don't give up. Keep trying.

**Anna Geiger:** What about the kids who are far ahead of the phonics skill that you're teaching? How do you handle that?

**Jessica Farmer:** Yeah, so don't throw away all your leveled readers just because someone said leveled readers are bad. They're not bad. The letter on it doesn't really mean much. Obviously it's going to have more text on the page as you get to those higher letters, but you could sort them by topic and let those students think about what they want to learn about.

Maybe they want to learn about ocean animals, and you know that they're fluent enough to read this leveled reader, and you can pull out some vocabulary that you can work on together. Look at some of the phonics skills that are more complex in that leveled reader. Pull those words out and teach them a concept from that. Maybe you're working on suffixes with that group because they're sure to be in a level J in first grade, a lot of words with suffixes. So you can pull a phonics concept out of that leveled reader. As long as those students are pretty fluent, I'm comfortable with them reading a leveled text or even a passage.

You can look on [readworks.org](https://www.readworks.org). It's free for teachers, and you can look up any topic. They have fiction and nonfiction. Ask them what they want to learn about, and that will also keep them more interested because they're playing a role in what they're learning about. But again, you can choose what you want to target with that text. So keep all your books and use them to your advantage.

**Anna Geiger:** Reviewing what you've talked about, so you said to start the year with the review of letters and sounds, even if that's songs or whatever, but just to remind everybody what those are, and you've found that that's closed the gaps pretty quickly for most kids.

Then in your whole group phonics lessons, you're teaching the same grade level skill to everybody, but you're scaffolding for the kids who are struggling in different ways. And as a reminder, scaffolds are providing support until you can take that support away. Some need a lot, some need just a little, but different things like giving them resources on their desk to refer to, having them close to you, giving them a simpler task.

Then the small groups would be flexible groups that you would form based on what kids need to know after. The kids who are really struggling, probably you meet with them quite often, I'm guessing.

**Jessica Farmer:** Oh yeah.



**Anna Geiger:** Reviewing the skills that you're teaching in the whole group or maybe going backwards a little bit and reviewing some things they don't have strong, like perhaps vowel sounds.

Then with the kids who are more advanced, am I correct that you wouldn't meet with them as often?

**Jessica Farmer:** Yeah, I think they are a lot more capable. When you have that small group time and you have centers set up, those students are capable of practicing the skills that they already have correctly, and you don't really have to worry too much about them practicing the skills at the center incorrectly.

The students that you are working with are the ones that need that teacher attention time. Your students that are at those centers are capable of practicing, doing that repetition, and maybe even going deeper into some of the skills that you've already taught in whole group.

I definitely think being mindful about how your centers are set up so that our students can be successful at them, and you might have to differentiate your centers for your different groups.

But yes, I would not meet with my students that are progressing as much as my students that are struggling. It doesn't mean I don't meet with them. We definitely touch base. We definitely will meet for a small group to try to extend their learning.

But yeah, you definitely want to do your best to close those gaps because time with the teacher is precious, and we know that there are only a certain number of minutes in the day.

**Anna Geiger:** Wonderful! Well I'm going to be sure to link to your social media accounts and also a place where people can join your email list, which just before this call, you told me was new, which is wonderful.

**Jessica Farmer:** Yes!

**Anna Geiger:** And I'll link to your TPT store and anywhere else that people can learn from you. I know you've been giving a lot of webinars and workshops for different companies and things.

**Jessica Farmer:** Yeah. I've been doing Top 10 Tips with the creators of Sounder & Friends. We just completed our April event, but the recording should be for sale for a little while, and it's going to be available until June 30th. We talked about the top ten tips for linking phonemic awareness to phonics instruction to really improve that automatic word recognition. That's something like we were talking about where the student is seeing the same word over and over again and having to continually blend that word, you definitely want to sign up for that webinar. The handout is over 200 pages. We always go wild and crazy with our handouts, with tons of resources, and it's great for our grades K to 2. We'll continue to do those Top 10 Tips. We have some exciting things coming up, so make sure you follow Sounder & Friends as well as my page so that you always know.

And sign up for the email list please because I'm sending exclusive freebies out to people who are just on my email list, and I'm planning some giveaways soon with some decodable readers. Really exciting things are coming up, so be sure to sign up for my email list.

**Anna Geiger:** Definitely. We'll be sure to share the link in the show notes. Thanks so much for joining us again, Jessica.

**Jessica Farmer:** You're welcome! Thanks for having me.

**Anna Geiger:** You can find the show notes for this episode at [themeasuredmom.com/episode125](https://themeasuredmom.com/episode125). Talk to you next time!