Triple R Teaching

Hello, welcome back to Triple R Teaching. I'm your host Anna Geiger from The Measured Mom. This week I had the honor of speaking with Dr. Julia B. Lindsey, author of "Reading Above the Fray," and she's going to help us think a lot about decoding and how we can explicitly teach that to our beginning readers.

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Julia!

Julia Lindsey: Hi! It's so great to be here!

Anna Geiger: Can you talk to us a little bit about how you got into education and bring us up to where you are today?

Julia Lindsey: Absolutely. I'd be thrilled to talk about that.

So I began my career in education in college when I started working with a summer program called the Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools, and I fell in love with supporting children in listening to complex texts and discussing all of the beautiful things that they were learning.

But it also started me down a path of kind of scratching my head about when are we focused on teaching kids the act of reading, of how to read. So that program is specifically quite focused, and it knows this and it says this, on comprehension and also on supporting children in culturally responsive texts. But actually even my second year in teaching in that program, while I was still in college, I came to the program director and I said, "Could I teach a phonics program too? Could I add this element in to the kindergarten, first, and second grade kids' experience? Because I think it's sort of weird that we aren't teaching them how to read words." So I created a very slapped together phonics experience for students based on the information I had access to, and that was kind of the first time that I started getting really interested in that side of word reading.

Then I went on to teach, I taught kindergarten and first grade. I taught in a district that was really balanced literacy. I wouldn't have necessarily known that that was what it was at the time, but that's what we were doing. We taught phonics, but we also primarily used guided reading and were really focused on moving kids up in their Fountas and Pinnell guided reading level. That was THE metric that we were thinking about for reading.

So again, I experienced some strange disconnects between what I was telling kids about language and phonics and what I was asking them to do in texts. And like so many of us, I had the experience of having students who I just simply could not support through individual words. They would be encountering so many words that I didn't know what to say, like, "Okay, sound it out, hmmm, that's weird. I don't know. That one's strange," and just kind of mucking through things.

Then I decided to get my PhD, so I went to the University of Michigan, and even though at that point I had a master's in teaching and I had taught children and I had different experiences, I was utterly floored by learning about the actual research that we have on word reading development specifically. I had, for example, never heard the term phonemic awareness before I stepped foot in a doctoral program and was pretty shocked to start learning things about what I could have done differently in my classroom. And also was shocked to then learn it wasn't about me, this was a very widespread disconnect between research and practice.

That led me into wanting to do more research and work around supporting teachers in foundational literacy instruction and in decodable texts and in really bridging this gap between how we teach phonics and how we think about teaching reading in other times of day and how do we bring in actual research into classrooms to give kids the best chance at becoming proficient readers.

Anna Geiger: So many teachers talk about that, about how they went through a master's program and still didn't learn about the importance of decoding.

I remember when I was teaching, for me it was about the books, getting the right books in their hands, and I didn't do a lot of explicit instruction in blending and decoding. I thought that moving them through the levels was the way to go. That was, like you said, what I learned in my master's degree program, we learned about running records and all of that. So it is definitely a new way of thinking about it.

And yet it's not new at all, it's been around for a long time, but we got distracted for quite a few decades there.

Maybe you can talk a little bit about the difference between decoding and phonics and why decoding sometimes gets lost in the shuffle. We're figuring out that, yeah, phonics is important, many people have known that for a long time, but why does decoding get lost sometimes?

Julia Lindsey: Yeah, so phonics is really a type of instruction, specifically it's that instruction in sound-spelling relationships and then using those to read and spell. But in my classroom, for example, and in many classrooms, what phonics really turns into is that explicit experience with some sound-spelling patterns and maybe some work in isolation with them. But there's not necessarily the same level of explicitness towards how do you actually use those sound-spelling relationships to read a word, to spell a word, and then to do any of that in context.

So you might be teaching a lot about how this is a long vowel team and it spells this sound, but we might not always bring that same level of attention to the actual act of decoding a word.

So for me, decoding is different because decoding is really how do we use those sound-spelling relationships to read a word. And we're bringing to bear not just that knowledge that we got from sound-spelling relationships and phonics, but also phonemic awareness and our ability to hear and manipulate those individual sounds, and in particular in decoding to blend them together.

I think oftentimes decoding gets lost because it feels like a side note or it feels like something that we might think would happen spontaneously. So we might say, "Okay, I've given kids this information, now I'm putting a word in front of them that includes this information, they should be good to go." But if we know anything about kids, it's that they aren't always just ready to go with that kind of information.

So I like to focus on thinking about how decoding is different than phonics, and by really foregrounding that to help us understand that the whole purpose is to give kids the chance to use these skills to read words and also of course to spell words. And that we need to bring the same level of awareness to telling them, "All right, now I'm looking at a word. Here's exactly the steps I'm going to take to recognize this word and how to get through it." And really keeping that at the foreground because after all, the whole point of all of these skills is to be able to use them to be readers and writers.

Anna Geiger: So let's say we've got a new kindergarten or first grade teacher listening and they understand the importance of phonics. They have their phonics lessons. What

would be the steps that they want to teach their students to decode a word? So after they've taught them the sound-spelling relationship, what's next?

Julia Lindsey: Great question. So say you're teaching kindergarten and you have just been teaching alphabet sounds and spellings, you might be surprised to know that you can go ahead and support kids in starting to decode when your students know at least about thirteen to fifteen sound-spelling relationships, maybe even fewer.

We have research at this stage that shows that by that point, kids are ready to start practicing decoding. So they need about thirteen or so sound-spelling relationships, obviously including some vowels. They also need that phonemic blending, that ability to say "/s/ /ă/ /t/, okay, that's three sounds. I can hear them, I can say them, I can separate them or segment them."

So if you're working on that skill along with the letter-sound relationships in the alphabet, then what you can say is, "Okay, we're going to put this together. We're maybe going to start with CV units." That's consonant-vowel units, they're not words most of the time. But we're maybe going to start there and we're going to start with some continuous sounds so that we can really hold the sound through so we're not distracted by any schwa that we're adding to those phonemes.

And we are going to start out by saying, "We're going to touch each letter, we're going to say each sound, and we're going to blend them back together."

Or we might start further back and say, "Here's an Elkonin box with two boxes. We're going to slide a token in and say the sound /s/, and then move it across and say the sound /ă/. /s/-/a/." And now we're going to add a letter there, we're going to write or maybe we're going to move a letter tile for S and a letter tile for A, while we're still saying those sounds. And then we can again read through those and say the sounds together.

So taking some strategic steps to get kind of that muscle growing. And then when we get up to a word, we're ready to read an individual word. Again, saying, "Okay, we can take certain steps to get through this. First we're going to say each of the sounds individually, then we're going to try to hold onto the sounds and blend them into one another."

Or maybe we need a little bit more help, "We're going to say the first sound, say the second sound, then say those two as a bundle, hold onto that bundle. And we can

always generally stretch that vowel because it's continuous and we're going to stretch that medial vowel into that final sound. And that's the way that we're going to kind of accelerate our blending."

But making sure that kids know you're using the sound-spelling knowledge, these aren't going to be spontaneously different if I'm giving you a decodable word and you're using that information that we've already practiced in blending.

And if we need to, even if we're working at a word in text we can add on that sound box, those tokens. We can use those in the moment to continue that support to make sure that kids are able to get through that entire word.

Anna Geiger: That is very different, isn't it, from assuming that all this is going to develop spontaneously, like you said.

I know when I taught first and second grade, like I said, it was more of a reading workshop approach. So I did a lot of getting what I thought were the right books in their hands, and kind of embedded phonics instruction. I did teach phonics in Words Their Way, but it wasn't real explicit and it did not occur to me that I needed to do this explicit blending instruction because some kids did just kind of get it, they learned it in kindergarten and I taught them first grade.

There was at the time, for sure, this belief among a lot of teachers that you didn't want to teach anything out of context because that lacked meaning. So I would not have enjoyed doing these blending drills you could call it or blending exercises because it seemed to lack meaning. What would you say to someone who would say that?

Julia Lindsey: Yeah, so I think that that goes hand in hand with this feeling that adding a level of explicitness to this type of instruction is going to somehow decrease children's joy or their motivation to read. And so I would say a few things to that.

First, to address your question head on, we know that proficient readers can read words in context and out of context at the same speed with the same level of accuracy. In other words, proficient readers don't need context to read. And by read, I mean recognize a word. Obviously we need context to make sense of a sentence because a sentence is context, but we don't need context to recognize words. So first off, knowing that can be helpful in terms of feeling confident in doing some isolated work.

We also know from research that we do need this combination of work in isolation with these skills and work in application of these skills. Having that isolated practice is really critical for building up children's abilities and their understanding of how to actually go through each of these skills.

And then in terms of this joy and motivation piece I think that this is one of the most important things for teachers to understand.

First, we have some fascinating research on the alphabet by Theresa Roberts and colleagues that looked at, are children motivated and interested in decontextualized alphabet experiences or contextualized alphabet experiences? They actually found that kids were more motivated in those decontextualized experiences. Not only was this based on kids' self-report but it was also based on the teachers and researchers observing the kids and seeing that they were more engaged and answering questions. And of course, even better than just being more engaged, their outcomes were also better.

So I think that that's pretty powerful to remind us that this very act of learning these skills is exciting to young children who have never experienced this before, even if it feels kind of rote to us.

And then finally, I'll say that there's a new study that recently came out that's gotten a lot of buzz because it shows us that there is a potential new way of thinking about motivation. This study suggests that good skill in reading is actually what leads to long-term motivation, not that motivation leads to long-term good skill.

So when we think about these early years, we think about how can I give my students the strongest possible backbone as a reader?

There's two major ways that we want to do that. The first is by ensuring that children are all able to decode words proficiently because that's going to give them the greatest chance at proficiency. And the second is, of course, supporting them in developing a deep and wide understanding of our language and having lots and lots of background knowledge. And those, in concert, are really the best way that we know how to support kids in not only being successful but also being motivated.

Anna Geiger: Excellent. That was really, really well said. I did learn about that study recently, and we'll have to get a link to that in the show notes too.

So on the topic of practice and motivation, a lot of balanced literacy teachers, I include my former self, were reluctant to use decodable books because they just... I mean, when I first started teaching twenty-some years ago, there weren't a lot of good decodable books to choose from. That's true. They were pretty bland and the stories were stilted, and so it really did turn me off. But nowadays there really is no excuse because there's so many good books out there.

So I don't think that the concern that the books themselves are bad is a reason to avoid decodable books because there are so many good choices, but we may be tempted to feel, "Oh, they just don't really say very much. They're kind of boring because you can only use so many letters. What's so bad about using leveled books for beginners to have them get to the words in a different way because eventually they'll apply the phonics knowledge they have."

What would you say to that?

Julia Lindsey: So I would say that decodable texts are one of the most powerful tools that we currently have for supporting kids in applying decoding in context. The reason I say that is because we know that children need the chance to develop this early decoding skill, and the by far easiest way to have them develop that is to give them a lot of chances to practice.

So if you are writing a book for a kid and you are not thinking about if words decodable, the chances that you just randomly write something decodable for a beginning reader is pretty low because it's pretty hard to write books that are really just using those decodable words unless you're trying. So we can't just put any old book in front of children and expect that they'll have a lot of opportunities to actually decode those individual words. So that's kind of like the base stage for why to use decodables that I think is important to recognize. It's not just random, they have a very specific task that they're going to be good at.

We also see in research, which to be fair, we have only limited evidence for decodable texts, but we have emerging evidence about them that is continuing to support their use for the group of children who are developing decoders. I imagine that we will have continued research coming out in this field that will get us more and more precise about what children need in decodables to be best served.

But the research that we do have points to children potentially being more accurate

and fluent in decodable texts, and I don't mean the first time they read them in terms of that fluency. This is a skill that develops over time, but that they are able to recognize words more accurately, they are able to rely less on a teacher for prompting, and they are more readily using phonics to recognize those words rather than using a guessing mechanism.

We also know that widely they seem to support early reading development better than other text types.

But for me, the most critical research finding around decodable texts for teachers is this idea that decodable texts kind of support children in spontaneously applying that phonics more. Children look at those words, and especially when you've taught them to decode words, they know, "Okay, I should be using decoding to read this word."

The reason why I think that is so important is because to me, decoding is really the golden key into becoming a word reader. We want children to be practicing decoding as much as possible because we know that it is the most likely way to lead to long-term automaticity and accuracy in individual word recognition, but also more broadly in being able to create a memory of many, many, many types of words, and for many children eventually be able to self-teach themselves words as they grow in their development. And so decoding is the route to that.

We might mistakenly think that the route to automatically recognizing a word is to memorize that word, but that is not an efficient or effective way for doing that. The best road to getting kids to be automatic word readers is actually to give them a lot of chances to decode that word and other similar words as well.

Anna Geiger: Right. Because we know that when you practice connecting the phonemes to the graphemes, the sounds to the letters, you're promoting orthographic mapping, that mental process where you can remember words for the future.

But if you're using those leveled books where most of the words cannot be sounded out yet, they're bypassing that process. And you see videos online like, I think it's called the Purple Challenge on YouTube, where the mother has her daughter practice reading this leveled book, which is actually a book that I used. The daughter can get to the words with the pictures, but take them away and she has no idea what the words say.

Whereas with decoding, if they're really learning to read the words, they can read them out of context, like you said.

That brings us into your Beyond Decodables, which have been available online for some time and they're not 100% decodable. Can you talk to us about why you created those and a little bit about why they're not 100%?

Julia Lindsey: Yes, absolutely. So my Beyond Decodables are really different than a lot of the other texts that are labeled decodable that you're going to see on the market for one major reason, and that's because these texts were not created as a product for decoding. They weren't created as something to sell. They were created instead during my work at the University of Michigan when I was trying to write a dissertation, and I looked at the research broadly and said, "What could we do in a text to best support early children's reading development?"

Instead of just focusing on decodability, I focused on a range of criteria that we know support children's reading development. In research, we call this multiple criteria texts. That is a mouthful that I don't think is going to catch on, and my dissertation was certainly not the first study to study these types of texts, but it's this idea that we need to be thinking about more than just decodability.

One of the reasons for that is you can imagine that if the only thing we thought about was decodability, imagine you're not thinking about meaning or sentence structure at all, you might end up with a text that says "Rat, pat, hat and cat." Which is obviously a meaningless sentence, but is in fact 100% decodable if you know all of those sound-spelling relationships.

So instead, multiple criteria texts attempt to take in a wider range of knowledge that we have about how we support children's reading development. Things like high frequency word support, and the percentage of high frequency words that are included in a text, word repetition, and also the patterns in words being repeated, those orthographic patterns that is, the level of understandability, I call it, of words, which means how imaginable are these words? How concrete are these words? How familiar are these words to children? As well as the broad meaningfulness of the text, the syntax of the individual sentences, and even the conceptual coherence of the text to children's other knowledge, like their science knowledge or their social studies knowledge.

So my books look pretty different because we were coming at it from saying, "Is there a way that we could support children in decoding while also trying to support some of these other aspects of reading development?"

And so they had two primary goals along with several others. The first was to support children who are using that specific phonics program in applying those concepts and texts. And the second was to support children who are using a very specific science, social studies, and read aloud program in seeing some connections with their knowledge building so that they could be supported in continual knowledge building, even in these early decodable texts.

So as a result, they can't be 100% decodable because most science and social studies vocabulary words are not decodable for this age group. So we chose to use some additional general science and social studies vocabulary words that those children would already be familiar with to try to support children across decoding, but also across knowledge building.

Anna Geiger: And just to insert, as I know you know, the research doesn't have a percent of decodability that's recommended for a decodable text to be effective. I know Wiley Blevins talks about that a lot. I think he said he'd rather have a text that's 60% decodable but makes a whole lot of sense, than one that's 90% but very confusing. I know there still are strong opinions on both sides these days, so I think we're still working through all this.

But I know in one of your early books, I think it has the word "turtle" because it's a story about turtles. Most of the words are decodable, but there's a word like "turtle" in it. So how would you recommend teachers help their students with words like that?

Julia Lindsey: Yeah, this is a tricky part because that is something that I think we still need more research on. What's the best move right there? For now, I would offer two options.

The first is, of course, the kid might know the word, and then you don't need to stop them, they can just keep going. That's fine. That doesn't necessarily mean it's telling you anything about that child's decoding abilities, but if they've learned that word in some other context, then that's okay.

The second would be if they have no ability to get through that word, and then you're going to need to make a strategic choice. In some cases, depending on what you know about that child's phonics skills and what you know about that particular word, then you might do something like... Say the word is "hotdog" and they're reading CVC words. Well you might decide, I'm just going to cover up each part of this compound word and have you read this like a CVC word and then teach you something new about how sometimes we see longer words and isn't that cool?

Or you might see a word that says "gazelle," and you think to yourself, "Hmmm, we're reading CVC words, and there's no way you're going to be able to accurately decode through that word even with a LOT of support." So you might just say, "That word is gazelle, let's keep going." And you might just support children in accessing the decoding of other words in that text, and I think that that's okay.

But like I said, I think we still really need research on this. There has, to my knowledge, not been a study done on that particular issue and I do think it would be really helpful if we could get some more research around that to be sure.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, and there's also, of course, the option of pre-teaching the word. Like saying, "There's going to be a longer word in this book that you haven't learned yet, and here it is." And you could write the word turtle and draw a turtle on the board or whatever, so that's their clue for that word.

Like you said too, so often these words that include patterns that have not been specifically taught are not very hard. So like the word "cheese," for example, you can tell them right away that EE spells /ē/, and they've already learned the CH, so that one's not too hard.

I don't think we have to be afraid to teach things out of order of our scope and sequence when they're helpful and we think our kids can access those. That doesn't negate what you're doing in phonics. But, of course, unlike what many of us were doing in our balanced literacy programs, we still want to be working through that scope and sequence, and that's our main focus of instruction. But we don't have to be afraid of words that haven't been explicitly taught. We don't have to be afraid of them, and I think we want to be careful not to go too far on the other end.

Julia Lindsey: Yeah, exactly. And I completely agree. If we are working with children who are decoding or even automatically recognizing a ton of words in a decodable text that's matched to your phonics instruction, and there's a few words that are a little harder, but they only need one extra piece of sound-spelling knowledge, then absolutely you can say, "EE spells the sound /ē/. Let's try reading that word again." And those children can probably quickly incorporate that information and make a new attempt at decoding. But that doesn't mean that you would then skip teaching them EE in your phonics scope and sequence.

And I completely agree that is the difference between thinking about implicit phonics,

so teaching phonics when it comes up in a text, versus explicit phonics, so teaching it in that clear systematic order and making sure everybody gets that information. But just because you might have a group that is ready for a little piece of information doesn't mean that you're doing something wrong, but it also doesn't mean that you would skip that later on.

Anna Geiger: Perfect. Well, we're rounding this up now. Could you talk to us about your book, "Reading Above the Fray," and why you wrote it, and then what's next for you?

Julia Lindsey: Yes, absolutely. So "Reading Above the Fray" is really an attempt to talk about the research on early reading and specifically on foundational skills. What do we really know about decoding? Why am I so passionate about it? Why do I think it's so cool and why you should too? And then some evidence around aspects of foundational literacy instruction and some swaps that you can make in your instruction to make sure you're more aligned with the research.

So it's really an attempt to support teachers in being able to look at their instruction and say, "Okay, this is in or this is out. What tweaks can I make?" And some of them are really small. Some of them I say, "Hey, you could try this tomorrow if you just take three extra minutes and you try this thing."

Some of them are longer term, and that's okay, that's kind of how change is going to work, but it is to get you started. And for some people, it might extend your journey, but I think it's probably best for people who are earlier in their journey who are trying to think about how do I change my instruction?

I wrote it thinking about teachers who might not have a huge support system. I certainly wrote it thinking about myself. I didn't have any power to change the curriculum at my school, but I would've had the power to change aspects of my instruction and different routines and structures of my day. So thinking about even if you are not in the position to say we need a full new curriculum, you can start making these changes and you can start making a really big impact on the students in front of you. So that's my hope that you can take away from the book.

And then in terms of what's next, I'm continuing to work with districts and curriculum developers and other groups all around the country, and indeed all around the world, to try to help teachers be more research-driven in their instruction so that all children have access to the highest quality foundational literacy instruction and materials, and that we can really make sure that the research gets into the hands of teachers and other administrators, and again, curriculum creators so that it actually gets to impact

kids.

Anna Geiger: Fabulous! I do recommend your book, and I will link to that in the show notes as well as your Beyond Decodables.

Is there any other place people can find you?

Julia Lindsey: You can find me on all the social medias, except for TikTok because I'm not prepared to dance for you. But you can find me on Instagram or Twitter or LinkedIn or Facebook, whichever one you like. It's always Julia B. Lindsey, and you can find me in all those places, and you can give me a follow, give me a wave, or send me a message about your reading.

Anna Geiger: Wonderful! Well, thank you so much for joining us today.

Julia Lindsey: Thank you so much for having me!

Anna Geiger: You can find the show notes for today's episode at themeasuredmom.com/episode127. Talk to you next time!