



## Triple R Teaching

Welcome back to our Change Maker Series! We're talking with a bunch of people who have helped bring about change when it comes to implementing the science of reading at different levels.

This week we are looking at the school level. We're talking with Reena Mathew, she's a literacy specialist, and she's going to talk to us about how she helped her school transition from a balanced literacy program to a more structured phonics program, as well as knowledge building in the comprehension area. She is going to talk to us about how they use UFLI, what the lessons look like, and how she helped her teachers become comfortable with this new program.

**Anna Geiger:** Welcome, Reena!

**Reena Mathew:** Hi Anna! Thank you so much for having me on your podcast.

**Anna Geiger:** I am really excited to talk to you today about how some changes have been made in your school and your district, and how you've switched from Lucy Calkin's curriculum and phonics to UFLI.

Can you start out by talking to us about how you got into education, how you became part of the school that you're at, and the position that you have currently?

**Reena Mathew:** Sure. I've been a reading specialist at my elementary school for the past sixteen years. Prior to that, I worked as a second grade teacher in the Bronx, New York. In my current position, I work with kindergarten through second grade students.

I come from a family of educators. Both my mom and dad were in education. My sister studied biology and has aspirations to be a high school biology teacher, and it was very natural to me as well.

I did a really solid master's program for my reading specialist studies. I will always appreciate the stellar professors and practicum experiences that I've had that prepared me for the job that I do and love today.

When I'm thinking about reading instruction, I'm always inclined to look at things from a K-3 perspective, and also from the point of view of an interventionist for students where reading doesn't come so easily.

When I began working in my district sixteen years ago, my students looked very different and came from very different backgrounds than the kids that I've been working with primarily for the last five or six years. Our population has changed with an increasing number of English learners and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, so that presents its own challenges.

With that being said, though, our students' reading needs remained fairly consistent. I go back and look at my RTI notes from back then and look at my MTSS notes from today, and I see the same recurring reading difficulties coming up. "Student has trouble decoding words, they have trouble remembering high frequency words from page to page. They can't blend sounds together. They have poor fluency."

These needs are irrespective of the color of their skin, their socioeconomic status, their parents' education level, or the predominant language spoken at home.

The remedy for all these students is systematic and explicit phonics instruction and spelling instruction, with a heavy dose of cumulative review to develop mastery.

Earlier on in my career, my misunderstanding was thinking that only students with reading difficulties or reading disabilities would benefit from this type of instruction. Now I realize ALL students can benefit from this type of explicit systematic instruction because it allows for the prevention of future reading delays, so the kids who coasted through kindergarten, first, and second grade don't fall apart when they get to third grade and beyond, because now they have texts without strong picture support and sentence patterns and they need to decode multisyllable words.

That's why it's so important our Tier 1 reading instruction be so dynamite that it prevents reading failure for the vast majority of students, and we need to be using a reading curriculum that allows for this.

**Anna Geiger:** Now, previously, your school wasn't using a very strong curriculum. Can you talk to us about what you were using and the challenges you had with that?

**Reena Mathew:** Yeah. So we have been, and still are somewhat, a balanced literacy school district. About ten years ago we adopted Units of Study, Lucy Calkins' curriculum for reading and writing, and when the phonics curriculum came out, it made perfect sense for our district to use that at the time.

When we first adopted Lucy, we had TC staff developers and literacy coaches, and we were asked to implement the program with as much fidelity as possible. We were to really delve into it, learn as much about it as we could, and help our students with it. We received a lot of coaching from our staff developers and our coaches.

As with anything else, when you start using a program and you really get into the nitty-gritty, you realize what works and what is lacking. Our teachers found that the curriculum makes a lot of assumptions about the skills that our students are coming in with, and it tends to move through the phonics concepts too quickly. There isn't enough of a review and repetition cycle.

We felt that we were teaching a mile wide and an inch deep, and our students were not really mastering the skills that they needed to, and it was not reflecting in their writing. Many of our students were struggling, and COVID just amplified this.

So in order to be responsive to our students, our teachers had been supplementing with multiple resources over the years, and it became very time-consuming and labor-intensive. We were having a difficult time and we were all ready for a change.

**Anna Geiger:** So with Lucy's phonics program, I've not actually been able to get my eyes on that. Do they have practice material with decodable text or is it more leveled books after you do the phonics lesson?

**Reena Mathew:** So initially we purchased their leveled libraries. They were all predictable and leveled readers that range the span of the grade levels. More recently they did introduce decodable text, so they have ones that you can print out from the Heinemann website. And now Lucy has her Jump Rope Readers as well, which are decodable readers that conform to the scope and sequence for their phonics lessons,

but we did not have that at the time when we initially started using it.

**Anna Geiger:** Right. It's just so interesting to me that they had a reading program for so many years without a phonics component! It's just very, very interesting for the primary grades.

I talked recently to someone about Lucy Calkin's book "The Art of Teaching Reading," which I used to love when I was a balanced literacy teacher. That book is about 600 pages, and literally six pages have any mention of phonics at all. And it's nothing about explicit teaching of phonics; it's just very implicit. Yeah, very interesting.

So you told me before we went live that during COVID you had some time off of teaching and some time to really dive into the science of reading. Can you talk to us about that?

**Reena Mathew:** Yes. So when our school shut down for COVID, it happened to coincide with my maternity leave, so I was home probably from mid-March until the end of August, and that's when I really started to delve deeper into the science of reading.

I first listened to Emily Hanford's audio documentary "At a Loss for Words," and I was shocked! I was shocked at all these strategies that we were teaching our students, both me as an interventionist and our classroom teachers as part of balanced literacy and as part of Lucy Calkin's reading and phonics, and I didn't realize how wrong it was.

But then I realized, "Of course. This can't be right!" I was also invited to the "Science of Reading-What I Should Have Learned in College" Facebook page. Once I joined that, I was completely hooked. I would literally be up in the wee hours of the morning nursing my newborn daughter and watching webinars or listening to podcasts. I just couldn't get enough.

So when I returned to school in September, I was so pumped to share the information that I had been learning with my K-2 colleagues and move towards positive changes in reading instruction. But little did I realize that we were in the midst of a pandemic still, and hybrid and remote instruction, and our teachers were just struggling to keep their heads above water. It was such a challenging time for teachers and students alike, and I myself was just getting the hang of what remote and hybrid instruction looked like.

So a few months later when spring rolled around, I thought this is a good time to start sharing some of this information with teachers and changing their perspective. So while in my own small groups I was learning things and kind of implementing changes to my reading instruction, come maybe March and April 2021, I started sharing an article here, a podcast here, some kind of webinar.

Our teachers started taking part in this information and they were becoming very curious and very interested and kind of going through all those emotions that I had, the surprise, the shock, the guilt, the grief, all that mixed bag of emotions.

I was able to do some training for my teachers. We had trained them in a sound wall and the importance of using a sound wall in the classroom. Also we were going over methods of using the Heart Word instruction to teach high frequency words and irregular high frequency words through phonics.

We also made some additional purchases of decodable books. Prior to this, we didn't have a lot of great decodable books, nothing that kids were really interested in reading anyway. So we did some research, and we purchased some high quality decodable readers that were engaging and had a storyline.

We were starting to move in the right direction and it felt good, these positive changes, but it still felt a little bit piecemeal. We had teachers doing ten minutes of Heggerty instruction, and the Lucy phonics, and introducing sounds on a sound wall, and doing the Heart Word method and it felt disjointed, like it wasn't coming together. That was still a struggle for us. We were trying to think what else could we do to help improve this and make our instruction more integrated.

**Anna Geiger:** Before we get into that about how you went to UFLI and how that worked for you, can you talk to me a little bit about what it was like sharing this information with teachers? It sounds to me like you've had a mostly positive experience, and you can share whatever you're comfortable sharing, but sometimes in schools there's a lot of discomfort. Certainly a lot of teachers don't want to hear that what they've been doing may have some problems, or they may be very committed to balanced literacy. How did you foster this environment of learning and curiosity versus resistance?

**Reena Mathew:** I think one of the ways I did this was modeling myself as a learner and someone who had misunderstood things in the past, and I personally was going through some of these experiences as well and learning new things that are so different from what I had believed in and what I had been practicing as a teacher. Sharing my own personal experiences was very helpful to the colleagues that I had been working

with.

And our teachers were not all convinced at the very beginning. It did take some time, but with every article, with every podcast, with every conversation we had, there were more light bulbs going off. Teachers were beginning to realize and understand, "Hey, you know what? We did the best that we could with the knowledge that we had at the time, but there are better ways to teach our students to read and there are better ways to reach more students."

And so having that open communication, having a safe space to really speak about our learning and speak about things that we did in the past that were probably not the most efficient use of our time or our students' time, and then learning from each other and learning from our mistakes, I think that's what really fostered that change.

That combined with the fact that we have a principal who has always been open and receptive and supportive and has always given us that leeway and latitude to try new things and has trusted us and trusted our work ethic and our commitment to our students. That was also very helpful as well to help us go about making these changes.

**Anna Geiger:** Yeah, there's just so much that goes into that, and I can see the way you're talking about it that you did this step-by-step. It wasn't just like all of a sudden we're throwing everything out. You introduced small things and it's been a period of transition, but at some point it sounds like most of you were ready to just find something that will basically encompass all these foundational skills pieces that we need. Can you talk to us about how you got into UFLI and how that's been working for you?

**Reena Mathew:** During the pandemic for our hybrid instruction, the UFLI, University of Florida Literacy Institute Virtual Learning Hub had put out some reading applications and blending boards and a whole bunch of other cool resources for teachers at that time to support their reading instruction. I had been using that for some time and it was such a game changer for my reading instruction.

At one point I learned that UFLI Foundations was coming out with a new foundational skills resource for K-2, and I was very interested. After watching a webinar and taking a look at some of the resources, we shared this information with teachers and there was definitely a curiosity and an interest.

Aside from how cost-effective and user-friendly it seemed, UFLI seemed to integrate all

these smart teaching moves in such a thoughtful and intentional way, and it really streamlined our teaching and was helping us to incorporate the best practices in early instruction. I can go into the details of what are the steps in UFLI if you'd like to know.

**Anna Geiger:** Before you go on, just for those who are listening who are not familiar with UFLI, you can look it up. It's just a spiral-bound curriculum that's actually for K-2, all combined in one spiral-bound resource, and it's very affordable. I think as of this recording, it's less than a hundred dollars for that resource. Then a lot of the supplementary resources are online that you can just download.

Maybe now could you walk us through a UFLI lesson and how it even includes phonemic awareness?

**Reena Mathew:** Absolutely. So as you said, UFLI Foundations is an explicit and systematic program that builds foundational reading skills. It's designed for core reading instruction in kindergarten through second grade, but can be used for intervention up to any grade. It has easy-to-follow lesson plans that follow an eight-step routine.

In that teacher manual, it houses all the lesson plans and it has steps one through eight. Step one is phonemic awareness. It has step two, which is a visual drill. Step three is an auditory drill. Step four is a blending drill. Step five is new concepts. Step six is the word work. Step seven is teaching irregular words, and it ends with step eight, which is the connected text.

So steps one through four serve as a warmup and review of previously taught concepts, and step five is an explicit introduction to a new concept with guided practice of reading and spelling words. Steps six through eight are opportunities to apply concepts through reading and writing activities at the word and text level.

So step one, which is the phonemic awareness portion, contains phoneme blending and segmentation practice, and it always is a introduction to the phonics concept that's being taught in the lesson. It serves as a nice warmup, it's very connected. The later parts of the lesson focus on accuracy and automaticity of grapheme-phoneme correspondence and decoding automaticity of words with previously learned concepts, as well as explicit introduction and practice in decoding and encoding words with the new concept.

What we really like is that the program also has a built-in gradual release. So, I do, we

do, you do. There's a lot of teacher modeling, there's a lot of guided practice for kids where they're doing it with the support of the teacher, and then they get to go and do independent practice as well. Those ample opportunities to respond have been so beneficial for our students, not to mention our teachers as well.

UFLI considers itself to be an educative curriculum, so using the material in the lesson sequence adds to teacher professional knowledge of reading acquisition, linguistic elements, and evidence-based instructional methods. So it's been really helpful for our own personal PD as well.

In addition, UFLI provides PD in the form of webinars and also video lessons of components, which are really helpful to watch and guide you through what the lesson steps look like.

**Anna Geiger:** It's very interesting that you say that UFLI is intended to be education for teachers. Mostly when I think about reading curriculum, it's this huge manual with so much. It's sensory overload, right? The teachers don't even know, "What exactly should I do? There's no way I can do all of this, so I have to decide. What should I do?" They do that on purpose. They add just everything so that there's all these choices for you, but that can be limiting in many ways.

I like to recommend UFLI because it's just so clear, and like you said, it really includes the elements of explicit instruction. I do, we do, you do. Then there's that constant review built in. The phonemic awareness portion is very connected. It eliminates the need for a ten minute separate phonemic awareness program. It's all included.

Can you maybe ... I'm not sure how much you remember about it because you didn't use it in your intervention, but can you compare it a little bit to the Lucy Calkin's Phonics program? I'm just curious how they're different.

**Reena Mathew:** With Lucy Phonics, there wasn't such explicit systematic introduction of new concepts. It was more almost as a story. One phonics lesson would be like a ten to twelve page novel that you'd have to read to kind of get to the crux of what we're trying to teach, as opposed to UFLI where you have two pages. In two pages, it has everything that you need laid out very clearly, very, very sequentially.

There was never that connection, I would have to say, between introducing a skill, practicing it, and that interleaving practice, which UFLI has. UFLI concepts, they introduce it in one lesson, but you keep on reviewing those concepts for the next



maybe ten or fifteen lessons. You get such sufficient practice, and that's what really helps you to develop that mastery and confidence to be able to apply it to your reading and writing.

**Anna Geiger:** So are your teachers pretty much exclusively doing this as whole group lessons or are they separating their students based on what they know in phonics and doing these in small groups?

**Reena Mathew:** So right now our teachers are using this as their Tier 1 phonics curriculum and they're teaching it whole class. Some of our teachers are now dabbling using their small group differentiated time to provide additional support with their students as well with the UFLI.

**Anna Geiger:** Do they have challenges of students who are far ahead of everyone else and are bored during the lessons, or how does this meet the needs of everybody?

**Reena Mathew:** So it's interesting you said that! The assessment that we use in our school at the beginning of the year is actually your assessment and the decoding survey that you provided, so we were really able to see what skills our students were at. So even though we were following the UFLI scope and sequence for that particular grade level, our differentiation was based on those assessments results. For our students who were either far ahead or had greater needs, we would then move to the concept that we needed and provide that additional support, whether it's an extension or remediation within the small groups.

**Anna Geiger:** So everybody has the same core skill and then the teachers do their small groups after depending on needs of their students.

**Reena Mathew:** Exactly.

**Anna Geiger:** Before we started recording, you shared how you supported the teachers in learning to use this program. Can you talk about the in-classroom support that you provided to get them comfortable?

**Reena Mathew:** Sure. So in the beginning of the year, we had met during our grade level meetings, and I shared information about the program, and we watched some of the implementation videos. We took a look at the UFLI toolbox that houses all the

lesson slides, decodable texts, roll and read games, and the blending apps and word work apps that we needed. We became familiarized with the elements of the UFLI program and what we need for each lesson.

Then a lot of the support that I provided in the beginning of the year, especially in kindergarten and first grade, was pushing in and modeling the lessons with the teachers. So I would model what a day one lesson looked like, what a day two lesson looked like. Some classes I spent more time in modeling than others, depending on the teacher's comfort level. Then after this modeling, our teachers would teach.

After our teachers taught each of these lesson steps, then they would ask any kind of questions or any clarifying questions. I would provide them with some more feedback and then refer back to those implementation videos that do such a good job of explaining the rationale for each lesson step: what the objective is, what we really want our goal for our students to be able to do. That was really part of the process of coaching our teachers and helping them to implement this program with success.

**Anna Geiger:** That is wonderful. I have to say that the program itself is very simple and laid out. I am Orton-Gillingham trained, and other things, so looking at it, for me, it looks very basic, but for a teacher who has not been doing explicit instruction, it could be a little overwhelming. So that's amazing, and a good example for others to hear of how you supported your teachers in getting started.

I know that this has gotten the attention of your district. Can you talk to us about that a little bit?

**Reena Mathew:** Yes. So similarly to our school, the other schools in our district were also feeling the need for moving to something a little bit more systematic and structured in terms of their phonics, and it had gained the attention of our district superintendent and assistant superintendent that our school was using a different phonics program other than Lucy.

Back in the fall, we had some of our district administrators come in and observe a kindergarten, first, and second grade class teaching the UFLI program, and they were really impressed with student engagement, the wonderful routines that the teachers had established, and the overall excitement about phonics that our students demonstrated. If teachers don't get to phonics one day, our students are bummed! They are so excited about it. As soon as I walk into the room, it's like, "Are we doing phonics today, Ms. Mathew?"

So it's one of those things. Our teachers love the simplicity and the routine. Our students love it as well because they feel successful, they know what to expect, and that's been so important.

So when our district administrators came in, they were able to witness the same thing, and recently at our last extended day, we were asked to present UFLI Foundations to the district-wide kindergarten through second grade teachers and talk about the successes that we had.

And now, beginning next year, we're going to be implementing UFLI Foundations district wide in our kindergarten through second grade classrooms.

**Anna Geiger:** That is wonderful and very exciting!

Maybe we could talk really briefly about, as people would say, the other side of the rope. So you're building your foundational skills, phonemic awareness and phonics, with UFLI. What do you feel your school's doing well with or is working towards when it comes to building comprehension in the primary grades and vocabulary?

**Reena Mathew:** So one of the things that our school is doing really well with is our read-alouds. Our teachers in kindergarten, first, and second grade do take the time to provide really engaging read-alouds, teaching the vocabulary, allowing for that time for turn and talk, building those oral language skills, and building those opportunities to share information. That's something that's been going really well.

We also do have science and social studies that we try to integrate into our reading and writing whenever possible.

For example, in second grade, our teachers are doing their insect unit right now, which is always very exciting for our students. They incorporate a lot of rich read-alouds, and fictional read-alouds, when it comes to insects, and they spend a lot of time and they stay on topic for a while when they're discussing this science theme.

So that's something that our teachers are doing well with. However, there's always room for improvement, and that's something that we are thinking about. How we can make our language comprehension side a little bit more robust in the same way that we

are striving to make our phonics portion robust?

**Anna Geiger:** Yeah. Well that is definitely the first step is having really quality read-alouds, and like you said, planning in times for students to turn and talk to each other. Also building that knowledge connected to your social studies and science is really wonderful because what we're learning now is that teaching comprehension itself is a little tricky. What you really need to do is build things like inference-making and knowledge itself and background knowledge so that students can comprehend all kinds of text.

Before we wrap up, could you share any particular resources or books or webinars or researchers that you've found really helpful for someone who's maybe just getting started?

**Reena Mathew:** I think the first thing to do is listen to Emily Hanford's audio documentaries. I believe she has three of them, "At a Loss for Words," "Hard Words," and "Sold a Story." I think that's a really good way to kind of get into all of this to begin with.

Anna, I really loved your webinar that you had presented on the science of reading, an intro to the science of reading. I believe last year I listened to that, that was very helpful.

In terms of researchers, I really love Wiley Blevins. He does some really great work with phonics and decodable texts. I have listened to a number of his webinars and have found him to be really helpful. It's really easy to understand and take actual changes that we can go and implement in the classroom right away.

I love listening to Margaret Goldberg speak. She's a literacy coach and a first grade teacher. She also speaks a lot from experience and talks about the way that she moved from a balanced literacy mindset to more science of reading and some of the practical changes that she's made, both in working with students, but also leading change among schools with the teachers as well.

Those are definitely some key people that I recommend to start with.

**Anna Geiger:** Thank you. I will definitely add all these things to the show notes.

Thanks so much for sharing your experience with us! Your school is very blessed to have you.

**Reena Mathew:** Thank you so much, Anna! It was wonderful speaking to you. I appreciate everything that you do as well. I have been using your resources for years on end and I've watched your webinars and listened to your podcast, and I'm always learning something new from you, so I appreciate you and everything that you do. Thank you.

**Anna Geiger:** Thank you so much!

You can find the show notes for today's episode at [themeasuredmom.com/episode134](http://themeasuredmom.com/episode134). Join us next week for another Change Maker episode, but also come back and see us on Wednesday. I'm going to be sharing a series of short solo episodes during this period so that you can get the big picture on Mondays and more specific ways to apply the science of reading on Wednesdays. Talk to you then!