What do students need to learn, and what do only teachers need to know? - with Dr. Devin Kearns

Triple R Teaching Podcast #216

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of The Measured Mom website. Today I'm welcoming Dr. Devin Kearns back to the podcast, and we're going to think about this: have we over-corrected in our enthusiasm for structured literacy? In other words, are we really excited about all the things we've learned so much so that we're over-teaching it, versus using an economy of language so that our students know what they need to know. That it's not so much that it muddies our goals and gets in the way of what we're trying to do, which is to teach them to be strong readers in the most efficient way possible. Lots to think about in this episode. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome back, Dr. Kearns.

Devin Kearns:

Thank you. Thanks for having me!

Anna Geiger:

I'm really excited today to talk about the topic that you shared at Plain Talk, which was "Critical Concepts for Students Versus Foundational Facts for Teachers: What Do Students Need to Learn and What Do Only Teachers Need to Know?"

But before we do that, could you just briefly reintroduce yourself and tell us what you're doing now?

Devin Kearns:

Sure, yeah. I'm a professor of education at North Carolina State University in the literacy program, and they actually offered me a kind of fancy sounding job here. I am the Goodnight Distinguished Professor in Early Literacy, which is a really nice honor that they gave me because they wanted people to come from across the country to North Carolina to help with reading efforts. I'm really excited to be here to do that.

Anna Geiger:

So what is what you're teaching now different from what you taught at your previous university?

Devin Kearns:

At UConn, I was also faculty focused on special education, so now it's more general literacy. That's the only difference between what I was doing then and now.

Anna Geiger:

So why did you choose that topic for your Plain Talk presentation?

Devin Kearns:

That is a good question. I think it was because I see a lot of times people starting to teach kids to do things that aren't really that necessary. This came out of something we talked about before about syllables and long words and how people do that.

What I realized over time is it's kind of a more generalizable concern that people get really excited about certain aspects of language and reading and they want to communicate those to their students. But then you start to think about it a little more, and you're like, do we actually need to teach kids all this stuff?

I just got thinking a lot about that based on my own experience and what I've heard from teachers. Especially if people have learned a lot more about the science, they get excited about the science and then want to communicate that to students. Then there's this question of, do the students really need to know all of that stuff?

Anna Geiger:

So kind of an overcorrection, you'd say.

Devin Kearns:

That's a good way to say it.

Anna Geiger:

So why might information be useful for teachers, but not for students?

Devin Kearns:

One example of that is all of the information about how the mouth works for kids. I don't think that kids need to know all the details of there's a puff of air versus stream of air, which sometimes can be useful for certain students. I used to teach a program where we did some of that, but for the most part, students don't need to know all the details of those things.

But teachers do, because when a kid makes an error, like if a kid says “jup” for “jump,” they're missing the /m/ sound, and both the /m/ and the /p/ sound are made with your lips. It gives you information about what the kid is hearing and isn't hearing, so teachers really do need to have that information.

Whether or not kids need all of that same information is a little bit of a different question. That's an example of that kind of information.

There are also things like terminology, digraphs and things that. People get really into talking about digraphs because they feel kids should use a technical language. Then I sort of ask the question to myself, but why do they need to know the technical language?

We call it a vowel team, which sort of works because team is a word that makes sense to kids being on teams and working together. If we say that it's a letter team or a vowel team, doesn't that convey adequately what we're trying to get kids to understand without calling it a digraph or something that?

Then it gets in this tricky territory, like what if there are three letters, IGH? And then you have OUGH, that's four, so do we have a trigraph and a quadrograph then too? Then people even talk about whether there's digraph and diphthongs, right? (It is, by the way, pronounced diphthong, because it has a P-H in it. Some people say it's "diPthong," but really it's diphthong.)

In any case, people say they need to know that diphthongs are whatever, too. The diphthongs are when you move your mouth, /ow/ and /oi/, and so they're technically different than a typical digraph where it's just one sound.

The challenge there is that those aren't the only diphthongs. All the long vowels are diphthongs, too. I-E-O-U, are we going to call those diphthongs? We call the other ones diphthongs.

So we start into kind of making up these sort of rules and sort of extra information. I keep thinking about, let's go back to a simple way of describing it. It's fine. Just call it a vowel team or a letter team, because that conveys adequately what we want the kids to know.

Anna Geiger:

So you're saying one side effect of trying to explain all these terms is that we just get down a rabbit hole and it never ends, right?

Devin Kearns:

Yeah. Yeah.

Anna Geiger:

So what would you say… Because there are people who would say we're underestimating students. They can learn these words. They can learn, for example, phoneme, grapheme, digraph, and all those words, so what's the problem?

Devin Kearns:

I mean, there's not so much a problem as it's a matter of instructional time and efficiency, right? Do the kids *need* to know that? What's the advantage of knowing that it's a grapheme versus a spelling, right?

I usually use the term sound-spelling, which I like because you have a sound or sounds that go together, and they have a spelling. There are a number of letters or a single letter that spell it. To me that maps onto language that kids already have.

If our goal is to get kids to learn to read the words as quickly and efficiently as possible, then let's keep their energy focused on reading the words as quickly and efficiently as possible. If that's what we're doing, then I think we should want to strip out all the extra stuff.

It's not that kids couldn't learn it. They certainly can. We know they can because people do it all the time, right? You can get kids to learn this stuff. I've done that myself, but I think it's just a question of do we need that? Is that a level of understanding from which the kids will profit, or is that just a "did you know" kind of thing.

It's a nerdy party conversation or something. "Did you know? Here's a fun fact about letters. Did you know that the /p/ and /b/ sounds are almost the same except… ?" Nobody cares about that.

I mean, teachers do, but don't ever say that to people at a party. They will not find it funny.

Again, you can teach kids any of this stuff. They can learn it. It's not a question of their ability to do it. It's just a question of what does that get you? Is there a benefit to doing that versus coming up with some other way of describing it that's simpler?

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, that's very interesting because when you think about what's our goal in this, it's to teach them how to read, how to read words quickly, accurately, and efficiently, like you said.

Whereas if we're teaching a different subject like social studies or science, learning all that extraneous information expands their knowledge and creates more networks. It's useful, right? But in here it's a distraction, you would say.

Devin Kearns:

Possibly, yeah. I mean, there's a question about precision though too. If you really feel there's a place where we really need to be precise, that the kids really need to understand something in a specific kind of way, then I think that's fine.

For example, calling something a vowel-R pattern or something. I'm for that because there's a group of words that all have a vowel plus the letter R, and the sound that they make is not the sound they would make when they're not followed by an R.

It's vowel-consonant-E and things that. I think that stuff is helpful.

There's the consonant-le at the end of a word, which people sometimes call the stable final syllable. Though I don't call it a stable final syllable, I just call it consonant-le; it is a stable pattern that is useful for kids to know. So even though it's a bit of a mouthful, consonant-le is useful to know because if you see a consonant next to LE, it's going to say /l/ at the end. That is useful. There is some kind of precision that sometimes you need.

I think the question for teachers is where is the necessary precision, and where's the extra stuff that's kind of the fun facts/did you know stuff?

Anna Geiger:

Yeah. That brings me to my next question, which we haven't quite nailed down, but where's the line between having a label, like you said, versus that's just too much.

Devin Kearns:

Yeah, I don't think there is. I mean, it kind of depends a little bit in a way too.

I always say there are "your mileage may vary" kind of situations. It's going to depend on the kids in front of you and what they're going to benefit from.

Some kids might really like learning linguistic stuff. If you're working with a teenager who has dyslexia or something, maybe their brain is kind of wired in a way that they enjoy facts and learning about language. There's a certain amount of confidence that comes from that. There's a certain amount of pride that comes in knowing all this about the language. If they can hold on to that terminology and everything else, they get to be a little linguist. That's kind of fun if you're 14 and you really don't feel confident about reading. Maybe that's totally appropriate to do then.

I just say that to say there isn't a really clear line, right? There are going to be questions about when it's more helpful and when it's not.

The cases in which I ever taught anything about the mouth movement was when I had kids with really severe dyslexia. Teaching them the mouth movements was really helpful because even teaching them /ē/ versus /ī/, the differences in the way your mouth works, was helpful to those kids because it didn't come naturally to them. Being able to think about the way the mouth moves was really helpful.

A fun fact is that people who do neuroscience in this area have shown that for some people who have really severe phonological problems, it may be that one of the ways they compensate for that is in terms of pronouncing things. Their brains may attend to the way the mouth works in terms of the motor activations, rather than the sound processing itself. The part of the brain that does the sounds without the movement doesn't work that well, but the part that does the movement still works, so there's actually potentially some value in learning about that for kids for whom sound processing is really challenging.

Again, there's no clear line, but I think the big thing is being sure to keep always in mind what is really helpful and what's extra stuff.

Anita Archer, who many of your listeners will know, actually came to the session you saw. She had lots of things to say in there too, but she always says, "Cut the fluff, teach the stuff."

As you're writing your lesson plans, as you're planning, think to yourself, "Do they need to know this? Is this useful information, or is this something that's kind of extra? Do we really need to know that?" If you're asking that question, then maybe you shouldn't be doing it.

Anna Geiger:

That's a good reminder to ask yourself that question. Also I think teachers have all this knowledge all of a sudden, maybe some have had it for years, but we want to use it! We want to share it. Just know that it's great that you have that store of information, and it's there for you when you need it, but you have to be the wise person about when to dispense it.

Didn't you have some kind of slide during your presentation about questions you could ask yourself about when to share extra information? Do you remember anything about that criteria?

Devin Kearns:

I can't remember exactly, but basically it's think to yourself, "Will the kids benefit from this, or is this something that I find interesting?"

I think that you're right about that experience. That's how it was for me too. When I first learned about syllable division, I taught everybody that stuff. This is amazing! I was so mad that no one had ever explained to me that there's a pattern to this stuff. I was so excited about it that I wanted everybody to know. That's where I found out that if you say that to people at parties, they don't find it interesting.

But you get really excited about it as a teacher, or you want to tell other teachers about these things, and then you feel maybe kids will want to benefit from it as well.

We have to edit, essentially. We have to think about what is it that we're really excited about, but we just have to stop ourselves from telling the kids, because it's just going to muddy up their minds.

There was a study recently showing that what's really important is economy of language when we're talking to kids. Particularly for kids who have reading difficulty, make sure to use the same words repeatedly, in the same way.

It's really important not to explain it multiple different ways. Sometimes we think, “Well, if that didn't make sense that way, let me explain it a different way.” It turns out that can be a really bad idea. If the kids didn't get it one way, then the answer isn't to let me explain it another way. It may be that the way you did it the first time wasn't the best, in which case you do need to fix it.

But you don’t want to say, let me give you an analogy. Analogies in some ways can be helpful, but they can be really challenging if it's not close enough linked to the content.

It’s really sort of being careful about the language. Say it one way, in a really careful way, so you don't end up having to fix it later. When you're planning, you think…

Often when I teach my new teachers how to plan, one of the things I say is, “Write out the exact explanation you're going to give for a key concept.” Because that's often what people don't do. I know this because I did it as a teacher.

I'd be like, “Yeah, I'm going to teach them about whatever.” Then I didn't even have a clear definition, so I'm making it up on the fly, which is a terrible, terrible thing to do.

I would say now, when you plan, make sure you get down the clear explanation of what it is you want students to learn. When you're doing that, that's when you can interrogate it and say, “I was going to teach them this, but do they really need to know that? Or is there an easier way for me to get at the same idea?”

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, and that sounds a little overwhelming having to do that for your teaching. But as a reminder, you do this initially when you're first learning how to teach this concept, and then you will internalize it. It will be natural for you.

Interestingly you're talking about… I have some questions in my notes, things like what if someone would say, “In my fear of not overwhelming some children cognitively, then these other kids are missing out.”

But your main reason for not doing this was not, and I know this could be an issue, but it was not necessarily creating cognitive overload, but decreasing efficiency and taking longer to get to the end goal. Is there also a big concern about the cognitive overload or is that secondary?

Devin Kearns:

No, I think that's part of it too. Cognitive load is a really big deal. When kids get overwhelmed, then it gets to be a real problem.

This is why explicit instruction is so important, and this is true for all kids. People think explicit instruction is maybe just for kids who have reading difficulty, but really for all kids, the beginning of learning by precision, clarity, and simplicity is essential.

Once you have your head around the foundational ideas, you can expand on them, but you have to have those things locked in.

If you're giving kids too many ways to think of it, or you're using terms that are less familiar to them, then you increase the cognitive load and then they can't get anything.

It's easy enough to imagine this as an adult by thinking about a really hard novel you had to read in high school or something. The book, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison is great, but I found it very challenging because the way that she puts it together, there are things happening, and you have to hold onto it, and

then nine other things happen and then that thing comes back. That becomes a real cognitive overload thing where you're trying to hang on to so much information.

That happens to kids too. Say you told them this new word, now there's another new word, and we're to put those words together. That stuff builds up and can be really hard.

If you're thinking about teaching kids with reading difficulty, particularly, that can be a real issue. Learning disabilities are language-based. If you have a kid who already has a language-based learning disability, and now you're telling them they're going to get to know and use all these new words they've never heard before, that is a recipe for challenge and failure, right? You're giving the kids more, much more, than they can actually handle.

Yeah, so it's a big cognitive load issue.

Anna Geiger:

And if we're concerned about holding information back from kids who might be able to handle it, I think we can think about ways to challenge them in other ways. If we're teaching them in small groups, then that solves it right there. If we want to share that vocabulary with them, totally fine. But if we're trying to be efficient in our whole group or any other decoding instruction...

Let's talk a little bit about specific examples. You already gave a little bit, and we can talk more about that now: the phonemes.

There's a lot of debate about what information is important for students in terms of when you're learning a new sound for a letter. How much do you need to talk about how that sound is formed? Is there any research to back up either side, or is this more just opinion?

Devin Kearns:

Yeah, that's a really good question. I like to take a deep breath and say this. This is a hard one to even say out loud. There is not strong data indicating that multisensory instruction is really effective.

Anna Geiger:

Yes, I do know that.

Devin Kearns:

Which is really hard to say out loud because people are really committed to it! That doesn't mean that teaching kids anything about the mouth is a bad idea, just to be clear.

They've done studies of this. There's this really famous study by this professor, Shelley Gray. What she did is she taught these kids with dyslexia a new language. Which I kind of find... I hope the kids... I think it was a summer project, just to be clear, so I hope it was kind of fun for them.

But they taught the kids this new language or whatever, and they taught them the sounds that go with it. They had different versions of it where the kids either learned about the sound formation or not while they're learning this new language, and they looked at whether or not the kids could read words in the language.

They were thinking, "Well, if there's a multisensory component to this, then the kids who are getting this information about the mouth formations and all that will do better in the end on the words."

But that wasn't true. They didn't find any difference between those groups. I don't think the kids who got the multisensory did worse though, I'd have to look back, so it's not that it actually hurt them, but it didn't make a big difference.

Take the sound walls and that kind of thing. There is no data on sound walls, right? Certainly it is not a bad idea to be teaching kids about sounds. For sure I'm all in favor of that, and I think that it's helpful, as I already pointed out, to do some stuff on articulation.

Multisensory instruction doesn't have strong data, but it doesn't mean that it's not helpful to do anything about sounds, but you just, again, need to be judicious.

I think I would reserve the focus on sounds for situations where the kids exhibit real confusion or a need to distinguish things more.

Another example is open and closed syllables. I really do think it's helpful for kids to know about the fact that vowels at the end of the syllables have the long sound, and vowels in middle or the beginning of syllables have the short sound. But what I suggest doing is calling them long and short vowel syllables, because in the end, the terms open and closed mean nothing to the kids, right?

I mean, that's a linguistic fact. Lax vowels in the middle, so it's closed. Then there's the open syllables at the end of the syllable, because there's something to get linguistic about, it's a tense vowel. There's a whole thing behind it if you know the linguistics of it.

But again, it's not that useful for kids to know that terminology. They already know the terms long and short, so you can call them long vowel and short vowel syllables.

It's not that precise because you have words like feasible. The E-A says /ē/, that's a long vowel syllable too. If you have fever or something, it's a long vowel syllable, instead of an open syllable where the vowel's at the end. So that would be a time where I would say the idea is important, but that terminology might not be.

That's how I feel about a lot of these kinds of advanced things that we do sometimes with letters.

It also makes me think of how much stuff you teach, in terms of the number of letter sounds we teach. In terms of efficiency and editing, and what do you need to know versus what the kids need to know.

How many sounds of E do the kids need to know? Or how many pronunciations of EA do the kids need to know? They definitely need know /ē/, and then there's EA says /ĕ/. But then there's EA say /ā/, like in "great." Do kids need to know that one? It's a little dicey. There are not that many words where EA says /ā/. A lot of them you could learn like "steak," not entirely as a sight word because the S, T, and K make the sounds you'd expect, but you know.

I think that becomes a real issue. How far down the list are you going to go? If it's the sound /ā/, I say teach A, A with a consonant E, teach AI and AY, and stop there. None of the other ones are frequent enough, because there's EA, there's EI, there's EIGH, all that stuff.

Just in terms of efficiency, what do kids need to know? I think it's great for teachers to know all that stuff. Kids don't need to know all but the most common.

Anna Geiger:

You're just saying that when you're planning your phonics scope and sequence, we could go into third grade here teaching every single grapheme, but that a good use of our time where they can figure those things out.

Devin Kearns:

Yeah, I did an analysis one time where there were around about a hundred grapheme-phoneme correspondences where you get the most bang for the buck in terms of the number of words you can read, versus the number of things you have to learn.

Anna Geiger:

Okay, what about phonics rules? Any thoughts on which are worthwhile, and how much kids need to be able to say the rule and all that stuff?

Devin Kearns:

Yeah. Well, one thing is that English spelling is rule-driven.

Historically there are reasons why F, L, S, and Z are doubled, right? Nobody knows what they are anymore. To be honest, I barely know what they are; I don't actually fully remember. But you know, there are reasons for these things, but it doesn't really matter anymore.

Actually one reason S is doubled is because otherwise it gets confused with a plural, but there's no there's no exact reason for that.

But it is true that almost always after short vowel F, L, S, and Z double.

It's also true if there's a short vowel before the /ch/ sound, it's going to be spelled TCH

These things seem kind of weird to even mention, but the reality though is that they're pretty consistent. As a result, it can be really helpful for kids to know.

For reading, you actually need to know fewer rules than you do for spelling. Spelling requires rules.

One thing that happened in the whole language era was you got a lot of kids who were good readers, but poor spellers. The kids figured out the sound system enough to be able to read, but they didn't get all the spelling conventions. I think there's a whole generation of kids who are not good spellers and think they're not good spellers because they didn't learn that stuff.

Where that line is to, I don't know. Change Y to I and add ES, you've got to teach that to kids because there's no way to kind of figure that out on your own. It's kind of a matter of efficiency and value to the kids.

If you have the long A sound in the middle, it's spelled AI, at the end it's spelled AY. I don't think that's a bad thing to teach kids. There are enough cases of AY and AI that it's useful for kids to know that kind of thing.

With the /aw/ sound, like AU and AW, there aren't that many cases of those, so whether or not you go that far is a different thing.

I do think there are rules and spelling conventions that kids have to learn, like knowing different spellings for their/there/they're. If you want to be a good writer, you need to know those things. Your ability to spell often translates to your confidence in producing texts, which translates to better writing. Having those things in place is really good.

Anna Geiger:

Something you shared in your presentation, which surprised me, you talked about… Back to the economy of words thing… For example, teaching kids to read a word with the vowel consonant E pattern.

You said what you wouldn't do and what you would do. Do you remember that and the phrasing you would use?

Devin Kearns:

Yeah, I said don't teach magic E. There's never been a study I know of where they've compared teaching vowel consonant E with magic E, and whether or not that produced better results. So I don't know that for sure, but I'm just going to tell you why I think you don't need magic E.

The magic E rule, which once upon a time they called the Bopper E Rule. Did you ever hear that?

Anna Geiger:

No, no.

Devin Kearns:

When I was in school, that's what we called it. Literally it was you hit the letter on the head and make it say its name. Now we don't do that; we tap it on the head with a magic wand and make it say its name.

There are a number of reasons that this is a problem. One is that it is not directly related to what we want the kids to know. It's this extra stuff; it's a metalinguistic knowledge. It's this extra stuff that kids have to put on top of the actual thing you want them to know. This thing does this to another thing. That's the first part.

The second is that there's this whole extra story element that goes with it that's totally unnecessary. The reason that's a problem is that when kids are reading, if you want them to pause for a second and think of the magic E Rule, then they have to think about what the rule does, which may call up memories of the way you know the rule, which is the magic E does the thing. You don't need to know any of that.

The more efficient way to do it is to tell the kids that when you have vowel consonant E, it says its sound. Let's just do that.

What I do is I say, "a_e is /ā/. How do you spell it? a_e. What does it say? /ā/. Good. Let's read some words." This is things like cake, and then just read a bunch of words like that.

That I've seen be really successful where I had this teacher I watched do a lesson one time where the kid with a language-based learning disability couldn't explain the magic E rule, but he could read the words. He read a bunch of words correctly, but then she wouldn't let him move on because he couldn't explain it to her.

He doesn't need to know the magic E rule; he needs to know that when you have this pattern, it says this thing. That's what you need in order to be able to read the word.

The worst example of this is a syllable house. I don't want to go into the details because this isn't the point exactly, but it's a terrible idea to teach the syllable house. It's this way of getting kids to remember open and closed vowels, which isn't necessary anyway, and it's adding this extra layer.

When people are looking at phonics programs, for example, it's important to look at the economy of language use and whether or not they're taking the kids off into some other area in order to get them to understand the letter-sound combinations. I've even seen programs where they use an entirely different marking system where the kids don't even look at the letters at all. They just use these little marks to indicate what type of letter it is.

Literally, someone sent me an image of this. There are programs in Texas that do this where there are literally no letters, and it's such a bad idea. It's taking the focus off of the big picture entirely. This is about letters and sounds. Let's match up letters and sounds. Let's get kids to do that really efficiently, and figuring out the way to do that is really the key thing.

We've got to sort of self-edit.

Anna Geiger:

The goal is that they learn the pattern, whether they're reading or spelling it, but not necessarily that they know why the pattern is used. Would that be right?

Devin Kearns:

Yes. That's exactly right.

Anna Geiger:

Well, you mentioned programs, and I think that's a really good piece of advice for people looking for programs. But what about people who have a program that is very word-heavy and does teach all these things, and they're expected to? Any advice for those teachers?

Devin Kearns:

That's a good one. Well, I'll say a couple of things about this. The other thing that I presented on at Plain Talk, I don't know if you attended, was a session on alignment across tiers. I did it with my colleague, John Bennetts, and one of the things that is happening for a lot of people is that they have a Tier 1 program and then they have a different Tier 2 program. Or they have a Tier 1 core curriculum and then they don't have the phonics, so they buy another phonics program, and now kids have two things.

One really bad situation is when you have kids who are in Tier 1 and Tier 2 reading, so they're getting additional reading support, using something totally different, and that second thing doesn't use the same language. It doesn't use the same terminology. They call them welded sounds versus letter combinations or whatever.

There are all these different terms you have to learn, and there are sometimes different ways of doing it. Do you tap? Do you use fingers? Do you do the arm thing? There are different ways of doing it. There are even different explanations for how to do this pronunciation. Do you slide your finger? There are all these different things and the different ways of teaching are really confusing for kids.

Imagine you are already a struggling reader, and now you have the teacher explaining one way over here and over there in a different way.

This is not an exact answer, but one thing that schools need to do is when they are looking at their curriculum... If they are getting a separate Tier 2 curriculum, it's an opportunity to think about alignment and to think then about if it's not exactly matched up, are there ways in which we can use this norm like, “Okay, well, this one has a much less involved way of explaining it. Maybe this is the one that we should emphasize.” I think that's really key.

First of all, I wouldn't do this alone because if you change it on your own and then nobody else does, then that creates a problem for your students if they go to another class too. You’ve got to be careful to think in team terms in that way.

When you get to work with people and to think about how to adapt things, which you need to do if you're going to align across programs and so on, that presents an opportunity to think about how to change the language.

The big message in everything we're saying is time on task and instructional efficiency.

I always say, "Count how many times the kids said something in the last minute." There is data saying kids need to be able to respond at least three times a minute. I don't mean listening to your neighbor say it, because that's a different thing. The worst thing you can do with teaching is having kids, one by one, raise their hand and give you answers. it's a highly inefficient way of getting kids to respond. Anything you can do to maximize the efficiency to get those three opportunities per minute is good.

When you're thinking about the kind of language you're using, think about what's the simplest way I can explain this so they can practice more. I think when you're working as a team to try to work with your program, think about how you can increase the amount of time practicing, and that could be the sales pitch to colleagues. If they're like, "Well, we really like the programming." It's not that I don't like the program; I just think we can be even more efficient. I think we can get the kids further faster.

That's the message too is don't tell everybody you think the program is bad; just explain that you think we can do even better.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah. So the takeaways from this episode would be, if your brain is bursting with all the new information you're learning, be wise about how you dispense it. You're trying to get kids to read words; you're not trying to fill their mind with all kinds of linguistic or phonics knowledge.

Number two, if your program is requiring you to do things that you feel are too much, open some conversations with your team about this very topic. They could listen to this episode, and you can talk about it.

Many things you're sharing here, you wouldn't say they necessarily are right or wrong, but are they wise? We just need to be thinking about that.

Anything else you'd to share about this topic?

Devin Kearns:

No, I think we got it. You said one thing I think is worth repeating. It is a lot of work to figure these things out, but you said this and I think it bears repeating. You're not going to spend all your time doing this every year. It's that first time of really kind of thinking it through and even getting that overwhelmed feeling. It will get better. You will get better at it, but take that time to plan it and think about how you're going to explain things.

I guarantee you it will pay dividends down the road. It'll help you in that lesson when you feel confident about saying the same thing the same way, because you know how you explained it. That makes such a difference for kids. Take that planning time, knowing that it will pay off in the long term.

I think that's it. Everybody's doing such amazing work for kids. The science of reading has changed things so much for the better. Let's continue to use our brains as we think about how to apply it best.

Anna Geiger:

Exactly.

Anything else you want to share about future projects that you're working on or any research you're doing?

Devin Kearns:

Well, we're teaching a computer to read. We're trying to understand how reading works. Basically we're trying to understand how much decodable books help versus other kinds of books by having a computer read.

We're not going to have kids all year just read decodable books or not, but you can make a computer do it, right? We're actually teaching a computer different types of texts. What if we give it all decodable books? Or what if we give it some decodable books and some trade books? What do you get in terms of how accurate it is? Then we literally give the computer your typical standardized tests to see how it does on the standardized test after you teach it this way.

That's pretty cool. I'm super excited about it. We finally got the model working this past week and so we're teaching the computer to read as we speak.

Anna Geiger:

So interesting. Wow, that's really cool.

Thanks so much for talking with me about this. I know people are going be very interested and have lots of strong opinions.

Devin Kearns:

They always do. Yes, they always do. I love to hear them, and thank you for having this platform for people to share ideas and for being such a good thought leader for all of us. You do amazing work which is why your book is really important. I see it in the background there!

Anna Geiger:

Oh yes, I've got a stack of them back there.

Devin Kearns:

Yeah, so thanks for all you do for the field. Not everybody asks these questions, and I'm really glad you do.

Anna Geiger:

Well thank you, and thanks for being here.

You can find the show notes for today's episode at themeasuredmom.com/episode216. Talk to you next time!

Closing:

That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, themeasuredmom.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.