Thoughtfully meeting the needs of advanced readers - with Dr. Amanda Nickerson

Triple R Teaching Podcast #219

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. In today's interview, I'm speaking with Dr. Amanda Nickerson, who helps advance state literacy initiatives in Ohio. She is highly qualified for this position because she has a background as a literacy consultant, classroom teacher, Title I specialist, gifted intervention specialist, peer coach, and she is currently an adjunct instructor at Mount St. Joseph University where she received her doctorate. Her research focuses on the intersection of MTSS, the science of reading, and gifted education.

In today's episode, we talk about how teachers can thoughtfully meet the needs of advanced readers. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome Dr. Nickerson.

Amanda Nickerson:

Hi, thanks for having me.

Anna Geiger:

I'm so glad to have you here to talk about helping students who are advanced in reading. But before we do that, could you talk to us about who you are and what you're doing now?

Amanda Nickerson:

Sure. I'm actually going to try to capture the scope of my background and experiences a little bit to take you on a trip down memory lane, basically, to really explain my passion for supporting this group of learners.

It really goes back to a formative moment in sixth grade. I was identified as gifted myself in second grade, but because services weren't required, I never received formal support in my school district. I was the kind of student who finished very quickly with my work. I was a perfectionist. I spent long stretches of time reading while I waited for my classmates to finish their assignments. But at that point in time, I didn't know I was missing out on anything. That didn't really happen until I changed schools.

A new district that I went to had a gifted program, but due to really fragmented gifted education policies and local control, my prior identification didn't carry over. I didn't know any of that, right, because I was 12, but I was a bit precocious. I noticed that kids who seemed to perform at the same level as me were leaving the room, and I was kind of left in the classroom doing what everyone else was doing.

I remember asking about it and they said, well, we tested last year and you missed it. That was kind of it at that point.

I just remember sitting there thinking, “Why not me? Why don't I get to go to mega? I want to go.” I really wanted to be challenged, and I wasn't getting that in the core classroom.

Fast forward, I decided to be a teacher. I actually started my career as a Title I interventionist, so I worked on building foundational skills before getting my first classroom job. Really when I entered that classroom position, I feel like I really discovered my calling at that other end of the learning continuum. I was the one who offered to work with gifted and advanced students during our intervention and enrichment block, our “no new instruction” time.

I would work with those advanced learners and give them some creative language arts and math extensions, and I really enjoyed that. I also feel like it helped me reconnect with my inner child and kind of heal some of those places in me that were still feeling left behind as a kid.

What was really fortunate is I had a principal who recognized the really exceptional growth that my gifted students were making at one point, and he encouraged me to go back to school and pursue my gifted endorsement.

I did that, and I went on to teach gifted clusters for several years and I really enjoyed that. I liked being able to provide greater depth and complexity, helping them deal with perfectionism and anxiety and sometimes executive functioning challenges. I really, really enjoyed working with twice-exceptional students in particular, because you have to enrich while you are remediating with that. That's really a challenge, but it’s really fulfilling when you do it well.

Eventually I transitioned from teaching to literacy consulting. I've worked at the county level, the regional level, and now I work as a state-level literacy technical assistance specialist and as an adjunct.

Really, over the last several years, I've had the privilege of coaching and consulting and presenting on lots of different topics. I talk about evidence-based literacy instruction and about systems change. I talk a lot about MTSS, and I get to talk a lot about supporting gifted learners as I'm talking about other student populations as well.

While I was pursuing my doctorate at Mount St. Joseph University, I had even more opportunities to delve more deeply into that and into how the science of reading informs enrichment. I'm really grateful for my advisor, Dr. Stephanie Stollar. She really encouraged me to lean into what this work can look like within MTSS.

I'm still so very interested in how we can support these advanced readers, especially in primary school, and what it would look like to really support twice-exceptional learners well within an MTSS framework.

Then I just want to add briefly, on a personal note, I'm also the mom of two gifted kiddos myself and watching them as a mom has really only intensified my passion for this diverse population. I feel like every day they remind me that, yes, it's about fostering high levels of academic achievement, but it's also about nurturing confident, resilient people who are capable of reaching their fullest potential.

That's not just what we want for gifted learners or advanced learners; we really want that for all of our students.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you for laying that out so well.

At the end, you said “gifted and advanced.” Do you have a terminology that you prefer, and are these things technically different from each other?

Amanda Nickerson:

I do. This is another fairly robust answer that I feel like I'll be giving you because, to be frank, and as you know this, there are many terms that are used to describe these learners. That's true in the literature as well.

We see terms like “advanced learners” or “high ability learners.” When I did a study, I called my students “highly skilled readers” because they were students with high word recognition skills and strong language comprehension skills.

“Gifted” is a bit more of a restrictive label. If you think of “advanced learners,” it doesn't matter if you're formally identified or not; it has more to do with your skill level.

“Gifted” has more to do with meeting a certain designation, but it's also the most widely used term. There is this generally accepted definition of gifted that comes from the National Association for Gifted Children, NAGC, and it basically says gifted students are those who perform, or show the potential to perform, at remarkably high levels compared to their peers. That sounds kind of straightforward, but it also kind of sounds abstract, right?

To be completely forthright, I'm going to kind of narrow the definition a bit to talk about how kids get identified for reading specifically, and there are kind of two pathways to that. Sometimes kids are given an IQ test through talent searches. They might take something like the CogAT or the WISC, and they're expected to hit a certain cut score or IQ score.

If we're identifying kids in reading, let's say, they might reach or exceed a certain percentile on a benchmark assessment, and that might be the 95th percentile or 98th percentile. But either way, if a student scores above that certain point, they get labeled as gifted and they have access to services if their district provides it.

But I kind of see this as a challenge or a problem, if you will, because if a student scores above a certain point, they get those services. But if they don't, they don't. Those percentile rates and cutoff scores are a little bit arbitrary.

I think we've even talked about this before, you and I, because you can have kids who are identical, who have the same skills, who fall on either side of that cut score, and one gets served and one doesn't. I think there's a problem with that. That's an equity issue. That dividing law line essentially becomes the gatekeeper to opportunity.

Anna Geiger:

Basically, these children need education that meets their needs, but I think they're often overlooked because we're very much focused on the kids at the other end who really are struggling, as we should focus on them.

But when people think about MTSS, I think they don't always think about providing services specifically for children who are advanced in reading or highly skilled readers. Why do you think that is?

Amanda Nickerson:

Well, I think many educators view MTSS as a way to provide intervention for students who struggle. That is really understandable when you think about its origins, the way it's commonly used. It has often been associated primarily with providing interventions and closing gaps.

But we also talk about MTSS as a framework that's designed to meet the needs of all students, whether they need extra help or extra challenge. Really it comes down to providing that data-driven instruction and having supports that are flexible and responsive.

While a lot of focus has been on remediation, and that's absolutely imperative, there's equal value in using MTSS to provide enrichment and acceleration for advanced learners.

We see lots of calls for this in the gifted literature over the years. People who are scholars in gifted education are saying we should be using this to leverage those supports as well.

As you said, many people say, “We have so many kids who need remediation right now. Shouldn't we be focusing our limited time and resources there?”

We have this tendency to think that advanced kids will be fine, but really this mindset is not only short-sighted, it's also potentially damaging.

It overlooks some really serious consequences. When gifted or advanced students aren't given appropriate challenges, we see students become disengaged. They might become bored. They might develop behavioral or emotional issues.

When this is prolonged over a long period of time, they can develop poor work habits or anxiety. They can lose confidence because they've never been pushed to struggle or grow.

In worst-case scenarios, I see students become clinically depressed. We see high achieving kids drop out of school or even choose to end their lives. That's tragic.

More commonly, we end up seeing kids who underachieve, not because they can't do the work, but because the work isn't right for them. It's not a good fit. It's not meeting them where they are.

I guess I want to say that serving gifted children or advanced learners within MTSS really shouldn't take anything away from students receiving interventions.

I think we really need to look at making some strategic shifts. That might be re-envisioning how gifted interventionists are used within a school setting and positioning them not as a luxury, but as a strategic asset within the school's instructional ecosystem. Just as we expect reading specialists to meet the needs of struggling readers, we need to empower our gifted intervention specialists to address the precise needs of those advanced learners in their school who are ready for more depth and complexity. That might mean that the instruction delivered by them might need to become a bit more targeted and data-driven as a result.

Big picture, the last thing I want to say about this is MTSS really allows us to shift from a deficit-based model, where we only respond when there's a problem and kind of reactively, to a strengths-based model that allows us to proactively support growth for every learner. That means that we recognize challenge as being just as essential as the support that we're providing to the struggling learners, because we want to make sure ultimately that no learner is left behind or left unchallenged.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, I like what you said about how we need to move from thinking of it as a luxury to more strategic.

Amanda Nickerson:

Yeah, think about how they become a strategic asset within the school. How do we use them well to reach more students so that we don't have a bottleneck for services.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, and maybe you can enlighten me on this because I don't know what the requirements are. Are there any laws that says these students are required to receive some kind of service? Maybe we can

start there. Is that something that schools are expected to do? Or is it really just a luxury where if you want to, great, this school offers that.

Amanda Nickerson:

It is basically a luxury at this point in time. There's no real legislation like IDEA that has the same teeth that you do when you have a 504 or an IEP. There are some plans that students might be on in my state. We have written education plans that outline enrichment, and we have written acceleration plans for students who need to be accelerated, but they have to be tested and identified. They don't have to be served, which is kind of an interesting.

Anna Geiger:

Isn't it interesting? It's very interesting.

Amanda Nickerson:

Yeah, and it's like that in many different states. There's just a lot of variation. There's a variation in how we define giftedness. There's variation in how it's assessed, and how kids are identified. It can be a bit like the Wild West. When I say that it's a luxury, I truly mean it.

I speak from experience as a parent too. My son missed the threshold twice when he was younger. He missed the cut score by one point, and he did not receive much enrichment until this year when he qualified as a fourth grader, and he did it with a huge margin.

We have kids that are capable, who are gifted, if you will, who are kind of flying under the radar. He will begin getting services in fifth grade, but I wonder what if we had been able to provide those services sooner? There are lots of kids like that. I don't think you should have to qualify to receive challenging instruction if you are ready for it, if your skillset is there.

Anna Geiger:

Then also that all should come down to the data that we're collecting on a regular basis, not just a single test.

In this episode, I'd like to really help teachers and perhaps specialists understand what we can do for these kids.

I think so often, and I'm not blaming anybody because I was a teacher too, and I know how it goes. You'll have a child who's very advanced, and you'll say, "Well, I'll just give them independent work," or "I'll just have them read this on their own, this longer book, and they can do these response sheets." I totally get that. We're strapped. We don't even know what to do.

Maybe today we can really zero in on what really we can be doing strategically to help these kids versus just kind of setting them off to the side and letting them go on their own.

Maybe we can start by talking about what type of instruction kids who are advanced in reading need. Do they still need phonics instruction and that kind of thing?

Amanda Nickerson:

Well, you know, that's an interesting question, and I have seen many, many teachers hesitate to provide phonics instruction to gifted and advanced readers because there are some long-held assumptions about what those students need.

For many years, gifted education has operated under the belief that advanced readers will acquire decoding and spelling skills naturally, essentially, without explicit instruction. This notion was really rooted in whole language theories. If you trace back their citations and the studies, they'll reference people like Ken Goodman and Frank Smith.

There's another study that frequently gets cited in this kind of conversation, and that's the 2004 study by Carol Connor and her colleagues. I'm sure you've heard this one before. It's really important when we have these conversations about advanced readers. It's a study that gives us a lot of insights, but it doesn't answer all of our questions.

In this study, the researchers found that meaning-focused instruction, so instruction focused on vocabulary and comprehension strategies, was more beneficial than basic grade level phonics instruction for a subset of advanced first grade readers that they were working with. That's a really meaningful finding because instructional time is limited. We have to make choices about how we're going to prioritize our time.

But I think it's important to interpret this study in particular within its specific context. The phonics instruction that was evaluated in this study was not differentiated or advanced. It was standard, first grade phonics content. That study did not examine what happens when advanced readers receive phonics or word study instruction that's appropriately challenging or matched to the students' precise skill levels.

I think that distinction really matters, right? If we use this study to argue that advanced readers don't benefit from any phonics instruction, then we really run the risk of misapplying the findings.

What it really tells us, I think, is that redundant instruction does not tend to move the needle for students. If they already know the phonics patterns, in this case it was a lot of CVC words, then we wouldn't expect them to grow as much perhaps as that rich, meaning-focused instruction. That makes sense. But again, they didn't really look at what would happen if that instruction was matched to student needs.

I did want to mention that I did a study on advanced first grade learners. We looked at the impact of differentiated phonics instruction and spelling instruction on their oral reading fluency and saw tremendous growth across all of the students in the study.

But I do want to say that this isn't to say that all students will need continued phonics instruction. Not even all of the kids in my sample ended up needing it. Some of them were excluded from the study, but that was determined through assessment. It wasn't just presumed. I didn't just assume that they didn't need it.

When we look at these kinds of studies like Connor's, which is a really valuable study, we just need to be careful not to overgeneralize the findings. I think that when you look at it alongside other studies they've conducted about individualizing instruction and the value of that, it reminds us that our students don't need more of the same. They need something different and appropriately challenging.

The goal isn't necessarily to remove foundational instruction altogether, but it means that we might need to replace what they've already learned with instruction that continues to stretch and support them, whether that's focused on word recognition, whether that's focused on language comprehension, or both. Ultimately, as you kind of pointed out, data should guide those choices and it shouldn't be guided by our belief or our suppositions.

Anna Geiger:

In the study that you did, did you use the phonics diagnostic to figure out where they were at and then group them according to skill that way?

Amanda Nickerson:

Yeah, we started with universal screening. We used Acadience because it just happened to be the tool that the school was using. We went with that and looked at who was above benchmark and then did some testing using the CORE Phonics Inventory, testing them to see where their skills were. Then we grouped them into like groups to deliver instruction and monitor progress. We actually looked at oral reading fluency as the primary measure.

Anna Geiger:

Was that instruction basically just further along in the scope and sequence using the same program, or did you alter instruction significantly?

Amanda Nickerson:

Yeah, I did not alter instruction significantly. We used the standard program.

I did create a protocol that allowed for a little bit more data-driven instruction in real time. So rather than waiting until Friday to do any kind of review, they did formative assessment on day two of the instruction. Then if they did well within the guidelines and parameters that I set, then they moved on to the next lesson the next day. But if they struggled with decoding or spelling during that formative assessment, there was reteaching.

I think it was just a good reminder… My highest-performing student who was reading almost with perfect accuracy at a third grade level at the beginning of first grade, she struggled the most with spelling. We had to have a lot of reteaching focused on really firming up encoding.

I think it's a reminder that we want to accelerate kids, and we want to compact the curriculum and eliminate redundancies to the extent that we can, but we don't want to move so fast that we run the risk of not monitoring their progress because that can inadvertently cause some gaps too.

We go as fast as we can, but as slow as we must, even with these students.

Anna Geiger:

I was reading the slides of a presentation that you gave, I believe it's where I saw you said that differentiation is the heart of MTSS. But what does that look like? I know there are different ways of looking at that, whether that's giving whole group phonics instruction and offering differentiation within that lesson, maybe different passages or different word lists, which can get pretty intense in terms of complexity, but some teachers do that. Or maybe it’s actually giving them different Tier 1 instruction in small groups. Can you shed some light on your thoughts on that?

Amanda Nickerson:

Yeah, so when we talk about MTSS, we're really talking about meeting every student where they are and helping them grow from there, from that point that they're at. That really at its core is differentiation.

We talk about adjusting everything. We sometimes adjust the process that a student is engaging in. We might slightly adjust the materials or the product that we're asking them to create. Sometimes we might even adjust the environment, and that's where those tiers of service delivery come in, right? Are we talking about differentiated core instruction, or are we talking about supplemental enrichment, or really intensive enrichment in Tier 3?

That's what I mean by it being the heartbeat of MTSS. It's something that really drives all of the decisions that we're making for these students.

And it's not just for students who need intervention. Again, it's just as crucial for our students who need more depth or more complexity or more challenge.

It's about giving different work. It's about being more purposeful, more meaningful, and about aligning our instruction to the student's readiness level.

I think what we see often in traditional gifted services are project-based learning opportunities and lots of critical thinking activities. They all have value and they have a place, and there's a lot of empirical support for these practices.

What we haven't seen is the same level of precision and enrichment that we have in intervention. If you think about the scope of the work that we do to support our students who need more scaffolding, who need more intensity, we haven't yet even scratched the surface on what that would look like for our gifted learners.

Differentiation applies across that whole continuum. If we think about this, like in Tier 1, your kids might be working with the same core content, but they might be accessing it through different materials or tasks or the pacing might vary. Ideally, there would be extensions provided that take that content a little further or deeper for students who are ready for that.

At Tier 2 or 3, we might see those targeted enrichment groups, again, just like we'd see with intervention groups, that are really designed to meet the specific needs of those students that might need really more specialized or individualized support.

Again, I want to come back to this idea that it's not about labeling the kids; it's about making sure that they have what they need to grow and thrive.

I think that when data-based differentiation is done well, not just differentiation, but really targeted data-driven differentiation, then MTSS isn't just a structure. It is kind of like a living responsive system that moves with students and for them. That steady heartbeat of data-based differentiation is what keeps it really healthy and strong.

Anna Geiger:

So going back to the specifics… If a teacher has maybe one or two students who are well above benchmark, they've given them a screener and they found out they're well ahead of the phonics skills for their grade level that they would be providing in the whole group Tier 1, what would you recommend as a first step for that teacher? Do you recommend starting with differentiation within the lesson? Would you recommend, if possible, giving them a different Tier 1 instruction?

Amanda Nickerson:

Well, I think it depends on the constraints of the system that teachers are in. I've seen some people advocating for cross-grade level grouping. That might be a viable option in some settings if you have the capacity for that.

In Tier 1, another viable option is teach the same pattern, like if it's vowel teams, teach the same vowel team, but maybe that advanced student's going to work on multisyllabic words containing that vowel team. They're going to work on multiple meaning words that fall within that word list. They're going to look at different dimensions of the word study. They might look at roots and adding suffixes and prefixes to words containing vowel teams. There are lots of different ways that we can extend even that grade level standard.

I've even thought about using dictation. Doing the typical dictation everybody does, whatever that might be, but then giving them a chance to put that into richer language. "Let's come up with some synonyms. How else might we say this? What's another word we could use for this word?" It's just getting creative about taking that a little bit further based on where our students are.

I think that approaches like that make it a little more manageable if you have one outlier in your class and you don't have the capability to pull a separate group for just that one student.

Anna Geiger:

If a school is doing a walk to read model, it might work to put them in a different grade, potentially, further along in the long scope and sequence. If that's not a possibility, because that is a big "if" that a school is implementing something like that, then teachers can also work on finding ways to differentiate the material within the lesson.

You talked about Tier 2 and Tier 3, and I really have not really thought about it that way as Tier 2 and Tier 3 might also be for kids who are well above benchmark. Can you talk more about that, what that might look like?

Amanda Nickerson:

Yeah, so I think of Tier 2 as being instruction that a regular classroom teacher might still be delivering.

When I was a third grade teacher, I took that group of students, and while other kids were getting targeted small group instruction during that period, I was enriching them. We were taking the standards further. We were maybe doing extension activities that were in our core program that we knew we could never get to because of time constraints, but we did them and I was able to incorporate greater depth and complexity into that or deeper questioning that we talked through, that sort of thing.

You might have teachers who could get trained in something like the Junior Great Books, where students could engage in textual analysis and conversation about the text at deep levels, depending again on what those students need.

But then at Tier 3, I really see that being the domain of a highly-trained gifted intervention specialist. Ideally I would like to see it be more than just the traditional gifted pullout services, even though there are great programs and resources that are used in those spaces. I sometimes wonder if that fits more in Tier 2, this kind of packaged program that you would do with kids.

Maybe Tier 3 could look more like really specialized data-driven instruction that takes them far beyond where their peers are because there's demonstrated need for that acceleration or that higher grade level skill development.

Anna Geiger:

You talked about the research that you did and you discussed Carol Conner's research. Are there any other insights from research you want to share about how best to meet the needs of kids who are

advanced in reading, whether that's how that's delivered in small group, whole group, moving ahead in the scope and sequence, any of that?

Amanda Nickerson:

Yeah, I think I'll say there are a couple meta-analyses, one of them by Joyce Van Tassel-Baska, who's a very renowned researcher in gifted education, and others. These meta-analyses, they suggest that mixed delivery is what yields the best outcomes for advanced learners. What I mean is that we have strong core instruction with targeted small group and independent extensions.

So I might use whole group instruction for concept introduction to get everyone to build a common understanding or schema. I'm going to use small group instruction to provide a lot more in-depth scaffolding or deep dives. Then I might use some independent work really strategically, like maybe I'm giving them time to work on a longer-term assignment to reinforce and extend learning that we've previously engaged in, and that I know they can be successful with, while I'm working with a group. Or I might create very tightly-designed choice boards that are based on review of things that we have been working on.

Again, I know they're going to be successful with it, and it provides a little bit more stretch or rigor for those students to sink their teeth into it or make cross interdisciplinary connections, that sort of thing. That's well-supported in the research.

I would add that when I was in the classroom, I learned a lot about different instructional frameworks that you can use to do this well in your classroom. There were two primarily that I really liked and used a lot that were developed by Rick Wormeli.

The first one's called the football structure, and I adapted it and created something I just called the bookend instructional structure. Basically what I did was start with a brief, explicit, teacher-led lesson, and all of the students would engage with the same content with maybe a little scaffolding or higher-level questioning embedded in there.

But then following that explicit instruction, I would group my students a little bit flexibly. I usually took my group of struggling readers or students who grappled a bit with whatever that target skill or standard was, and I'd pull them to a small group with me to a table and we would spend more time doing that gradual release of responsibility. They'd have a lot more teacher support.

While we did that, I sent my other students off to be in student-led groups or partnerships. Sometimes particular students, like you mentioned a student who might be an outlier, perhaps they'd be working independently because their needs were a little bit different than the other students, and they would work on some variation of the task. Sometimes it might be the same activity, but with some stretch or some scaffolding. You could think about partially completed graphic organizers or something like that. Sometimes it was a different task. They might have a different output or product, but on a similar topic and with similar expectations embedded.

And so we would work on that. I would stay with my group that I needed a little bit more one-on-one time with, and then I would leave them to get started on the work, circulate, check in on everybody, and go back to my table with my group. Then we come back together and share out our insights, what we learned. Because again, there were common threads to what we were all working on and we could all learn from one another.

The other structure I used a lot was something called an anchor framework. That was also by Rick Wormeli. It was a lot better for skill-based groups. While that football framework or my bookend structure was really good for language comprehension skills, the anchor structure is a lot more helpful

when you're doing a skill-based group, something like a phonics lesson or word study or what have you, because that's where we see a lot more diversity sometimes in our students.

It also allows us to do at the outset some universal instruction. I might teach handwriting to everybody, or I might do a PA lesson with everybody, to prevent having to do it over and over again. Then the time spent in the group could really be focusing on whatever is different, whatever the needs dictated.

I used those two structures a lot because it enabled me to, at the beginning of each of those lessons, have some universally delivered instruction for common needs, but then also intentionally differentiate for those different needs that were in my classroom, and there were many different needs.

Anna Geiger:

We all know how that goes. No matter how many students you have, there are a great amount of needs.

This is really helpful. You've laid out a lot of things. I think people might want to listen again and take notes because you talk fast too. You shared lots of great stuff about specific things you can do within a lesson, but also other ways to structure it.

I guess the bottom line is there's no one way to do this, but we want to be strategic by taking our data and using that to determine what kids need to learn. We start with the screener, but then we dial deep with the diagnostic. Then we progress monitor and make sure that they're actually making the progress we want to see, and we can alter that instruction as needed.

Any final thoughts of encouragement for teachers or even parents who are listening and wondering how to help their child who's advanced in reading?

Amanda Nickerson:

Yeah, I think I'd say you don't have to be a gifted intervention specialist to make a meaningful impact on advanced learners. Specialized training certainly never hurts, and I would wholeheartedly recommend seeking out professional learning that's focused on the needs of advanced learners because that's only going to help you be more confident and purposeful. But really, the bare minimum requirement is that you are committed to using your data to design instruction that accommodates a full range of learning differences in your classroom, including the needs of those advanced learners.

I think once we have a clear understanding of our students' readiness through those instructionally relevant assessments, then we can really talk about how we intensify instruction in really manageable ways.

I think the other big takeaway I want to leave everyone with is that differentiation doesn't mean that you have to teach 25 different lessons or seven versions of a lesson each day. It doesn't mean that you're only going to ever use small group instruction. What we're trying to do is make purposeful decisions about when whole group instruction is needed, when small group instruction is needed, and exactly what our students need to be engaging with at a particular point in time.

I think the other thing I would like to leave everyone with is just this idea that learning occurs along a continuum, right? Language develops along a continuum, and so we have students who are moving along this language and literacy continuum at different paces, and sometimes there are starts and stops. Some students fly through these stages and that has implications for how we teach.

But just like we talk about intensifying instruction for students who have reading difficulties, we can also intensify supports for students who are advanced. That might look like, again, having a Tier 1 lesson, let's say it's from your high-quality instructional materials from your core curriculum as your nucleus for your

instruction, but then you're purposefully thinking about how I can break tasks up into smaller chunks, how I can make things more concrete for students who struggle, or sometimes even those gifted learners who just need another repetition before they go off and go deeper into the learning.

On the other side, you might think about adding some abstractions, some complexity, multiple steps, and interdisciplinary connections.

Again, it's not just for advanced or gifted learners. All of our kids at some time can benefit from that rigor, but our advanced learners might need a lot more of that more frequently.

I think of it as moving across this continuum constantly as we're teaching, toggling back and forth between giving students direct instruction when they're novices, when something is new or challenging, and then dialing back those scaffolds and increasing the rigor so that students can go deeper and deeper into the learning as their readiness necessitates.

Anna Geiger:

Well, thank you so much. We got lots of great information in this episode.

I'm going to get some resources from you afterwards to see where teachers and parents can dive in to learn more, and we'll put those in the show notes.

Amanda Nickerson:

Awesome, thank you. It's been great being with you.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you so much.

You can find the show notes for today's episode, including the information about Dr. Nickerson's study that's currently in press, at reachallreaders.com forward/episode219. 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, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.