Triple R Teaching

This week on the podcast I welcome Lindsay Kemeny, author of the brand new book, "7 Mighty Moves." I highly recommend it. It's a book that I now recommend for teachers who are new to the science of reading as well as for anyone else who just wants to learn more. There's a lot of practical information in here. It's a short, easy read, and an excellent book. With that, we'll get right into the interview!

Anna Geiger: Welcome back, Lindsay!

Lindsay Kemeny: Thank you! Thanks for having me.

Anna Geiger: So last week I replayed the episode where you joined me last year and talked about your transition from balanced to structured literacy. A lot of that revolved around your son being diagnosed with dyslexia. Since that time, you've actually written and published a book which is incredible, five stars, and everyone should get their hands on it. It's called "7 Mighty Moves" published through Scholastic.

Tell us about how this even happened and what your goal was in writing this book.

Lindsay Kemeny: Oh, it feels surreal that this has happened, but back when I was going through that journey with my son that I talked about in the other episode, I started a blog. I just felt really passionate about sharing the things I was learning with others, and I just thought every child deserves a teacher who understands this stuff. Every teacher deserves to know this stuff. I hadn't been taught it.

So just as I was learning, I started blogging. We don't have a huge blog. I don't blog a ton, but people were sharing it a lot on Twitter, and I assume that's where the people at Scholastic saw it because they saw my blog. Several people had been reading through it, and last year in May I got this email from the editorial director of Scholastic asking me if I was interested in writing a book.

I was like, "Is this a scam? What is this? Is this real?" And also it was May and May is a super crazy month for teachers, and I just was like, "I can't even think about this right now."

It took me a few weeks before I responded to the email, and as I was thinking about it, I was like, "Oh my goodness, yes, I would love to write a book. I really want to help teachers out there. I've been applying the things I've been learning in my classroom, and I've learned some things. I would love to share this because I see so many misconceptions about the science of reading, or I see people who understand it but still have questions about what it looks like and how do I apply it? I just had LETRS training, but now what?" So I really wanted to help answer those questions.

I met with the team at Scholastic in June, and they invited me to write a book proposal. That is pretty involved; there's several different things that need to be included in that and including a sample book chapter.

So I wrote that that summer and then handed it off to Scholastic, and then it had to go through several levels of the company. So it wasn't like one and done, it had to go through these cuts.

While I was waiting for that, it was summer and that's when I had time to write. So I just continued to write, and I was just thinking, "Well, if Scholastic decides it's a no, I'll seek out another publisher" because I really was getting into it.

It was the end of October when I learned that it was a yes from Scholastic. So that then began the process of revising every chapter, giving them to my editor, getting feedback, getting advice, and fixing things.

I came to really love the process. I was excited for the feedback I would get. Then I also reached out, after my editor had been through everything, I reached out to some amazing experts in the field to read through and check all my draft chapters because I'm like, "I want this to stand up to criticism. I want it to be accurate. I'm explaining how I interpret the research, and I don't want to say anything wrong."

Anna Geiger: So here we are and it just came out!

Lindsay Kemeny: Here we are.

Anna Geiger: We're recording this in the summer of 2023.

So tell us about why you came up with the idea of "7 Mighty Moves," the way you structured the book?

Lindsay Kemeny: Yeah. If you look back, I have an old blog centered around these seven major kinds of mistakes I found myself making, and the biggest changes I made in my classroom. If you've listened to my other podcast you know that I used to be a very strong advocate for balanced literacy and that's what I was trained in. So for me after learning about effective literacy instruction, I had to make changes. So these represent the seven big changes that I made.

Anna Geiger: So in writing this book was your audience primarily balanced literacy teachers who are moving to structured literacy, or is it a wider audience than that?

Lindsay Kemeny: Really, I think it's all teachers. I think it's very applicable to those that already have knowledge of the science of reading and fully embrace it because I think it's helpful to see how others are applying the things that we're learning in the classroom. So it's for both. It's for the balanced literacy teacher. It's for the science of reading teacher. It's for those just starting to teach. I think it helps everyone.

I love listening to the experts and reading. There are so many excellent books out there. I love professional development from these literacy gurus, and researchers, and cognitive scientists. I also highly value hearing from the teacher that's IN the classroom. That's perhaps what makes my book a little different is that I'm currently teaching. I plan to keep teaching and I'm sharing here's what I do, here's what I have found that works in my classroom.

Anna Geiger: I think that's really fabulous and I agree that it does reach all those people. I think for one thing, it's very easy to read and very relatable. So for anyone, especially a new teacher, it's helpful. Also, for someone who's in a balanced literacy classroom, you do lay out in a very non-judgmental way the changes that are helpful. Then I've also been studying the science of reading like you for years, and I still learned a few new things that I hadn't heard and just a new perspective.

What's really great is the practical application and photos of your actual students.

Usually when I read these books I'm like, "Oh, I recognize that person" because it's all the same stock photos. "Oh, I know that one. I've used that on a blog post," but these are all real pictures!

Lindsay Kemeny: Yeah. Can I just say that's something I think is really fun because, yes, all the pictures are from my classroom and the videos are from my classroom. It's really kind of funny because for a couple of the pictures I had asked my literacy coach, "Can you come in and take a couple pictures during my phonics lesson today? Okay, awesome." And then for some of them... My daughter was in fourth grade last year and she took some of the pictures! She came in at her recess, and I'm like, "Okay, just-"

Anna Geiger: Oh, that's great.

Lindsay Kemeny: "... here's the camera. Just take a couple."

Anna Geiger: That's so wonderful.

Lindsay Kemeny: You'll see there are QR codes to videos, and I literally would just set up my cell phone, push record, go around to the other side, teach the lesson, then go back over. So it's all very authentic.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, that is so good, that is just what teachers need.

Well, what I thought we'd do today is just walk very briefly through each of the seven, and for each one I picked out something I think would be good to talk about.

So move number one was "Teach Phonemic Awareness with Intention."

We've certainly talked about that a lot on this podcast, and we've recently talked more about this idea that we need to get right to phonemic awareness. Kids don't need to learn to break words apart into syllables or onset-rime before we do phonemic awareness.

We know that's true based on research, but you also pointed out that at least for some children, backing up can be helpful, which is really good to hear from an actual teacher. So can you talk to us a little bit about that?

Lindsay Kemeny: Yeah, absolutely. I think some students do need more help with those larger units before moving to the smaller ones. I shared that example of working backwards.

So I was giving this little student phonemes to blend, three phonemes to blend, and he couldn't do it. He also couldn't do two phonemes to blend. I talk about that in the book that maybe some of those words were more abstract, and that's why it was harder for him, but he couldn't. He definitely had a deficiency in phonemic awareness. He also had a really hard time with attention. And so all those things came into play.

So I backed up and I tried onset-rime, and he still couldn't blend, "m-ap." He couldn't do that. So then I backed up and gave him syllables, "pur-ple." If he couldn't do that, then I would go back and do compound words like cupcake. "Listen, cup-cake. Put them together." He could do that one, and so I praised him, "Yes! You got it! Excellent!"

With that praise came a little motivation. And I talk about, especially for this student, he was only a first grader, but he already had a really negative experience with school. He didn't learn any letter names or sounds his kindergarten year; he was really struggling. I had to build him up as well and giving him some of those easier larger units helped him go, "Oh, I can do this. Okay, I can do this."

And then I moved back to, "Okay, listen pur-ple," and helping him blend that. Then I could go to... Oh, I skipped body-coda before. But body-coda is helpful if a student can't do onset-rime like "m-ap." If you put that vowel at the beginning and go, "ma-p," that's just a little bit easier. So for him that was easier and then he could do that. He struggled with the others. It took a little bit of time, but soon we got to the phoneme level.

So it's just being really aware, I guess, of that student and what they need. So for him those larger units were helpful in prepping him, but it's not that I did that for weeks and weeks and withheld work at the phoneme level because we're still saying, "Okay, now, tell me the first sound in this word." We're still working on that, and we're trying to get to the phoneme level as quickly as possible.

Anna Geiger: And the next mighty move was "Teach Phonics Explicitly and

Systematically."

I just wanted to quickly discuss a tool that you mentioned that I had not heard of before, but I'm very excited about. It's called Phinder from Devin Kearns. People might know that he's done a lot of research on multisyllable word reading, but Phinder is spelled P-H-I-N-D-E-R. Can you tell us about that and how you use it?

Lindsay Kemeny: I love this! I find myself going to this site all the time. So yes, it's devinkearns.com/phinder. You type in the grapheme, and then it's going to come up with all these different phonemes or sounds that the grapheme can represent. You click that and then it's going to give you a word list of all the different words.

So that's so helpful if you maybe need to supplement your phonics program a little bit, or if you're saying, "Okay, we're teaching this sound spelling, but there are only a few words in the lesson. Are there more words I could use?" I can put it in and I can get more words.

Maybe I don't necessarily like the sentence in my program for dictation that day, or I just want some additional sentences. I will put it in, I will find some words in there, and then I can make a sentence with those. I find it really useful.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, it's really cool. It's really neat the way that it offers, once you type in the grapheme like IGH, it will tell you all the different ways that you can pronounce it. Then you click on the pronunciation and it gives you the word list so you don't have a bunch of mismatched words, which you'll sometimes find if you're searching online for a particular pattern.

Your next mighty move was "Teach Decoding Strategies, Not Queuing Strategies," and I really like the little procedure that you share. It's on page 74, and it's called, "Provide the Unknown Sound." Can you walk us through that quick procedure for correction?

Lindsay Kemeny: Yeah. So you want to point out the part they missed or don't know, and tell them that and have them re-blend.

In the book, I give the example of the word, house. "Point to the H, what sound? /h/. Point to the OU." I might first just point to see if they can self-correct that sound themselves. If they can't, then I tell them, "OU spells /ow/. What sound? /ow/. Good."

Now, they're going to blend the /h/ and the /ow/. "Blend those /h/-/ow/. Great. Now, look at the last letters. SE. What sound? /s/. Yes, blend it altogether, house."

So you don't always just have to tell them. I wouldn't just tell them the whole word, but instead tell them the part they missed and have them go through that practice of blending.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, I think that's good because I've actually seen some well-meaning structured literacy people where their feedback routine is to just to tell the word a lot of times. I think you're right that we should definitely call attention to the letters to give them a chance to solve it, and to explicitly teach the parts they don't remember.

Lindsay Kemeny: When I have my kids working in partners, as a coaching procedure, I do tell the students to just tell them the word they missed because I mean these are first and second graders. It's going to be a lot to ask them to think about, "Okay, which spelling did they miss? Give them that sound, have them re-blend." So in that case I'll just say, tell them the word, have them repeat the word. But if it's me, if it's another adult, and for my parents, I teach them this procedure.

Anna Geiger: Agreed, agreed. I wouldn't expect kids to be able to do that. So it's good to have a different one.

The next chapter was "Use Decodable Texts Instead of Predictable Texts with Beginning Readers."

We've talked about that in this podcast many, many times. The biggest question I get from people, and I think it's really hard because there's not a clear answer, but I'd love to hear from you as a teacher, how do you transition kids out of decodable texts? You've taught multiple different grades in the past few years, how does that look different across the grades too?

Lindsay Kemeny: Yeah. I think this is something we tend to overcorrect on and people think the science of reading means decodable text, and then that's all they're going to use. Or I see a fourth grade teacher saying, "Oh, I need decodable texts for my classroom."

And I'm like, "Well, maybe a couple of your kids will, but most of them shouldn't."

It's so important to know that they have a purpose and the goal is to transition out of them as soon as you can, as soon as the child is ready.

What is tricky is that that's not exact science. You can't say at this point of the year they're ready, or once they know this, they're ready. It's a little bit different for each student. I think by the time that they have the majority of the code and the most common grapheme-phonemes, a lot of them are going to be ready to transition.

It was so fun teaching first grade this last year because this is really the year that they're transitioning, I feel like. Some of my students were ready the end of January, and they were transitioning. Some took a little bit longer, but we're working on that transitioning. We're all in complex texts as a whole group. That's going to help them, and scaffolding them. And by the end of the year, all of my students except one were able to be successful with an authentic text.

In the book, I share the preferred guidelines of Linda Farrell and Hunter. I would add to theirs because I think students need vowel teams. So once they know digraphs, they can read words with those consonant clusters, they know r-controlled, they know vowel-consonant-e, and vowel teams, you can start seeing if they're ready to transition.

What I have found is that if I transition them and I'm listening to them read and they resort back to a lot of guessing and they're missing a lot, then I'm like, "Oh, they're not ready." And so I go back to decodables for that student.

Anna Geiger: What about somebody who would say, "Well, what's the problem with keeping them in decodables a lot longer?" What would you say to that? What's the point of getting out of decodable text, for everyone listening that's where the majority of the words can be decoded based on what they've been taught.

Lindsay Kemeny: Well, the goal that we have for our students is to read anything, right? The goal is not to read decodables. And there's also research that supports that complex text and getting them into the complex texts. So we want to push them towards the goal. We don't want to keep them in decodables forever. Decodables serve a purpose, and then the whole goal is to have them reading anything.

Anna Geiger: And there are things they can't practice as well in decodables, like set for variability where you get to an unfamiliar word that you can't 100% sound out and

they have to be able to adjust it, and you need practice doing that because that's what many, many words are that we come across. Phonics gets us so far and then we have to adjust it to a word we know or a word that makes sense in a sentence.

But of course we start with decodables because that's the only thing that's going to work for a beginning reader for them to actually orthographically map the words because the other option is leveled predictable text where they use the picture and context and that teaches bad habits. It's not true reading. I like the way you talk about that in here.

Move number five was "Embrace a Better Approach to Teaching 'Sight Words'" - in quotes. We've talked a lot about what sight words actually are, and most people listening are probably familiar with the Heart Word Method, so let's go in a little different direction and just talk about an old method of helping kids with unfamiliar words, which is still valid.

I think some people call it Say It to Spell It. Is that right? Do they call it that? Where they take a word like Wednesday, which is obviously not phonetic 100%, and they just teach kids to do Wed-nes-day. Talk to us a little bit about that.

Lindsay Kemeny: Yeah. So don't you do that as adult? I do that. I say Wed-nes-day. And so we'll do the same thing, and in the book I share my procedure, my routine for teaching a word, and then we're going to kind of analyze it like the word, friend. In fact, the first time one of my students said, it looks like fri-end. And I'm like, "Yeah, it does," and we all kind of laughed.

And then every time after that, whenever I would say to write the word friend, they would all go, "Fri-end." Everyone would remember that and it was the same for the word many. They would go man-y. It was just this silly little trick and my students would get into it. They just thought it was so funny and it would help them remember the spelling. So that's great.

Anna Geiger: And that's just a classic that teachers have been using for decades. Just as a reminder, we don't have to reinvent the wheel in everything that we're doing.

Lindsay Kemeny: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: Chapter six, move number six was about "Meaningful Fluency Practice." This is a great chapter and I often refer people to the workshop that you gave for PaTTAN at their last conference, about partner reading and paragraph shrinking. I ask them to watch it. Whenever people email me about fluency practice for older kids or second grade and up, I always send them to that one because it's wonderful, and I really liked watching how the kids did the paragraph shrinking, even young kids.

Can you talk us through that procedure a little bit?

Lindsay Kemeny: Yeah. Partner reading and paragraph shrinking I learned from Dr. Matt Burns. It's a classified intervention, and it's like a paired down version of PALS, P-A-L-S. So if you've done that in your classroom, it's like a shorter version. It takes twenty minutes.

You have two partners, and you've intentionally paired these students. One is more fluent student and the other is less fluent, and the stronger reader goes first, so that's going to be Partner 1 or Partner A, whatever.

So Partner A is going to read for five minutes aloud and Partner B is following along and going to do an error correction procedure if they miss. Then I stop my timer and it's Partner B's turn. They go back to the beginning and they read for five minutes while their other partner monitors and follows along.

Then my timer goes off and we switch again. It's back to Partner A, and now they're going to continue reading wherever the other reader left off. And they're going to stop at the end of each paragraph, and they're going to do what we call shrink that paragraph. I'll tell you what that is in a minute, but let me finish the routine. After they do that for five minutes, it goes back to Partner B, and now they're going to continue reading wherever Partner A left off, and they're going to stop after each paragraph to paragraph shrink.

So in paragraph shrinking, one partner asks the one who is reading, "What's the most important who or what in that paragraph?" and they determine that.

And then they ask, "What's the most important thing about the who or what in that paragraph?" and then they answer.

And then the third question is, "Now say that main idea in ten words or less."

So they're going to take that information they just shared about the most important who, and what was most important about the who, and they're going to condense it down into ten words, which is so fun to watch them do, and they just move their fingers to count. I do have a video in that presentation where you can hear the student do it incorrectly, and she corrects herself and then gets it ten words.

So it's great. It's a great activity and I saw huge results in my classroom, which I share in that presentation too.

Anna Geiger: It is brilliant because it teaches summarizing, which is so hard to teach little kids. And then the finger thing, when watching that I loved that because you could see them start and they realized, "Oh no, this sentence is going to be way too long." So they learn to be very concise.

How much modeling did it take for the kids to understand how to find the who or what and what happened? Because that's not easy.

Lindsay Kemeny: I know. You have to do a LOT of modeling, especially the younger the student is. This procedure is meant for grades 2+, grades 2-8.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Lindsay Kemeny: But I did do a version of it in the first grade last year! We could talk about that another time.

So lots of modeling, and returning to it, and then giving them a chance to try and they're doing it, but then you're doing it too. We could do this any time. When we're reading our complex texts together, I can model this for them.

The who or what is usually not so hard. Sometimes they had a hard time, and then they would raise their hands then I would go over and help.

Sometimes they were just disagreeing and it was really kind of fun. "Well, she says the

most important who is this, but I think it's this!" So then we talk about why. But showing them too, what is each sentence referring to? And you can circle those pronouns. What is this referring to? Look, each one is about the turtle, so the most important who or what is the turtle.

So yeah, it's great. But yes, it requires modeling.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. I think that is just one of the most brilliant things I've seen. I love it. What's great about it is it works perfectly for any grade above two. The text is harder, so they just have a more challenging job writing the summary.

We're going to finish up with number seven, which was "Improve Comprehension by Developing Vocabulary and Background Knowledge."

That's been a big thing in the science of reading community lately about how we need to step away from this idea that we need teach all these strategies for long periods of time, but we need to focus instead on the content of the text.

You had a keyword outline procedure, which I thought was interesting. Could you talk to us about that?

Lindsay Kemeny: Yeah, absolutely. There's been a lot of talk, and strategy instruction is important. The thing is, especially for me, I was neglecting the importance of background knowledge and vocabulary. So that was the focus of this chapter.

The keyword outline procedure I learned from the Institute for Excellence in Writing, IEW. I love this procedure because you take a passage, and you start with a really short passage, like maybe six sentences. First, we're going to read it, I might read the whole thing to the class or we might choral read it.

Now we're going to take it apart sentence by sentence. So we're going to read the first sentence, and I'm going to say, "Choose the three most important words in this sentence." Then we're going to talk about it and discuss what do you think it is?

So in the book... Let's see, this is on page 138. So the passage we read, the first sentence was, "A fox sometimes hunts for insects." And so one student might say,

"Okay, I think it's fox, hunts, insects." Or someone might say, "Oh, sometimes, hunts, insects." We discuss the three. They circle the three most important ones.

A lot of times we say, "Oh, we don't need to put fox in there because it's in our title. We already have that at the top."

Anyway, we choose our three words, and then they're going to write them. We're going to make an outline.

Then we go to the next sentence, choose three words, write them on that line, go to the next one, go to the next one for the whole passage.

Then they're going to take the passage and put it away. We're not going to look at it again because now we have our keyword outline, and now we're going to write a summary from that outline. This is so great for writing too because how many times do you have those students that are like, "I don't know what to write about," and they lose all this time because they just don't know what to write about. Well, we have something for them right here to write about. And they're writing about something they read, which is excellent.

Anna Geiger: Really good for comprehension.

Lindsay Kemeny: Yes. So now they can take this and they see, "Okay, sometimes, hunts, insects." And they're going to come up with a sentence, and we do this all orally first. "Can you turn those three words into a sentence?" And then they're going to tell it. I have them tell it to their partner. And so they'll go through the whole outline. We have six lines of our keyword outline, and they're going to orally retell them to their partners. Then they will write them.

It's great because we can add a lot more writing. We can talk about adding strong adjectives, strong verbs, and different things into their writing. So it's a great, great strategy.

Anna Geiger: So the goal is not to recreate the original paragraph, but to summarize the paragraph in an interesting way, using the keywords that you've noted.

Lindsay Kemeny: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: Well, this book is full of things like that that we just shared, things you may not have heard of before. Not to mention just the practical research base for why we teach this way. So I can't recommend it enough! I hope that everybody listening will go out and grab it. "7 Mighty Moves," you can get it on Amazon, and be sure to leave a review too, because that will allow more people to see the book!

Is there anything else you want to share with us, Lindsay? You can talk about your podcast or any place else people can find you?

Lindsay Kemeny: Yeah. I'm the co-host of the Literacy Talks podcast, so if you want to check that out. We are three literacy nerds, and we just talk all things literacy.

Thank you so much, Anna, and I'm so glad that you liked the book! That means so much to me. So thank you.

Anna Geiger: Of course. Well, thanks for coming on.

Lindsay Kemeny: Thank you.

Anna Geiger: You can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode130. Talk to you next time!