Triple R Teaching

Hello! This is Anna Geiger from Reach All Readers, and today I'm very excited to nd the creator of the Reading Science Academy, which is a wonderful, affordable, fabulous membership for people who want to learn more about the science of reading. I've been a member for a couple of years now. She has excellent trainings that she gives as well as guest speakers, big people in the science of reading community like Dr. Anita Archer and others, and also a really fabulous community of people who come together to help each other problem solve through issues they might be facing when it comes to implementing the science of reading.

Dr. Stephanie Stollar has worked as a school psychologist and educational consultant. She's also an adjunct professor at Mount St. Joseph University. I was actually able to take a class from her, and in that class we discussed many of the things that we'll be talking about today, specifically how to use assessment data within MTSS.

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Dr. Stollar!

Stephanie Stollar: Hi, Anna. Thanks so much for having me!

Anna Geiger: So I have really appreciated everything I've learned from you both at Mount St. Joseph and then in Reading Science Academy and also through a recent course that you published about MTSS.

In this podcast series, we're learning how to structure a system so that everyone gets their needs met, but I think there's a lot of confusion and uncertainty about how that looks. So today we're going to dive into that a little bit. In the previous episode, I laid out MTSS and how all that works, and today we're going to talk starting with the screener data.

Let's say that we've done the universal screener at the beginning of the year, and we're teaching first grade. What do we do first?

Stephanie Stollar: Yeah, good question because I think there's an opportunity that is unrealized in most schools for using screening data to prevent reading problems. I think everybody's familiar with using screening data to identify students who are at risk. We're doing a good job now of doing that, but we're not doing such a good job using screening data to identify SYSTEMS that are at risk. What I mean by that is specifically using screening data to reflect the health and effectiveness of your classroom reading instruction.

The first order of business in building a multi-tiered system of support is to use your classroom reading instruction to shrink risk, to reduce the number of students who need something additional to a very, very small number, something like 20% at the grade level.

So the first thing to do after you've done universal screening is to look at what your students need. Screening should tell you how students are doing on their path to reading, whatever grade level they are. Screening should indicate, do they have those essential skills? Can they understand grade level text, for example? If you look at your screening data, then you know what your students need. You know what they already know and what they need to learn next.

Then you can reflect on your classroom reading instruction. What are you about to teach? Does that make sense? Is it a match? Is your instruction going to be aligned to where students are currently with their skills?

If not, then that's the first order of business as a grade level team to sit down with the percentage of students who are at risk at your grade level and start unpacking what the students need. How are we going to meet that need with our first reading instruction, regular classroom reading instruction, in Tier 1?

The mistake I see many schools making is they do the screening and then they're going from a score on a screener, usually unfortunately something like a composite score, which shouldn't be used this way, straight to a tier in the three-tiered model.

So they'll say, "Everybody who scored below benchmark is going to get Tier 2, and everybody who scored well below benchmark is going to get Tier 3." They're just using screening to sort students in terms of individual student intervention, and they're missing the biggest opportunity of MTSS, which is to use the classroom reading instruction to shrink risk.

So then people are overwhelmed. They've got 40% of their grade level who are at risk or 60% of their grade level who are at risk, and they're running around furiously trying to build more intervention opportunities, get more intervention minutes, get more intervention people, get a different intervention program, and they're trying to build intervention on top of a shaky foundation of Tier 1.

They're like hamsters on a wheel trying to just run faster and faster with more intervention when they're not addressing what's going on in the place where students spend most of their instructional minutes, that's regular classroom reading instruction.

Here are some things to think about if your Tier 1 is not showing to be all that effective; if you've got more than 20% of students at a grade level who are at risk on screening, what should you think about?

Well, you should think about what you're teaching and how you're teaching it. You should look at the scope and sequence of your curriculum. What skills are you teaching and are they lined up to what your students currently need, or are you about to teach over their heads? How are you teaching those skills? What are you using to teach those skills in terms of instructional routines and materials? What do teachers know about teaching those skills? What's their knowledge base? How are you grouping for that instruction? Have considerations around what you're going to teach whole group and small group. How are you supporting that differentiation? In MTSS, we call this flexible service delivery.

When I talk about aligning Tier 1 instruction to the needs of your students and doing that primarily through small group, I'm not asking classroom teachers to do that all on their own. I'm also not saying that the teacher should be with one small group while everybody else is fending for themselves. I'm talking about flooding the grade level with every available adult resource so that you can get that small group differentiated instruction that is the hallmark of Tier 1.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. So what if we do the screener and our percentages are looking pretty good? A great percentage of kids are getting their needs met in Tier 1, but then I do have the children that are below benchmark or well below. Now what? How do I decide the balance between whole group and small group?

Stephanie Stollar: If most students are on track, then you could probably provide most of your instruction in whole group. This is one of the ways that we act on data-based decision making. Is your data saying that most of your students need the

same thing; they're mostly at the same skill level? Then it makes sense to teach mostly in whole group, though that small number of students who are at risk are going to need something additional. That's where Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention might come into play.

In that case, Tier 2 and Tier 3 can be supportive of the whole group instruction. So maybe you're pre-teaching vocabulary words or you are reteaching a phonics skill to that small number of students who are struggling so that they can keep pace with what's going on in the whole group classroom instruction. Then you're also using that extra dose to catch them up to close the gap so that you get to the place where you need to be, which is 100% of your students meeting those grade level expectations.

All of the things that I'm suggesting are based on the data. I'm giving a framework of a model that is not meant to be rigidly applied; it's meant to be contextualized to the needs of your students.

The main thing I would say is if what you're currently doing isn't working, you need to think about doing business differently. This is where I don't think people are having enough conversation. It's still about what's wrong with the student and it's still about screening. The child's at risk so they're going to go somewhere else to get something else.

I want to encourage people to take ownership of this and to build a system that's actually designed to match the needs of the students. If what you're currently doing isn't working, you're going to have to think about one of these variables that I mentioned about Tier 1 instruction. You're going to think about changing something there to get a different result.

Anna Geiger: Let's just get really specific and say I've done the screener, and let's say 80% of the kids are at benchmark or above, and then there's a few that are really below. I happen to know that these particular children are really below, I'm teaching at the beginning of first grade, and they don't know how to decode words at all, or maybe they're still struggling with letter sounds.

What would be the next step in terms of my whole group and small group? Would you recommend keeping them with the whole group even though we're farther than they are, and then just differentiating in a small group right after, or something different?

Stephanie Stollar: When it comes to phonics instruction specifically, in my experience and what I've seen in the research, matching instruction to the student's skill level

seems to work best. I'm giving you, again, my understanding of the research, my personal experience in schools.

I don't think students learn through exposure. I don't think that it's helpful for them to take a pass through something just to be exposed to it. I think that's what causes frustration. I think it's what causes students to either act out or internally withdraw. Students are very aware of how they're performing relative to their peers, and if they are in instruction that's too difficult for them, there are negative social and emotional outcomes of that.

So my preference is going to be to match the point of instruction, for those initial decoding and word recognition skills, to do that to the extent possible in small group. And to do that from the get-go in kindergarten and first grade so that you don't have to continue to do that every year.

This is why it's really important to direct resources to those early grade levels and to do the small group differentiation and the double dose at Tier 2 and 3 so that kids actually catch up by the end of first grade. Because to do this kind of thing with fourth, fifth, or sixth graders, the research indicates it's going to take something like an hour to an hour and a half of reading intervention every day to catch kids up, and we're just not typically organized to do that.

So what I'm describing is really best applied with urgency in kindergarten and first grade so that everybody leaves first grade on track.

Anna Geiger: And just to clarify that the differentiated instruction that you're recommending in small groups would be the Tier 1 instruction?

Stephanie Stollar: Yes.

Anna Geiger: And then the Tier 2 or, if necessary, Tier 3 would be provided possibly by another teacher, but building on what you're already doing in the Tier 1?

Stephanie Stollar: Yes. It's in addition to, not instead of.

Anna Geiger: Right.

Stephanie Stollar: So kids don't come out of Tier 1 to get their Tier 2, or Tier 3.

I don't get too rigid about WHO it is. It could be the classroom teacher who's doing Tier 2 or Tier 3. It could be a different educator. Schools are different in terms of the resources and personnel that they have.

The concept is that kids who are behind, students who are at risk, need more and better instruction. They need more minutes, they need more repetitions, they need more direct and explicit instruction. They need more immediate corrective feedback. They need more opportunities to practice and respond, and that happens best in small group, and they're going to need not just one small group each day, probably that double dose. That's what I would recommend.

Anna Geiger: That's what I appreciate about MTSS now that I have wrapped my brain around it. This idea that it's not just that you're stuck in this small group forever and you'll always be the lowest reading group, but the point is you're setting a goal and we're tracking it, and we're doing what we need to do to get you there as quickly as possible. What that means is you need extra instruction.

Stephanie Stollar: That's right. The purpose of Tier 2, I think people forget this, the purpose of Tier 2 is not to take you back to where your skill is and keep you there forever, or even to have you make parallel growth to your age and grade peers. The purpose of Tier 2 is to accelerate your growth so that you catch up.

If your Tier 2 system is not doing that, then you need to analyze and improve your Tier 2 system. If nobody is catching up, it's not the kids' fault. There's something in that instructional system that could be improved.

Anna Geiger: Let's dial down to a very specific classroom. Let's say a teacher has their screener data and they've, like I said, they have a few children that are quite behind. Maybe they don't have other teachers that they can work with, so they're on their own in terms of having teachers coming together to take different groups at the same time. They're responsible for the Tier 1 for all their students.

How do you recommend doing that? Do you have a large group over here, and then the

small group of the kids who are struggling, but what are they doing when you're meeting with the large group? How would all that work out?

Stephanie Stollar: Well, first of all, I'm not sure of a scenario where there's absolutely no other adult who can help with that differentiation.

Even if there's one section, one classroom, for each grade level, there's probably a special educator in the building. There's probably a speech language therapist or a school psychologist or a counselor or a social worker who serves that building. There's probably a librarian, a music teacher, a bus driver, or a principal who serves that building. I've seen all of those people trained to do small group reading instruction.

This is where people have to get creative in identifying who are their resources, adult resources, and what's the best way to use them and train them so that they can help with that small group instruction.

Putting that aside, what are other students doing while the teacher is with a small group is a question that we could entertain. I would say the best thing to have students do in partners or in small groups or even independently, is to practice for the purpose of moving from accuracy to automaticity.

Don't send students off to work on their own on anything that you haven't seen them perform accurately in front of you. I think that's where we get into trouble, when we have sort of blanket literacy stations or the same centers that everybody's going to rotate through. That doesn't always go well because if the students can't actually perform the skill, they can't do it independently, so they're going to choose to do something else.

Anna Geiger: Yes.

Stephanie Stollar: They're going to get into misbehavior. They're just going to flounder and waste the time.

I think you have to differentiate that independent or partner work just as much as you differentiate what you're doing in a teacher-led small group.

Kids need practice as they're learning to read, so if you can structure that as independent practice or partner practice, which works really well in a variety of ways, then even if you have to send them off to do something while you're with a small group, you can make it practice of a skill that they can do accurately. Then that's time well spent to move them to the level of automaticity and fluency that's required with these foundational reading skills.

I love partner reading activities. I love repeated reading in partners. There's a couple of different ways that you can get support to do that. I love repeated reading with paragraph shrinking. That's a great thing that can be adapted to struggling students or accelerated in advanced students. I love collaborative strategic reading, which is a small group intervention that Sharon Vaughn has published. There are ways to use that time wisely if that's your situation.

Anna Geiger: I think that is such a good reminder because I think that's a mistake that I made as a teacher, thinking that the small groups or the centers were supposed to be application of what I had just taught versus, like you said, a review thing.

When I was balanced literacy teacher, to me that just felt like kind of a waste of time. I hadn't really studied how important automaticity is and how much we know about retrieval and how much they need to practice remembering those letters sounds or sounding out those words. So yeah, thanks for clarifying that.

It also relieves some pressure from teachers who are worried that, like I just got another email about this week, how will I know that they're not practicing mistakes at the centers? If you're giving them review and they can do it, you're still doing something really important, you're building automaticity.

Stephanie Stollar: That's right.

Anna Geiger: So what if you've decided to do some small group Tier 1 instruction, but you have students who have multiple areas of need, so they've scored low on different sections of Acadience. How do I decide what I'm going to start with? Or do I do a combination? What's my number one focus in my small groups?

Stephanie Stollar: Yeah, you ask tough, complicated questions. In general, I think about sort of a path to reading, a sequence that students need to move through. It's not quite this linear; there's lots of back and forth. The skills are reciprocal, I know that.

But in general, there's a sequence that we have to move students through. If we think about the word recognition skills, it starts with phonemic awareness, and then they have to map sounds to print. They have to develop the alphabetic principle. They have to unitize basic CVC words. Then they have to become accurate in text and then fluent in text. Then they have a chance of understanding what they're reading, if we have also had simultaneous effort directed at the language comprehension skills.

So I try to keep that path or sequence in my mind when I'm thinking about what I should focus on for small group instruction, or intervention, for a student. When you get older struggling readers, it's complex because they're probably missing all of those skills.

So, in general, you want to go back to the lowest skill in that sequence that the student hasn't yet mastered, because you can't skip over any of those, right? They build on each other. It's cumulative knowledge that gets created. There is value even for older students to take them back and fill in the gaps.

When I started in education, we didn't think that was the case. We used to think if they get to fourth grade and they're a struggling reader, they haven't learned through phonics, so we should scrap all that and just teach them through the whole word method.

Anna Geiger: Right.

Stephanie Stollar: Well, now we know that's not how the brain reads, right? Even with fourth graders and above, we should go back and establish phonemic awareness if that's what they're missing, and build the alphabetic principle through decoding and encoding. We should take them back to those earlier skills and solidify those because that's what's going to create the foundation, along with language comprehension, for reading comprehension to take place.

A way that I think about this is that there's kind of a balance between, if I dare say the word balance, it seems like it's a crappy word, but there's a balance between a focus for your small group instruction or intervention and an integration.

Let me say what I mean by that. In your small group instruction, you're going to have

this priority focus, right? So let's say you have a third grader who has not mastered phonemic awareness. You may be having a focus on phonemic awareness, but that doesn't mean it's the only thing you're going to teach, because we also know that there's value in integrating across these skills. This is why it's so complex and difficult.

Anna Geiger: Yes, rocket science.

Stephanie Stollar: It is rocket science for sure! So even though I'm focusing on the fact that I have to fill in this gap around phonemic awareness, I know that the best way to learn phonemic awareness is through reading and spelling, so I'm integrating the alphabetic principle and phonemic awareness. I'm not just teaching one skill in isolation.

I know that there's value in knowing the meaning of words for building phonemic awareness and decoding, so I'm not keeping vocabulary out of my explicit phonemic awareness and phonics lesson. If students are reading and writing words that they don't know the meaning of, I'm going to quickly, incidentally and on purpose, bring that meaning in.

My focus might be on that lowest skill area, but I'm integrating the instruction across the skill areas. Does that make sense?

Anna Geiger: That makes sense. It does.

Just a quick question about progress monitoring. You're just picking one thing to focus on for that though, right?

Stephanie Stollar: Yes.

Anna Geiger: And just picking one thing you're tracking, which should be the lowest skill.

Stephanie Stollar: That's right, yeah. I think of progress monitoring differently, where my instruction is going to be a little bit more integrated and take advantage of the reciprocal nature across the skills. I want to be more focused with the progress

monitoring because progress monitoring will capture growth when it's lined up to the point of instruction.

If I'm progress monitoring on a skill that's a couple of steps down the line from where the student's current knowledge is, that progress monitoring won't show growth on a weekly basis. Then I might make a mistake. I might think the student isn't growing and I should change instruction, or I should intensify support, when really the problem is I've been measuring in something that's too distant from where their skill level is and it's going to be a long time until the progress shows up on that distant measure, that grade level measure, if you will.

Anna Geiger: So the progress monitoring is kind of a waste of time if I'm doing it that way, because then I can't tell if I need to change instruction because it's not even measuring what I need to do.

Stephanie Stollar: That's right. Even worse than it being a waste of time, it leads people to make the wrong decision. That's what I've found.

If you're only monitoring in grade level material, but the student's skill level is below level, and you're actually intervening in a below grade level skill... If all you have is grade level progress monitoring, you are probably not going to see growth. Then again, you could make the wrong decision. It's going to lead you down the path of perhaps changing instruction when that might very well be the instruction the student needs. So make sure to line up the progress monitoring to that point of instruction.

Anna Geiger: That would be one mistake that people make is progress monitoring in the wrong skill. If they're performing below grade level, and that's what we're teaching them with, that's what we progress monitor.

What are some other mistakes to avoid when implementing MTSS?

Stephanie Stollar: Oh my gosh, there's many. We've talked about some of them, not using screening data to design your systems of support, that's a mistake.

I think it's a mistake to go straight from screening data to tiers of intervention.

Anna Geiger: Versus examining what you're doing in your Tier 1, and starting with that first.

Stephanie Stollar: Yes. Skipping the Tier 1 altogether. It's a huge mistake that people make.

What else? People make the mistake of taking kids out of their Tier 1 literacy block to get their Tier 2 or Tier 3, and nothing is more disjointed for a struggling reader than to be plopped back into something that's like a movie that's ongoing and you missed a piece of it, that's problematic.

Not learning to do problem solving. This is a huge mistake that I see schools making.

Not seeing MTSS as the framework for implementing the science of reading. This is a campaign that I'm on currently because we shouldn't have separate efforts and initiatives and teams within our district for reading improvement, for school improvement, for responding to dyslexia legislation, for science of reading, and then MTSS as something separate. MTSS is the framework for all of those other projects if you will. It's what brings everything together.

Anna Geiger: So you have spent a lot of time educating teachers in many different ways. Can you talk to us a little bit about your Reading Science Academy and your course that you just published?

Stephanie Stollar: Yeah, I'll start with the course because it's specific to MTSS. I have spent a lot of time consulting with school districts and other agencies about implementing MTSS. A lot of people, as they're trying to implement dyslexia laws or improve their reading outcomes, have been coming to me for that kind of support to implement MTSS.

Honestly, I can't respond to the demand and I see the kinds of mistakes and missteps that people are making, so that MTSS course was an effort to try to disseminate some information about how to use MTSS to improve reading outcomes to a larger group of people.

It breaks it down to the really big and important steps, gives people some tools and

some guidance, and serves as kind of a map for moving forward to implement when I can't be there to provide that kind of consultation and guidance. I can't do the PD school by school, so having an online asynchronous course was my attempt to try to support more individual educators and more schools.

The Reading Science Academy is a different entity altogether. It is a community for learning about and implementing the science of reading. It is a responsive educational community. It's not a course, so there's not an A to Z, start to finish.

What the members need, they bring forward to me in a variety of different ways. We have a private Facebook group that we interact in and where they say what they're struggling with, what questions they have, and what they're reading or learning about. I create content in response to what they need.

Members get new content every week. The first week of the month, we get together on Zoom for just an informal Q & A opportunity. The second week of the month, I release a masterclass on one of the topics of interest. The third week of the month is what I call a cheat sheet, some kind of implementation guide, or a summary of a research article, or an area of research. The fourth week of every month, we have a guest I call the "substitute teacher."

All of those materials are housed in a password-protected website. All of our live meetings are recorded, and it's not that people should go through and consume all of the content. I mean it to be responsive to what people need, so in the moment, if you're looking for a resource, you can go to this now vast three-year library of content and find what you need.

In addition to the content that's housed there, it's the community. I think that has been really the most rewarding for me, and I think the most helpful for members. I created it for people who were sort of new to learning about the science of reading, but the unexpected and wonderful thing about it is I have members, like yourself, who are very knowledgeable, members like Nancy Eberhardt, who are just like literacy legends to me. So it's the interaction and mix between people who are farther along on the journey and people who might be just starting out and what people have learned from each other.

I've just created the environment to make that possible, and what I've seen in terms of growth from the members has been amazing, remarkable. We have people writing books, and we have people, again, like yourself, hosting podcasts and blogs, and people who were classroom teachers who've now been elevated to being coaches, or reading interventionists, or district administrators. Now they're being asked to provide PD for

their entire district on the science of reading.

It's just amazing what individual educators have accomplished in the last couple of years, so I'm really happy to be connected to people like that. It's very inspiring to me. It makes me feel optimistic. We might finally get this right for kids this time around.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, well I can't recommend it enough. I'm a member for life. I will be.

Stephanie Stollar: Well, thank you. That's awesome.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, I love all of your trainings. You have a very concise way of presenting and also are very easy to listen to.

Stephanie Stollar: Thank you.

Anna Geiger: Also, like you said with the group, that's a really good place to go. I do like to post in the big science of reading group sometimes, but you'll get all kinds of chatter there. It's really nice to be with the supportive smaller group, and you're always extremely responsive, which I really appreciate.

Stephanie Stollar: Thank you.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, it's wonderful. And your guest teachers are amazing, like Anita Archer, Shayne Piasta, and researchers. It's so great. So thanks for all you do.

Is there anything else you'd like to share before we sign off?

Stephanie Stollar: I would like to share a message to teachers who might be listening to this. In my years of experience, I've seen a lot of things come and go. There are a lot of factors that contribute to reading outcomes in schools, and what I want to say to teachers is, YOU are the most important variable. You might not feel like you have much power within your system, but in your classroom, YOU are the most important variable in what contributes to reading outcomes. Wherever you are on your journey in

learning about reading research, stick with it. Take the next step. It will matter in terms of what your students learn.

Hang in there, especially here at the beginning of the school year, I want to send encouragement to all of you. What you do in your classroom is really important. It matters, and at least I want to acknowledge and recognize it. So thank you to all the teachers!

Anna Geiger: Thank you. Thank you so much for listening. You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode146. 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

episode of Triple R Teaching.