Triple R Teaching

Hello, this is Anna Geiger from Reach All Readers, and today I'm speaking with Linda

is

a big purple book that's fabulous. It's very thick, very long, very useful, and very readable about how to teach reading. It covers all the grade levels, and it's used in some schools of higher education for helping their teacher candidates learn how to teach reading according to the science of reading.

In her long career, Linda has focused on teaching children to read, especially those with word reading difficulties like dyslexia. She's worked as a public school teacher, a principal, a director of curriculum and instruction, and more.

Today, we're going to zero in on a particular topic. She recently wrote a white paper about differentiating small group instruction from the start, versus teaching a whole group phonics lesson and then differentiating. I hope that you can listen today and think about how you might be able to make some aspects of this work in your situation. Let's get started!

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Linda!

Linda Diamond: Hi! Thanks for having me, Anna!

Anna Geiger: Thank you so much for taking time out of your day to talk to us about small group reading primarily, but maybe we'll touch on some other things as well.

First, could you introduce yourself and let us know what you've done in your career?

Linda Diamond: Sure. I'm Linda Diamond, and I'm the author of the "Teaching Reading Sourcebook," also "Assessing Reading Multiple Measures." The Sourcebook is used in many of the universities that are doing a good job preparing teachers. I also launched CORE Learning, oh gosh, it must have been in 1994.

Anna Geiger: Oh my goodness.

Linda Diamond: Then I retired in 2020 and began doing some consulting for publishers, for state departments, and for policy makers that are writing legislation pertaining to reading science and structured literacy. I also led the analyst team that reviewed teacher prep syllabi for the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ). That's what I've been doing of late. I don't tell people I'm retired anymore, I say I'm unretired.

Anna Geiger: That seems to be the theme for a lot of people that I talk to on the podcast, they're never done.

I often recommend the CORE Sourcebook, but for anybody who's listening who hasn't heard of it, they should definitely look into it. It's a very thick, accessible book. What makes it great for a college or university class is that it covers all the grade levels in elementary, versus just the primary grades. It also is extremely clear and practical. There are a lot of lessons scripted out to show you examples of how things would look. It is truly excellent and I've shared it on Instagram and Facebook often to let people know that it's a must-have, so thanks for your part in that.

You came to my attention recently because you had published a white paper about small group reading and, as of this recording, you've got a webinar coming up. By the time this comes out that will already have aired, but the white paper you published is called "Small-Group Reading Instruction and Mastery Learning: The Missing Practices for Effective and Equitable Foundational Skills Instruction." In it you talked about a concern you had that too often a lot of the elements of reading instruction are taught in whole class instead of according to students' needs. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Linda Diamond: Sure, and indeed, there will be two different webinars coming out. One with the Facebook group, Science of Reading-What I Should Have Learned in College, and one with the Center for the Collaborative Classroom.

If we go back and look at the research, what we'll see is that most of the researchers that are often cited as comprising the science of reading with their work actually reference small group instruction. This is not just because they did their studies with small group instruction, but because they found the greatest efficacy with small group instruction.

This goes back probably to the work that Benjamin Bloom did when he talked about the importance of differentiating and meeting kids at their skill needs. Then we have Siegfried Engelmann of "Direct Instruction." All of the direct instruction programs were designed with placement, which is key, to small group instruction. I was trained by Siegfried Engelmann. We have a number of curricula that are still DI programs, Reading Mastery and Language for Learning, for example.

Then we have a lot of what we call little DI. They're based on the same principles, SIPPS would be an example, Bookworms would be an example, and Success For All certainly utilized the same explicit, systematic, small group mastery approach to instruction.

The reason I'm saying it's a missing part is that what's happened in the science of reading community, of which I'm a strong proponent, and structured literacy, is we're teaching the word recognition skills, and we're really focusing on those skills. If we think about Hollis Scarborough's Reading Rope, we have the word recognition skills that need to become increasingly automatic. That's your phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, and sight words.

Then we have the language comprehension or linguistic comprehension: vocabulary, syntax, genre, literacy concepts. Those are not increasingly automatic; they're increasingly strategic.

Another way to think of it is the word recognition skills are also referred to as constrained skills, and that's because they can be taught and mastered if taught well, in a constrained amount of time. Whereas with reading comprehension, language comprehension, writing, vocabulary, and syntax, those are unconstrained because they continue to develop over time. Text gets more complex; vocabulary gets more complex.

So I'm really talking about why teaching word recognition skills in small group instruction, differentiated small group instruction, right from the start, is important.

Interestingly enough, Dr. Stephanie Stollar just wrote about this. Literally it hit my desk this morning. It's part of our LISTSERV.

We know that when we're teaching word recognition, we want to be able to hear the students. We want to be able to see their mouths when they're articulating. We want to

be able to have many opportunities for response and the ability to give corrective feedback on the spot. We can't do that well in a whole class setting with 25 to 30 kids. With a small group, we can really attend to them, and we can push them much farther.

One of the things Sharon Vaughn said, one of the key researchers, is that she really worries about these students who are obviously going to struggle from the start. When they're in the whole class, they already are missing it, but when they're in the small group, even with grade level phonics skills, we can catch it and we can accelerate them and move them much more quickly to get through those grade level skills.

We just can't do that in a whole class, and that's why I have said they're missing. They're missing largely because the publishers of most textbook materials teach word recognition from the start in a whole class setting and then recommend that you differentiate. Well, that differentiation is too late for the kids who already were struggling and already felt lost.

For those kids, and there are those kids, and if you're familiar with Nancy Young's Ladder of Reading & Writing, we do have a group of kids who start school already reading. They're bored, and we can keep moving kids at their skill level if we work at a small group structure for word recognition.

I'm not advocating that for all the language comprehension and the text reading; we need to build that community as we're reading complex text and listening to stories and discussing vocabulary. But we can get these constrained skills mastered in a relatively short amount of time if we do it right.

Anna Geiger: I was thinking about this the other day when I was helping my fourth grader with her piano practice. We have six kids and we're teaching them all piano, and I thought, this kind of matches up because it would never work to have all of them have a whole group piano of lesson, of course, because they're all at such different levels. But if we were going to have something like a music appreciation time, that would make sense.

So that was talking about the difference between constrained and the skills that continue on. Now what are the reasons why small group instruction has been found to be more effective than teaching these types of skills in a whole class?

Linda Diamond: Well, it's for the reasons I said that I think are important. I want to be able to see these kids and hear them. I want them close to me. I want to be able to

catch those students who are not getting it and are not being successful.

Then in a multi-tiered system, let's say I'm doing my small groups right from Tier 1, but I'm seeing and hearing these students who, even with my small group intensive, explicit instruction, are not quite getting it. I can now double dose in Tier 2 and I know exactly who needs it, and I can give them more opportunities to respond and I can make a targeted correction. Those are the predominant reasons.

Then with my students who are already advanced, if they come to school already reading CVC and long vowel words, why would I start them there? A key to this working is knowing where kids are. Placement tests are critical.

Only a few of the published curricula, the ones I named, actually have built-in placement tests, so we have another tool. We can use one of our screeners and begin to look across them, as Stephanie Stollar just did in her nice report today, where we can see the lowest skills and start to think about how we can use that information along with some survey assessments where we dig deeper. Which phonics skills have they mastered? Which haven't they? Then we can start to group these kids and then we're meeting them at their skill level, which is really critical.

Anna Geiger: I think one challenge that teachers might have is they have these things that they want to fit into their word reading lesson. Maybe they start with a phonemic awareness warm-up, they teach the new phonics skill, they have some blending practice, some word building, some dictation, and some decodable text reading, but that can take a long time. Do you have any suggestions for that, like an ideal length of a small group lesson and how to fit them all in?

Linda Diamond: Sure. Shanahan talked about this as well. We're really looking at word recognition lessons not taking much more than about 30 minutes in total. That includes what you talked about. It's that quick, short phonemic awareness, because once they're already decoding we don't keep doing oral-only phonemic awareness; we link it rapidly to the letters. We're quickly doing enough work with decoding and encoding, and we're working on reading those decodable texts. That can happen in about 30 minutes.

So the question then becomes, what's the rest of the class doing, right? That's going to be a challenge.

If a teacher has two groups, which is the ideal, then while one group is doing their direct work with the teacher, the teacher might not get to the decodable books with

that group. She might only get to the phonics instruction and the decoding and encoding, and then move to another group. Then she comes back for the decoding while the other group, probably the higher group, is doing more work, more practice, and then they get their decodable text.

You can do a quick read of the decodable in the same first sitting and then have them reread during their seat time. The ideal is not to exceed two groups, and the challenge is how to do that.

What we found out is that the schools that do it effectively do it across the school. They do it at least across two or three grade levels where they regroup kids. That's what Success for All did. That's what Reading Mastery does. That's what Bookworms does. We call it a walk to reading model. No teacher has more than two in her class at a time.

However, if you don't have a whole school, then it becomes a challenge, and there are ways to overcome that challenge.

Anna Geiger: Before we get into that, when you said not exceeding two groups, do you mean not exceeding two groups that a single teacher has to teach, or do you mean her whole class should only be divided into two groups?

Linda Diamond: Not exceeding two groups that a teacher has to teach.

Anna Geiger: Okay, that makes more sense.

Linda Diamond: It's very possible in fact, we've seen this when we give placement tests, that the class may have as many as four or five different skill levels.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, that makes sense.

Linda Diamond: Now if I only want to take two, I might take a very low one and a middle one. My colleague might take the highest one and another one. I'm taking her kids that fit, but we want to still keep the group size down to about six to eight.

In regrouping across the school with added adult support, most of those schools that have done it very effectively have other adults who become highly trained and deliver the curriculum. You have to understand that most of these direct instruction or little DI curricula are scripted, and we can teach paraprofessionals, parents, and even high school students how to teach these curricula. That's what those of us who were trained by Siegfried Engelmann did often. Now a lot of schools have coaches and interventionists as well.

When I was a building principal of a middle school, a 5th-8th grade middle school with very very low performance, my fifth graders were doing a DI intervention program, Corrective Reading, and I took the lowest group. It also was a nice break for me as a principal; I couldn't be bothered with other things during that time. There are ways to do it if there's the will to do it and the understanding that it's important.

Anna Geiger: So imagine, and of course this is true in some cases, where a teacher wants to do this, but they are kind of a lone wolf and nobody else is on board. What are some things they can do to make this work? Are there some things they can pull out and just do as whole group so they have abbreviated small groups, or how would you recommend they go about it?

Linda Diamond: Yes, so we have a school like that that I've worked with. It's one of our Bureau of Indian Education Schools. Now, the Bureau of Indian Education Schools, many of these on the reservation are tiny. They might have anywhere from three to five teachers, so regrouping across a whole school is difficult, if not impossible. What we've done, and what we've seen that these schools have done, is they have trained parents. The beauty of that is even though many of these very tiny schools have high teacher turnover, particularly on the reservation, but by training parents, not only are they giving skills to their BIPOC populations, they're also training their next generation of teachers. So parents have come in the classroom, and that can be done with a single teacher.

The other thing that you can do is when you see you have too many groups to possibly manage, you're going to make some decisions where you're going to push the mid to high into one group, and then just the low is another, so you still don't have more than two.

It's not a perfect one-to-one skill placement, but it's close, and you could do reviews of sound-spellings together, as long as they're quick. You could, again, have kids rereading their own decodable silently while the other group is with you, and they can be doing much more work.

Now that we have some very effective computer programs, we also can have a group working on a program that reinforces what they're working on. With our DI programs, we did have a very good computer program that could reinforce. If we have other curricula that can reinforce, we can bring those in so that some kids are on the computer while the teacher is providing direct instruction.

But here's the key, and Anita Archer talks about this all the time, this instruction should be short, brisk, zippy, and not have to take a lot of time.

Anna Geiger: A "perky" pace.

Do you have any more suggestions for what the students can be doing when they're not meeting with the teacher?

Linda Diamond: Well, in our DI programs, and in many of these programs, they have their own independent work built in. That may include alphabet practice where students are matching uppercase and lowercase letters, or handwriting where they're forming and working on forming their letters. They're definitely doing rereading in decodable text, or if they're past that stage, they're able to read in text that's more authentic, but they're doing it for rereading practice. They also can be working on their handwriting, and they're also matching a letter to pictures that might start with that letter. Those are the various things.

Typically in small group instruction, at the start, some skills need to be taught to the whole class right at the beginning so that everyone could do them when they're in small groups. That would have to do with letter recognition, alphabet, letter formation, maybe some connection of pictures to words that start with the sound. Similarly, you could have some vocabulary where they're matching a picture to a word if it's a word that they've already heard and they know that word. If they've also been taught a set of high frequency words, they can be repracticing those words. Those are all examples.

Anna Geiger: What would you say when teachers who like to use the whole group method and then differentiate afterward would say, "Well it's giving them all exposure to the grade level skill, so that's being more fair," or "It's giving them access to grade level skills because they might not get there by the end of the year."

How would you respond to that?

Linda Diamond: Okay, so I love that question. First of all, exposure does not lead to mastery. Only mastery leads to mastery.

Anna Geiger: Could you define mastery really quickly before you move on?

Linda Diamond: Yes, mastery is when you achieve that automaticity that is so important that Linnea Ehri talks about all the time. If we don't have automaticity, we aren't going to have comprehension, so we want automaticity.

The way that curricula that are structured this way do this is they make sure that in each lesson, about 90% of the lesson, has previously learned skills and there's about 70% new. What that does is it means kids have a high success rate. You want to see them about 90% of the time getting the skills they already were taught right because, remember, you're still interleaving skills throughout. When they see those that they've already learned, you want them to get them right 90% of the time. Whereas the new skills, at least at the first attempt, 70% of the time get it right. Then you can reteach and correct.

If they start to achieve that mastery, we'll be able to build, and we'll be able to build more swiftly because the student's not frustrated.

The problem with exposure, if I am a student who is struggling... Let's say I spent 30 minutes, which is what most of the publishers have for those skills in whole class instruction, hopefully not more, and I didn't understand or master much of it, then I have essentially lost 30 minutes. Then I differentiate and I get, say, 20 minutes targeted instruction, maybe 30 if I'm lucky, in Tier 2.

So now I've had about 30 minutes where I was lost much of the time, and I've now had about 30 minutes where I'm really targeted, and it's those skills I need. They could be the grade level skills. They could be skills I missed from the grade level before. I don't just skip over them because they build these word recognition skills.

If I started Tier 1 in a small group, I could have 30 minutes right at my skill need, and then if I have to double dose, I could have another 20 or 30. Now I have 50 minutes at my targeted need. I think that's an important distinction.

For those students who already came reading, I know what their parents say, and they're bored fairly early on when they could accelerate. This really frankly gets to, in my opinion, the equity question, which is very important.

A lot of people misconstrue grouping as tracking. We are talking about grouping at the skill level, and again, with word recognition. Well, we had some very good research done by a Greek researcher, Valiandes, who actually saw the opposite, and so did Lou, who studied small group instruction, so did Sharon Vaughn. We all saw that, in fact, they all got to the grade level standards much more quickly when they had the targeted language instruction.

I think of that great graphic that kind of clarifies the confusion people have about equality versus equity. I don't know if you've seen the image. It's one of my favorite.

Anna Geiger: Standing by the fence?

Linda Diamond: Yeah, the three kids standing by the fence, and two of them are fairly tall and one is short, and they're all on the same size boxes. That's equality, but the short child still can't see over the fence. You give that child a taller box, and now that child has equal access to the same opportunities, and that's equity.

It's giving children what they need when they need it. It only becomes tracking if we don't have an explicit, systematic, structured, mastery-based, accelerative curriculum. If we don't realize that we have kids who are stuck and we just keep doing the same thing as opposed to really digging in and figuring out what their needs are in order to target. Then we can accelerate.

We see this all the time. We see it with schools, for example, using SIPPS, where they give a program mastery test every two weeks on what was taught. They regroup just about every two weeks, so you'll see kids moving to another teacher or others coming to another one because they are not stagnant.

We always have talked about flexible groups. Well, how do you do it unless you've done this really good skill-based placement, which Matt Burns is going to talk about. This is how we achieve equity, by giving the kids what they need when they need it, not treating everybody the same.

I will tell you one of the biggest concerns that I hear from my colleagues who work in the multilingual community is that it's all one-size-fits-all curriculum. We know that we have children who come to school from, let's say, alphabetic languages who already have developed phonological awareness, and we can move them much more quickly because we can transfer that knowledge.

Because of that, I think we need to be mindful for all our children that equity requires giving children what they need when they need it, not just treating everyone the same.

Anna Geiger: Thank you for explaining that so well. It sounds to me like you're also saying that when people are choosing a curriculum, they should look for a curriculum that has all this in mind. One that gives them materials to help them set up their groups, gives them progress monitoring tools, and even activities for the other kids. I don't know if that's something people always look for when choosing a curriculum, so that's really good advice.

Linda Diamond: They don't. You know, those of us old timers who were trained by Siegfried Engelmann, and then people like Anita Archer, who was also trained by Siegfried Engelmann, and the late John Shefelbine, who developed SIPPS... Having an understanding of direct instruction models will help when looking for curriculum.

I have to say too, I'm not saying don't do it whole class. I would rather see it done than not done, if it becomes too much of a struggle. There are some very good whole class curriculum out there, for example, UFLI Foundations. Holly Lane and her colleagues did a beautiful job.

But I'm also saying that we do even more by starting kids in a small group, mastery type approach. Yes, it requires some work with the whole school, it requires planning, and it ideally would require having really strong curriculum that's already designed that way.

Anna Geiger: Well thank you very much. I'm really looking forward to the presentations you're giving later this month. Those will be out already when this airs, so I'll make sure to link to the replays, if they're available, in the show notes.

Is there anything else you'd like to share? Any projects that you're working on?

Linda Diamond: Well, let's see. I am working on California, my home state, and where we're headed. We have a number of universities that are starting to revise their teacher prep, which is a good thing, and I'm engaged with some of them.

I'm working with, as I mentioned, a couple curriculum publishers, and we're in the process of making changes or revision.

Then I have a project of my own that I've been working on now for over a year with a former colleague, B.J. Thorsness. We've been working on a curriculum that teaches writing from a syntactic grammar approach. That's taken us a long time.

Anna Geiger: Interesting. What grade is that for?

Linda Diamond: It's targeting really upper elementary through. We're making assumptions that there are a lot of students who don't really understand a linguistic approach to grammar, and they don't understand the syntax of the sentence, and then the paragraph. That's where we're headed with this particular project.

Anna Geiger: Well, that's very exciting. Any guesses when that might be ready?

Linda Diamond: No, we thought it would be ready already. I would guess we need another year to get done with this.

Anna Geiger: Do you have a publisher already?

Linda Diamond: No, we're going to be looking for one.

Anna Geiger: Okay, because I would keep an eye on publishers' newsletters, but I'll just wait to hear when it comes out. Hopefully this will get announced in the big Facebook group once that's ready.

Linda Diamond: Good! Thank you.

Anna Geiger: Well, thank you so much for taking time to talk to me and clearing a lot of things up. I really appreciate that.

Linda Diamond: You're very welcome.

Anna Geiger: You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode147. 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.