Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here from Reach All Readers, and in today's episode I had the

Development Center for Educators and a professor in the School of Education at the University of Delaware. During her long career, she's done many things and may be best known for co-authoring the book "How to Plan Differentiated Reading Instruction" with Michael McKenna. She's also the author of the free open-access educational resource called Bookworms. That is a free curriculum online that includes loads of resources for shared reading, interactive read alouds, and more.

In this episode we're going to start by talking about her way of differentiating foundational skills. She actually starts with a whole group spelling lesson on level and then she differentiates based on where students are with their knowledge of phonics skills. Then she also talks about the whole class work that happens within the Bookworms program.

She definitely challenged my thinking in a few ways, as you'll see, so you'll have to let me know what you think of our conversation. You can leave a comment in the show notes. With that, let's get started!

Anna Geiger: Welcome Dr. Walpole!

Sharon Walpole: Thank you!

Anna Geiger: Today you agreed to meet with me to talk a little bit about differentiating reading instruction, especially in the primary grades.

Can you talk to us a little bit about your experience in education and what brought you to where you are now?

Sharon Walpole: Thank you. Yes. I was actually a high school history teacher, if you can imagine, and my students couldn't read very well so I became interested in

studying reading. I always thought I would study adolescent literacy, but when I went to the University of Virginia I had the opportunity to work with some really, really fantastic folks in beginning reading and shifted my focus.

Then because I really did want to do my research in elementary school, instead of going to a university job right away, I became a literacy coach in an elementary school to sort of get some street credibility because there's nothing first grade teachers hate more than having a high school teacher tell them what to do. So I learned a lot about how to run a reading program which was much more than just how to teach reading.

I did that work for three years and then I moved to the University of Delaware in 2002, and I've had a really wonderful career at the University of Delaware. I've studied literacy coaching, I've studied the design and evaluation of interventions, and I'm also the author of a K-5 reading curriculum that's open-access called Bookworms.

Anna Geiger: Yes, and we'll talk about that at the end.

So you have co-written "How to Plan Differentiated Reading Instruction," and I think multiple versions of that have come out. Tell us about where that came from and what the book was written for.

Sharon Walpole: Yeah, actually it's kind of an interesting story and it houses sort of the whole trajectory of the move from guided reading into direct instruction. Mike McKenna, my late partner, he died in 2016 suddenly, and I had worked together for about 15 years.

In the early 2000s, we were working in Georgia with Reading First. We were the state architects of professional learning, so we went to Georgia and we visited schools a couple of times a month.

One of the things that Reading First required was that teachers collect data on foundational skills development, and that was kind of the beginning of DIBELS being very widely used. It was the test that was used in Georgia. At the same time, teachers were required to use a core program that was based in SBRR, scientifically-based reading research, and there was a big movement for that.

So there were these two mandates and they kind of overlapped because the

assessments revealed foundational skills deficits, but they didn't tell exactly what to do about them. They were screening mechanisms.

I thought that teachers needed to know not just that kids were at-risk, but exactly what they needed to learn. We actually developed a diagnostic assessment that's very easy to use called the Informal Decoding Inventory.

The other thing that we learned was that the Reading First mandate had a big conceptual hole because back at that time, almost all of the curricula that were on approved lists for SBRR actually had some version of guided reading.

Teachers had a grade level passage or reading that went across the week and then they had three small groups. Typically, those small groups had a guided reading lesson in one of three little books that were related. They had some shared vocabulary, but there was the easy version, the middle version, and the hard version.

That made no sense to me because the easy version, especially in kindergarten, first grade, and the beginning of second grade, was typically a predictable book.

So we had data to show that students were at-risk for their decoding proficiency and for their oral reading fluency, and we had diagnostic data to show exactly what they needed to learn, whether they needed to firm up their letters and sounds, whether specific decoding proficiencies had been mastered, and those are pretty predictable. We know a lot about how decoding develops.

But there was no mechanism for teachers to actually address what kids really needed, so they were in small groups doing something that made no sense at all to me, predicting what the words might be.

So we actually said, let's sub out that small group, that weakest group, and teach some phonics. And so that's how the approach actually began.

There are things about guided reading that were always very attractive to teachers. It's not hard to do. It can be done in a sort of routine regular way with students learning to manage their self-directed work and teachers calling groups.

So we used that structure, but subbed out the content. There was no problem with that in the Reading First world. I know people say that it was very rigid. It wasn't for us, because after we started that in Georgia, we also worked across most of the states on the east coast to try to promote this same idea, and it was very, very well-received.

So that's how it started. It started as a feasible replacement for guided reading instruction for kids who needed to learn to decode.

Anna Geiger: Okay, and then in your book of course you lay out all the different types of lessons that you would have depending on where they're at.

Sharon Walpole: Yeah, we ended up scripting it. We started out with just frames, saying this is what the lesson should contain, and a lot of literacy coaches filled in those frames, but then when I came to watch them, sometimes they were just a little bit off. The scope and sequence wasn't exactly right or the level of difficulty wasn't exactly right, so we just said, well, we can write them easily.

That's how we ended up writing a book that talks about the science of reading and also has a fully-scripted set of lessons for building basic alphabet knowledge, initial phonemic awareness, and then more advanced phonemic awareness, segmenting and blending, and single-syllable phonics instruction.

Anna Geiger: So what is your opinion on the idea that yes, all kids need to know this, but I'd rather teach the grade level skill, according to my curriculum, to everybody at once. It will include the elements of explicit teaching and all that, and then if someone's struggling, then I'll remediate in a small group? Or if they are more advanced, then I'll give them a small group a couple times a week, but we always start with this 20-30 minutes of whole group phonics. Do you have any opinion on that?

Sharon Walpole: I actually think that that's pretty normal and it's a good idea because in the end, it's not feasible for teachers to differentiate everything. What I worry about is how long that whole group lesson is.

Even in Bookworms, that's how we do it. We have a short word study lesson that focuses on spelling and on letter formation in kindergarten, and then on decoding regular and high frequency words in first grade, and then on more mature letter patterns starting in second grade, and then on syllable types starting in third grade. You can still do that whole group phonics instruction for the grade level relatively quickly.

For students who are struggling in that area, they may not be mastering the content that the teacher is teaching because on the continuum of word knowledge they're starting out much lower. However, it doesn't mean they're not learning anything. They might be learning word meaning or they might be building phonemic flexibility, even if they're not quite learning decoding and spelling.

I know that one of the things that you had asked me to think about was whether that's previewing the content so they can learn it later, and I don't think that makes sense. I think they're learning something else about words. Some students do need us to go back to really where they start on that continuum, but I don't think it's reasonable, nor would it be effective, not to have grade level instruction. Because what about the students who are on grade level? They need to keep advancing their knowledge across the grade, and if there's no scope and sequence for grade level word knowledge building, those students won't be served.

Anna Geiger: What about someone who would say, let's give them a diagnostic assessment for phonics and then just put them all in instructional groups based on where they are on the scope and sequence, and that's how we give our instruction?

Sharon Walpole: Well, that's what we do, but we do both. We first have a grade level quick word study lesson every single day, but then also give students a diagnostically-driven small group lesson. I do think that that combination, at least so far in the research on the effects of Bookworms, has been really dramatic, so we do both.

Anna Geiger: Can you help me understand the purpose of the short whole group lesson for everybody?

Sharon Walpole: Yeah, so in Bookworms, it's a spelling lesson.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Sharon Walpole: At its very beginnings in kindergarten and first grade, word knowledge, spelling, and decoding can either be developing together or they can diverge. That happens a lot where students end up doing really well in their decoding, but their spelling starts to drop off.

So what I decided to do was to differentiate phonics instruction to get decoding ahead as quickly as we could, and then have a really systematic attention to spelling instruction. Ideally in a Bookworms school, a student's placement in decoding lessons in small group would be ahead of where their word study spelling instruction is at the whole group.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, that's very interesting because I know a lot of kids might enter kindergarten and first grade reading well above grade level, but their spelling is not at the same place.

Sharon Walpole: Yep.

Anna Geiger: How does that work though if you're doing the whole group spelling, and you have someone who's only reading at CVC level, but the whole group spelling is much further along? How do they do with that?

Sharon Walpole: Not well.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Sharon Walpole: I think that that's important information for teachers and families. I think it's easy to say my students are doing well when I'm instructing them at their just-right level of decoding knowledge, but we need to have a reminder that it's an emergency and that they're well below grade level.

So yes, I would expect students who are in second grade and decoding at the CVC level to do very poorly on grade level word knowledge assessments because they're not at grade level.

Anna Geiger: So in those small groups, would you do any kind of encoding work?

Sharon Walpole: We don't because there's not enough time. It's not that that might not add value, but to me, the costs are too great. Whenever students are in a small

group in a classroom-based intervention, the rest of the class is waiting. The longer that time is... So that's just a pragmatic decision that I made, and I might be wrong for sure, but that's why I made it. I want to really protect the amount of time that students are not in teacher-managed work.

Anna Geiger: Right, and it is just a tug of war kind of because you're trying to meet everybody's needs specifically, but you also realize that the other kids aren't getting you at the same time.

Sharon Walpole: That's right.

Anna Geiger: They're just not learning as much. They're in a situation where they may be practicing something for automaticity, but there's no direct instruction there so I know that that is a really hard thing for teachers.

I know some schools have managed this by having a grade level team work together and each teacher is given a group, so they're all getting a good length phonics lesson at once.

For a teacher that is finding that they don't have the support to do a really good small group setup for the Tier 1 instruction and that their main phonics instruction mostly needs to be whole class, a longer whole class lesson, do you have any tips for differentiation within that?

Sharon Walpole: I just don't believe in that. I think you can either teach grade level instruction or you can teach different content based on students' assessed needs, but you can't do both at once. People have tried it. I don't think that that's an ideal design.

People in Bookworms schools differentiate sometimes for students who are struggling by giving them a preview lesson for the word study, but not from the teacher because the teacher has to be managing the whole crew, right? That's if they have intervention providers. Some people have also designed response cards so that the teacher can actually monitor more visually how quickly students are responding because they're touching items on a response card.

I still think that students can be learning different things. For example, one student might actually be building phonemic blending skills while another student is learning

how to spell patterns - at the same time. I think that always having phonics and/or spelling instruction have a phonemic content actually is a way that you're both building automaticity for all kids, but also differentiating, inside one lesson.

Anna Geiger: So I'm trying to conceptualize how all this looks day-to-day for the teacher who's trying to figure out how to apply this. Maybe you could just briefly walk us through it. Let's say it's the beginning of the year for a first grade teacher, what does she do first?

Sharon Walpole: I'll tell you how Bookworms is designed. In a Bookworms first grade classroom, the teacher would start with shared reading probably. There's three segments: shared reading, English language arts, and differentiated instruction.

Let's say she starts with shared reading. Shared reading in Bookworms starts out with about 10 minutes of compare and contrast spelling instruction. It's called word study in the lesson plans, and all the lesson plans are open so you can actually look at them. They're open-access.

In the first four weeks of school, the kids are reviewing their letter names and sounds, but then in week five they start comparing and contrasting short vowel word families. Every day they sort words by their sound and then by their patterns once they become more sophisticated. They also do full phonemic analysis of words and they learn to spell six high-frequency words every week.

That word study instruction is fully scripted in the lesson plans, and it lasts about 10 minutes. At the end of that, all the students write a dictated sentence. The teacher says a sentence, the students memorize the sentence, and the students write the sentence. That allows the teacher to have daily progress monitoring in first grade when things are such high stakes for kids.

After that, they have their reading lesson, which starts out with choral reading. Bookworms only uses trade books. The teacher doesn't select them; they're already selected, and they're fully curricularized. The teacher is going to read the day's text segment with students chorally, which means everybody's reading together keeping their voice as best they can with the teacher's voice, and then immediately they reread it in partners. The teachers have partners already set up. The students just move to their partners and they reread that day's segment.

By about October 15th probably, the time that students spend in that repeated reading

is about eight or ten minutes.

So they've read with the teacher, and then they reread.

Then on Tuesday, the next day, the teacher reads the next part of the book and the students reread it. They're always reading and rereading so they have a repeated reading intervention every single day. Then they have a discussion with open-ended questions, and the teacher makes an anchor chart of the content of the book. They do that every single day in shared reading.

Then the 45 minutes have elapsed for that instruction, and now it's time for differentiated instruction. At this time, the teacher can see up to three groups for 15 minutes each. When the students are in their groups, either they're getting additional phonics lessons that are based on diagnostic data, or they're getting an additional repeated reading lesson.

While the other students are not with the teacher, they have a written response to the day's shared reading. There's always a question that they write, and then they practice their word study in a workbook. In first grade, they also have handwriting practice.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Sharon Walpole: Those are those two blocks. Then there's a third 45-minute block, in Bookworms at least, that has either units of read-alouds to build knowledge, followed by grammar instruction or writing instruction, composition instruction.

Anna Geiger: Okay. Let's go back to the shared reading time. So these are trade books? These are not decodable texts necessarily?

Sharon Walpole: Right.

Anna Geiger: So can you walk us through that? Because I think some people would be concerned by that and wondering if we're teaching kids to memorize words, or how can they access the words if they don't have the patterns?

Sharon Walpole: So that's a really good question and probably in the first few weeks of first grade, there are a lot of kids who are memorizing the words because the books themselves are short enough for that to happen. But after that, they're just too long so they can't memorize the words.

I think the benefits of repeated reading have been very well-documented in the research literature, but you're right to be skeptical because basically they say that the benefits of repeated reading start when kids are past, in the old-fashioned terminology, about a primer level.

Basically we have to get them up to the primer level as fast as possible for the benefits of repeated reading to kick in. Now our small group phonics lessons do have decodable text to practice, but that decodable text is matched to the decoding instruction. In some ways, for some kids, at the beginning, maybe even the first month of first grade, parts of shared reading might just be a placeholder as we're using the rest of the day to get their skills built enough that they could read at a primer level.

Anna Geiger: What do you see as the learning goals or the benefits of the shared reading time?

Sharon Walpole: It builds community, that's one, and motivation for sure. Actually, I've been amazed at how much it builds student motivation to read, but that's just frosting. The real benefit is kids building automaticity with a wide range of words. I think that there are special educators who will disagree with me and say that all the reading has to be controlled, but that just never ends up intersecting with natural language text in my view.

I put natural language text in front of kids, but with this intense scaffolding of choral reading. Students do learn words, they learn a lot of words, just by reading them successfully several times.

I'm influenced by the work of David Share, and one of the things that he's argued that really resonated with me is that words are in a sort of gauge of known. They go from unknown to fully known. The number of times kids saw a specific word, or a word with a specific set of features, differs by the individual and brings a word to known.

So I think that this repeated reading intervention, even at the beginning of first grade,

is building the corpus of sight words in a child's lexicon. We're addressing it very systematically with a spelling continuum, with a decoding continuum, and with repetitive reading in natural text.

Anna Geiger: This is so interesting because I know that there's not a ton out there in research about decodable text, and then there was also a meta-analysis and their conclusion was that we shouldn't limit kids to decodable text. So you're basically showing us a way to scaffold other text reading.

I think it's still a little hard to wrap my brain around because there's so much about automaticity at the word level and achieving that before you move kids into these more authentic texts. Do you have anything to say about that?

Sharon Walpole: Kids are capable of learning a lot more than we think they are, especially if we're providing a really engaging environment and a lot of scaffolding, which is what Bookworms provides. They're also able to build a literate community, even in a first grade class, where kids actually collaborate to solve reading problems.

Of course other people would say, well that's what they do in a reading and writing workshop, but that's actually also what they do in science of reading-based classroom. As long as you've taken time to build community and also as long as you've proven to kids that they're going to learn to read, they're going to be able to participate every single day and they're going to do things that are both interesting to them and challenging, and they're going to do them in community.

Anna Geiger: So to someone who would say any choral reading type of exercises or fluency-building type of exercises for early readers should be... Let's say they're doing reader's theater and they'd say, well, it should only be decodable readers theater. That is a lot of what I hear. Can you respond to that? I think you would disagree with that, right?

Sharon Walpole: Yeah. I've never actually heard that ever. Reader's theater can't be with decodable text. That's not what readers theater is so I don't know what those people are talking about.

Anna Geiger: It would be people who believe that we shouldn't... There are people that are working hard to understand the research believing that when kids start reading, they orthographically map words by matching the phonemes to the graphemes and actually sounding it out, and if we're giving them a lot of words they can't sound

out, then what exactly are they doing?

Sharon Walpole: Yeah. Okay. I hear you now. What exactly are they doing is sometimes they are actually processing words more holistically when they're embedded in natural language text. There's no way around that, of course, that's what they're going to do. But some of those words will be processed during that time with enough depth to actually build them into the lexicon, not all of them.

Maybe the bets I'm trying to hedge are that we can teach decoding systematically and that's going to build word knowledge. We can teach spelling systematically and that's going to build word knowledge. We can also engage kids in repeated reading and that's going to build word knowledge too. So two of them are along very predictable lines of development and one is out in the wild.

Anna Geiger: Okay. So I know in your lessons you have decodable sentences, and then we have this other time that they're doing this other reading, this choral reading with scaffolding. Some of those words they are sounding out because they have the knowledge to do that, but we're also giving them access to a chance to build prosody and build knowledge and community and see patterns in words so that eventually, like you said with David Share, when you have some phonics knowledge, you teach words yourself. Thank you for walking me through that.

Sharon Walpole: Maybe I'm just actually trying to give kids the opportunity to come to that time when they're ready. You know what I mean? To be engaged in this really, really rich word world in Bookworms. I actually think it's fine for some students to be in the same world but learning different things at the same time. Maybe in some ways, that's the definition of differentiation.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, that's very interesting.

Sharon Walpole: But it's not because of what the teacher's doing to make it different; it's because of what the student's bringing.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, I've never thought of it that way. Very interesting. Well, thank you.

Well thank you so much for sharing how Bookworms works, and of course I'll link to that in the show notes and to your book.

Is there anything else you want to share about your work or things that you'd like people to find from you?

Sharon Walpole: I really would love people, especially people who use the "How to Plan" book because they have experienced a trust in what Mike and I together learned about how to build word knowledge, to look at the full curriculum to see how we can expand that idea to all the skills that kids need to be successful at grade level. It's easy to sign on, to open up resources, and get access to the lesson plans that are free. All you have to do is buy the trade books that go along with them.

Anna Geiger: Well, thank you. I know I've sent many people especially to your interactive read alouds there because they're just so well laid out the vocabulary is taught so nicely, and I'll make sure everybody can find all that. Thank you so much for joining me.

Sharon Walpole: Thank you!

Anna Geiger: Thank you for listening. You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode148. 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.