Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here from Reach All Readers, and today I'm sharing a conversation

how to differentiate foundational skills from the start, but Casey wanted to share how he has found success beginning with a whole group phonics lesson and then differentiating in small groups.

Now, just to be clear, this is not my preferred model when students are at different skill levels, but I think it's important to hear different perspectives and to hear about Casey's success that he's had with this method. So here we go!

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Casey!

Casey Jergens: Well hi! Thanks for having me.

Anna Geiger: Thanks for joining me to talk about your teaching and differentiation. Can you introduce us to yourself a little bit? Tell us about your teaching experience and what you're doing now.

Casey Jergens: Yeah, my name's Casey Jergens, and this is my tenth year of teaching. I started out teaching in rural Iowa, and then I've spent the bulk of my career so far teaching in an urban setting in the middle of a city in more of a typically underserved population. All of that time was spent teaching first grade, and now for the second year in a row I'm teaching kindergarten.

The school I'm in now is kind of a unique situation. It's a suburban school, but about 50% of our population is made up of multilingual learner students. It's a very diverse school, maybe a little bit atypical of what you'd think, so that's a little bit of that.

I have a master's degree and I just mention that because it's kind of a unique master's degree in culturally responsive teaching and equity. Part of that is the lens of how I

approach things and what we focus on there.

Anna Geiger: Do you have a favorite grade?

Casey Jergens: I really like both of them, so it's hard to decide. I like teaching first grade and a lot of great things happen in first grade, but I'm really loving kindergarten too. I'm finding that I really like that first foundational year, so I'm loving both.

Anna Geiger: Talk to me a little bit about how you teach your foundational skills in your kindergarten class.

Casey Jergens: Yeah, my overall literacy block is maybe typical of what people think of. It's 120 minutes and about half of that time is devoted to foundational skills. About half of the time is devoted to that other side of the Reading Rope, if you will, using a content literacy curriculum.

Within that foundational skills block, we really try to align together our handwriting, our phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, and connected text. It all meshes well together into this block of time.

I do use predominantly a whole group model for instruction. That doesn't mean that I never see small groups, and it doesn't mean that I haven't done small groups. This model that I use now really, in my experience, has led to the best results or the greatest outcomes for learners.

That's just an overview of the block. Is there anything more specific that you want me to dive into?

Anna Geiger: Talk to me a little bit about how you do use small groups and how you decide when and how to form them, etc.

Casey Jergens: Yeah, for sure. Like many people, we start the year with our universal screener, and we use that for two different pieces. One, we're going to look at who's high risk, who's potentially needing that Tier 2 intervention, and then what are our whole group needs?

A lot of times that leads into maybe a deeper dive into a diagnostic piece. In kindergarten, it's a little bit different because we're starting at the beginning, but we do do a letter sounds focus at the beginning, and then that determines where specifically we are going to start.

The first small group that I see is within that one hour block of time, and that's a very fluid group of students really based on what I'm seeing weekly based on progress monitoring. It might be based on just what I saw that day. Who needs a little bit of that extra dosage and who maybe just needs more practice.

I should make this clear. That Tier 2 time is in addition to that block of time. That's going to be a little bit more of a structured group that we're seeing. Some students are going out of the classroom to receive an intervention, and I'm working with a group of students on a specific targeted intervention. I'm using either diagnostic data to determine those small group needs or the universal screening data, and then progress monitoring too to determine who still needs to be in the group, who's ready to exit, and those types of things.

Anna Geiger: So in thinking about this, I think about the year that I did try to do whole group phonics for the whole class, and it was very difficult because it was first grade and I had a little girl who didn't know her letters and some kids who were reading fourth grade material. In the way that you approach this, how would you handle that?

Casey Jergens: I've been in that situation a few times and I think one of things that we first do is going back and looking at that universal screening data and then looking at the diagnostic data. I have a few examples I can share of specifically what I did.

We determine, especially in first grade or second grade, are we ready to begin the year whole class where we need to? Do we need to go back a little bit? Are we ready to go forward? Then are there specific groups?

The final year that I taught first grade, two years ago, I had a pretty distinct group like you're talking about with that one student. They were missing some letter sounds, they were missing some of those pieces. So right there, that was my first group, and we started right off the bat, week two of school, week three of school.

I still kept them in that whole group time, though, because especially what we were doing at the beginning of the year still allowed them to grow in that practice. There may have been a little bit of a struggle there, but we made sure to put some scaffolds into place to support them.

Then for those students on that higher end too, I think one of the things is ... I've never quite had a group that was reading that high before, but I've definitely had students that were above grade level. I think sometimes we see that and we go, okay, they're going to be so bored in this instruction, but that's just never been my experience necessarily that they've been bored.

I think a couple of things, like keeping a quick pace, moving along in your scope and sequence, and continuing to make sure you're moving along quickly, will keep those kids engaged. Especially in first grade, we always added multisyllabic words into what we were doing. I remember specifically a group of boys that I had that were above grade level, and they just ate that up! That was really a way to push them forward. I also would take those students and we might continue to grow in fluency. Some of those types of things.

Anna Geiger: One thing I'm trying to work out is, say we've got a class of kids and the grade level skill is CVCE words, but I have kids who still aren't reading CVC words yet and kids who are beyond. I guess I'm wondering what exactly are those kids who are much below the grade level skill getting out of the whole group lesson?

Casey Jergens: I think it's important for them to hear the modeling. I think it's important for them to continue on. I guess it's not been my experience when I got to CVCE words that many students weren't able to continue on with that. If we're doing a dictation or when we're reading the words, they can join us because of the modeling or the scaffolds that we're putting in place. It could be just something like choral reading. It could be something like we are segmenting the sounds together and then they're writing it. I guess I can't really think of a specific time where that really impacted them, and I feel like it continues to push those kids forward.

Anna Geiger: I think the argument on the other side would be, we know that to get these kids caught up to grade level benchmarks and maybe beyond, they need lots of instruction where they're at. So the argument would be, well, why don't we differentiate from the beginning so that instead of doing the whole group where they're not getting exactly what they need, they can get it during this time and then additionally in Tier 2. What's your thought on that?

Casey Jergens: Well I guess I don't necessarily completely disagree with you on that. I

get what you're saying, but what I worry about though is... I think that sounds really nice when we sit here and talk about it and it's like, "Okay, we're going to put these groups together, and this is the focus of this group and this is the focus of that group." I think what actually happens in reality in a lot of situations though is that group is always going to stay behind.

We have to talk about how do we take this group of kids and yes, go in and fill in what they're missing and what they need, but we've also got to make sure they're making accelerated growth towards the end of it, so that they don't always stay in that group that's behind.

If I'm taking this group of kids and we're spending X amount of time just on CVC words, waiting until everybody's showing 100% mastery of that, but now I've got another group that's in CVCE words, and I've got another group that's in vowel teams, and I've got another group that's doing r-controlled, now we're continuing to spread that gap. We're making that gap even bigger, I guess is what I would see.

Maybe I'm not explaining it in the best way. I guess what I've seen by starting everybody at that same place, using your data, has allowed for us to close gaps a lot quicker.

Anna Geiger: Okay, help me with that part. If you're using data, aren't you seeing that these kids are behind, so therefore we need to give them a different kind of instruction instead of the on-level? How does the data inform the whole group?

Casey Jergens: I'll go into a couple of examples if that's okay.

Anna Geiger: Sure.

Casey Jergens: I was thinking back and looking at some data from the past, and a good example of this is probably seven or eight years ago when we were first shifting this focus. We had been balanced literacy before.

We came in, we did our universal screener, and only about 25% of our kids were meeting that benchmark at the beginning of the year. We gave the diagnostic. This is the beginning of first grade, and many, many of our students were lacking letter sounds and couldn't blend or encode CVC words.

So we made a decision as a grade level team. We sat down and said, "Okay. What are we going to do about this before we dive in to where we were supposed to start?"

Even though we had some kids that were ready, we spent the first six weeks and we did a letter sound of the day. It's actually a model that I use in my kindergarten classroom now. But in first grade we started and we did a letter sound of the day, and we went through and reviewed. By the fourth day we were blending and encoding CVC words.

By building on that, by the end of that six weeks, 80% of the kids had letter sounds. They were blending and encoding CVC words and we were ready to move on. There was maybe still a little group that hadn't completely mastered that yet, but we moved into that next phase and they still got that additional small group where we were continuing to fill in those gaps.

Anna Geiger: Thanks for explaining that. Basically from what you were saying, you saw that most of the kids were well below, so you did a whole group, basically, a whole class intervention.

Casey Jergens: Right, because what we didn't want to do is we weren't going to take 75% of the kids and do a Tier 2 piece.

Anna Geiger: Sure.

Casey Jergens: Thinking about what you're saying, another option we could have done is grouped it out. We were being told at the time, you're going to figure out how to do this whole group model that everybody's going to do.

We still, by the end of the year, made it to our end of the year expectations. I had in my notes that the class moved from 25% to 75%, which 75% is maybe still a little bit lower than what we'd like to see, but this is also year one of the shift. That's pretty good.

Fast-forward about five years, my first grade class came in and about 60% were meeting that benchmark. Now we're not going to go back whole class necessarily, so then we're using that diagnostic and of the eight that didn't meet, about four were just

under.

We consider those kind of the bubble kids. They're not going to need a ton to get them where they need to be. A lot of what we were doing whole group really fit their need. Typically, first grade maybe reviews CVC words, or they start getting into digraphs with CVC words, maybe starting to get into some of those consonant blends. If you've got your letter sounds, a lot of those things are really applicable to you. You can do that.

Then I had a group that I really did need to see every single day. We had to go back and backfill in those pieces. What I saw was what I was doing with them in small group, they could still apply that to what we were doing in whole group. By the time we got to December when we were doing magic E or CVCE, they had caught up enough to where that was attainable to them.

Anna Geiger: First of all, going back to what you said before, I definitely agree that if the group is very similar, like you said most of your class was at a very low level, then it makes perfect sense to do the whole group instruction.

Interestingly, I've been reading some work by Carol Connor. She did a lot of work on differentiation and notes interesting things that she found. By differentiating in small groups, both in comprehension and foundational skills, she found that it was much more effective to teach skills in small group in terms of outcomes. A lot of that makes sense, like just the idea of having a small group because you have kids close together and you can give better feedback and everything.

But I also know that a teacher has so many things to manage. If teaching in a small group is helpful, that's great, but we don't necessarily want to do small groups for the sake of small groups because that's just not practical, and because the kids that aren't in small group aren't getting the teacher's attention, or at least not a lot of it.

I know when we talked before we did this, you'd mentioned your concern that the lowest level kids in small groups just tend to stay there. I think back to the balanced literacy model, which I did also at one time, and that was true because I certainly wasn't doing any MTSS or anything. They just stayed there. There was no extra double dose of instruction to catch them up or to get them closer, so that is definitely a problem.

If teachers are grouping by instructional need, and you've got kids that are quite behind maybe in the scope and sequence, and then you're not doing anything extra beyond

that, that is definitely a problem.

Tell me more about why you think that's so important that everybody gets the grade level skill, even if they're not necessarily there.

Casey Jergens: Well I think you touched on it, and I'll add in, I agree with you. We don't want to do the groups for the sake of doing groups, so then what does that look like?

One of the things I think about is what are the other kids doing? We have to have that discussion when we're doing this. We know a lot of the research, like you mentioned, says, yeah, a small group focused on a specific targeted area, it leads to these great outcomes for kids and it's wonderful. But in a classroom of 26 kindergartners and I'm seeing four kids over here, what are those other 22 being asked to do that's effective and not a time waster?

I think when we look at some different models of what different curricula put into place, that's where I struggle with the mindset of, "We're going to see three groups a day because that's what this curriculum says I should do, so I'm going to make these groups." Well then how much time are kids spending maybe practicing skills away from the teacher? Is that helping those students that are behind?

Whereas in this model, they're getting all of that instruction. Yes, maybe a little bit of it is a little bit out of their reach. I think it's important to remember that I'm talking from a kindergarten and first grade perspective. This might look completely different if I was a third grade teacher because now I've got larger gaps to fill in.

I think some of that is it's a little bit expensive in terms of planning, time, resources, thinking about what the other kids are doing, and also thinking about how it may be just a little bit inefficient. If I've got this one hour or two hours of my day, what's the best way I want to spend that time? Assuming it's just me by myself, how am I using myself during that hour of time? That's one of the things why I think this is a better way to do it.

I think I also will just add in that my outcomes at two different schools and two different grade levels have spoken for themselves because I was definitely that person. Like I said, seven or eight years ago, we were doing not only the guided reading groups, but there was a time where we did do the skills groups and I was the person really arguing for that. I think what shifted my mindset was seeing how impactful this actually was

switching it to the other way.

Anna Geiger: Tell me about your outcomes. What specifically did you see?

Casey Jergens: Well, in multiple years of teaching first grade, the last few years, we're looking at 90 to 95% of kids leaving at grade level. That year that I talked about where we came in and I had the two groups that I saw and they moved up, that year 95% left at grade level and the one student that didn't was right under there. Not only that, we were looking at 90% to 100% of kids making aggressive growth.

A valid argument for not doing it the way I do is you were talking about those kids reading at the fourth grade level. Well, that was always a huge concern of mine, and it made me nervous because I'm like, well, I'm not seeing them in a small group, am I meeting their needs? When I saw that those kids were still making aggressive growth from the whole group instruction, I was going, oh, they are. This is meeting a need. They are still making that growth.

Looking at my kindergarten class from last year, by the middle of the year last year, 100% of the students were on grade level...

Anna Geiger: Congratulations.

Casey Jergens: ...on the universal screener. Not only that, I actually pulled it up here, I think all but one student made aggressive growth in that time span. We look at typical growth, and aggressive growth is more than what you'd expect in that time span.

We haven't done our midyear screening yet this year, but if I'm looking at my progress monitoring data, every student is on track, and this year I started at a much lower spot than I did last year. We've been able to continue to close those gaps.

If I look at things like letter sounds, this year 16 out of my 24 students came in with 0-3 letter sounds, so we started in with our letter sound of the day. We were following some of the most recent best practices using letters and things like that that they talk about. Now 24 out of 24 students, 65 days later, are all showing mastery of at least 85% of their sounds. There are some who are still mixing up B and D or something like that.

It almost surprises me. I was a little nervous. I was like, is this going to work this year? It really has shown that it has.

Another thing I'll say on that is I think about some of the kids I have in my class this year that came in at high risk, or I've got two students in my class that are newcomers to the country. They're not only getting this, but they're also developing their language skills. I'm looking at where I would've potentially placed them in a small group at the beginning of the year, and I'm going, would they have been making this much growth if I had only been seeing them in maybe that 15 or 20 minute group versus them getting this hour of instruction? Some of them, they're now reading the decodable passages that we're doing. They're flying through our dictation and things like that. That's really what has sold me on this model of instruction.

Anna Geiger: I think it's important to think about what it looks like for a single teacher versus a group of teachers working together because I agree that if you're doing this on your own, which is what many teachers find themselves doing, it is really hard to meet with your students enough if you're doing small groups.

I know the ideal situation is to work across the grade level, group across the grade level, if you choose to start that way with the small groups, if needed based on data, so that the kids actually get every day 20 to 30 minutes of targeted small group instruction. I know that some schools make that work, but I also know that if you're just getting started or other people aren't on board with that, that could be difficult.

There was another thing in Carol Connor's work, I don't have a study to share on this, but she was talking in a presentation and she said that when they compared kids who had the whole group lesson versus the differentiation... It was a high poverty school, and what they found was the kids that were higher to start didn't really grow that year. They just stagnated. You said your experience was different.

Maybe we can just close out with how you make your whole group lessons effective for everyone, because there's a lot of skill involved in doing that. If someone hears this and says that's what I want to do, I just want to do the whole group and then differentiate as needed, but their whole group instruction is not impactful, then they're not going to see the good outcomes. Talk to us about how you do that.

Casey Jergens: I agree that that's probably the most common question that I get is people are saying... I'll just back up a second before I go into it. I see a lot of people... I'm sure you're familiar with UFLI, it's kind of taken off, which is that model of whole group followed by this is what kids need to go in. I do see a lot of people going, "Well, I

taught the lesson exactly hoe the book said, and then these kids aren't growing."

That's where that teacher training comes into play too. I've had a lot of that, so I can really decipher and discern what we need to be doing.

I think for some of the higher students, I think some things in the lesson are moving along that scope and sequence pretty quickly. At this time in my kindergarten classroom, we've gone through our letter sounds, we're going back through, we're almost through our second round of letter sounds, but on the second round of letter sounds, we're really focusing on the encoding and decoding piece. Most students now are showing mastery of CVC words, so now we're starting to get into words with four phonemes in them. Well, I'm noticing that the kids that are really globbing onto that are some of those higher learners. I've even started here and there putting in a word like sunset and showing some of them.

Even little things like that to show some of your higher learners how those words work, or sometimes more advanced spelling rules where I might tell everybody about it, and it might be over the heads of some kids, but those kids are globbing on to it like, "I understand this word starts with a C because the vowel is an A." For many kindergartners right now, that's not a typical thing I would expect them to have mastered.

One thing I do do to whole group differentiate is everybody has in their book box what we call a fluency sheet. I did the same thing in first grade, and we spend a few minutes each day going into it. It's also something they can do if they finish work early.

Everybody does have something a little bit different tailored to their needs. The majority of kids have CVC words or CVC sentences. Some kids have additional sentences, or they've moved on to words with consonant blends in them, or words that have maybe even a two-syllable compound word. As the year goes on I might even take first grade fluency passages and put those into some of the kids' fluency folder. When they get that out, they're practicing something that's attainable to them, but yet pushing them forward in that sense.

Another great way to do that is in my students' book boxes, they have their books that they find in the classroom library, but then they have a specific folder that I have them put their decodable books in, and so that if we need to, we can pull that out. That's another great way is in my decodable library of books, I can find books that might be a little bit more advanced and we can put that in students' folders. That might sound complicated, but it's really not. It's much more flexible, but it is helping meet the needs of some of those students who are ready to move beyond that.

Those are just a few maybe more simple things that I can think of.

Anna Geiger: One more thing, when you have the whole group lesson, how long does that take?

Casey Jergens: So the whole group lesson right now is anywhere from 30-45 minutes, but I want to make sure it's clear that that's not me standing in front of kids in seats for 45 minutes. We're doing a different task every five minutes during that time, and we're moving pretty quickly. Our routines are down and it's all flowing together very nicely.

Anna Geiger: Then you do differentiation after that, which you don't count as Tier 2, correct?

Casey Jergens: During that time, I would say I don't consider that a Tier 2.That might look like... For example, today I actually flipped it because schools have weird schedules, as people know. We actually did our 10-15 minutes time at the beginning of our block, and students were practicing their decodables around the room. I pulled over three kids to the table and we worked on some additional decoding together in that group while the rest of the kids were practicing their decodable texts independently or other skill practice that they have in their boxes. That was more just based off of a need that I saw.

Then yesterday, students at the end of the block of time were playing the roll and read games that we see, and they were practicing that. I actually, instead of taking a group to the table, decided to target specific students and I just monitored them while they were playing the game and provided feedback, "Oh, let's go back and read that one again." I had them situated at a table near each other, so they weren't being singled out by any means, but I could really monitor that and make sure I'm monitoring the rest of the class too.

In the additional 20 minutes a day of Tier 2 time, if needed, I can see a more systematic, structured group of kids. I'm fortunate to work at a school where we have a large, wonderful intervention staff that can help see some of those students. Right now I have three students that go out to that, and then the rest of the students are not receiving any Tier 1 during that time.

Right now I'm not actually seeing a group just because I don't currently have a specific need at this current time. We're doing some testing, I'm doing some one-on-one work with specific kids, and that kind of thing. Maybe after our midyear testing there might be a small group that falls out based on after we do that universal screener again.

Anna Geiger: So far, I have not learned of any specific study that has tested these two things we're talking about, as in comparing quality whole group instruction with differentiation built in, and then a little differentiation afterwards, versus differentiating from the beginning and then adding on Tier 2. So I think data is really what we're looking at, and if what you're doing is getting your kids where you want them to go and you're seeing growth across the board, that's wonderful.

I think probably people will want to reach out to you and learn more maybe if they have questions or this is something they want to do, or if they're trying to make the most of the time that they have, so can we share your Twitter in the show notes?

Casey Jergens: Yes, of course. Yep.

Anna Geiger: Is there any other way that people can get in touch with you, or is that the best way?

Casey Jergens: That's probably the best way.

Anna Geiger: Okay. All right, well thank you so much for taking time to talk to me and explain how you make things work in your classroom.

Casey Jergens: Thank you.

Anna Geiger: You can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode158. 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.