Triple R Teaching

Hello, it's Anna Geiger from Reach All Readers, and today I spoke with Dr. Devin ia. He designs and tests reading interventions and works with teachers and schools to implement them. He's also written a number of articles about helping students learn to read longer words, and that's what we're focusing on today. We discuss syllable types and syllable division, and what might be the best way to help students learn to read those longer words. Here we go!

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Dr. Kearns!

Devin Kearns: Thank you! Glad to be here.

Anna Geiger: We're going to talk today about polysyllabic word reading, which is something you're known for. You've written quite a few articles about it that people often refer to when trying to figure out what's the best approach for teaching kids to read those longer words.

Before we get into that, could you talk a little bit about how you got into education and what you're doing now?

Devin Kearns: Yeah, sure. My journey to education started with my youngest sister who had a hard time learning to read when she was little. When she was six and I was thirteen, sometimes I would do the twenty minutes of reading homework, and she really hated it for obvious reasons. It was hard for her to do.

Later, it became clear that one of the reasons she didn't know how to read well was because she'd been given inadequate, insufficient reading instruction. I didn't know that at the time, but her difficulty was part of what inspired me to become an educator.

I taught then, much later of course, in the Los Angeles Area Public Schools, and I was

inspired through that because the schools that I worked in were low income schools. There was a lot of educational need, and I felt compelled to really help with that, it had a service orientation.

I taught in the schools for seven years, and my first couple of years I had a really hard time teaching kids to read. Again, part of the reason was that I hadn't been given good advice about how to teach reading, and so my students didn't learn to read very well.

That was why I then actually took a part-time job in my spare time. I worked three days a week in the evenings and on weekends with kids with reading disabilities. I learned how to use scientific principles of reading, the programs that had an evidence base, and I realized that the problem had not just been that I was a new teacher when my kids couldn't learn to read, but that I hadn't been given good advice.

After that, the outcomes for my students were much better, basically because I knew what to do, because I had been given the right instruction.

Those were the reasons then that I decided to become a higher educator. I wanted to help other teachers avoid the mistakes that I made, and I decided that the best way to do that would be to be a teacher educator. That's how I ended up where I am.

Along the way, I also started asking a lot of questions about the kinds of things that I did, that even though there were certain programs I used that had a strong evidence base, I sometimes wondered about certain parts of them and whether or not those pieces were effective. I wondered what things we were doing that might be optimally effective and what things could be even better, because as well as we're doing helping kids learn to read, there's always room for improvement, and there are a lot of kids who aren't getting better at reading fast enough.

I've always been interested to think about how can we do more for kids more easily and make this process better, so that's how I ended up where I am today.

Anna Geiger: If we go back a little bit, and you talked about how at first you didn't know how to teach reading and then your reading teaching improved, could you compare those two approaches? What were you doing before you really learned, and then how did that change?

Devin Kearns: I did a lot of exploration activities. We would do things with word sorts. I would have a baggie of slips of paper, or whatever, and the kids would sort them into categories. Then I would ask them to infer what the category was, which took a lot of language, a lot of them explaining, trying to tell me what the pattern was and them trying to infer that pattern, and it didn't work very well.

It also wasted a lot of time because, first of all, it wasted a lot of my time cutting those things up, and then when I didn't cut them up, the kids had to do it. Then we even had little books the kids would paste them in. I can't even believe the amount of paper that we wasted having kids cut these things up and put them in books. I feel like I kept the Elmer's glue company in business with all the glue that was wasted doing this. Basically it was really inefficient; the kids didn't learn enough, quickly enough.

I did a lot of let's just read books, and I would ask the kids to figure out the word for themselves, and I would pause for a long time and let them think about it and encourage them. I would try to come up with books I thought were high interest and things like that, all of which seemed like a good idea because I'd been told that those are the kind of things you do. You focus on motivation, you focus on getting kids to think about the words and use various strategies.

What was not clear to me is that what you need to do is help kids focus on the letters in the words when they're trying to figure them out. The letters have the answers, and that's what I hadn't been told.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, that's very similar to my experience. I definitely did a LOT of word sorting, and again, it was like I was afraid to tell them what it was, that I couldn't just directly tell them. They had to figure it out. That was the whole point. Yes, we pasted them in notebooks as well!

Devin Kearns: It's amazing, what a cultural phenomenon. We didn't teach probably in any of the same places, and yet we did the exact same thing. Isn't that wild?

Anna Geiger: Oh yeah, we must be about the same age.

You say "polysyllabic" instead of "multisyllabic," and so I used that in my questions that I prepared, but can you explain why? Is there a reason why you choose that word?

Devin Kearns: Yeah, I went back and forth on this a lot when I wrote my first big academic paper about long words. I had been doing a lot of academic reading about this, and if you look at the academic literature, it's split down the middle, polysyllabic versus multisyllabic.

The reason that I went with polysyllabic was that the paper I wrote that was my first big academic paper in a fancy journal was on polymorphic words that were also polysyllabic. I was trying to figure out which word was I going to use, and I was like, "If I'm using poly for morphemes, why am I not using poly for syllables?" They're also both of Greek origin and poly is more frequently used with words of Greek origin.

So I thought from there, "I'm just going to go with poly, because it seems more consistent, and about half the people do it," and so that's why I went with that.

I know it was a weird decision because it did sort of put me in the space of being the ONE who says that. You can always tell I wrote it if it says polysyllabic, although some people have started to say it now.

I don't really care, and sometimes I just say "really long words," just because it's easier and no one has to take a stand on which one is right. But I don't really care. It seemed internally consistent at the time.

Anna Geiger: Gotcha, gotcha.

You're often quoted when people are debating what we should do with syllable types or syllable division, and you probably know that.

Devin Kearns: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: Can you tell us, in your view, what syllable information is important for students to know?

Devin Kearns: Yeah, so first of all, kids have to know that words have syllables.

They need to know that syllables are anchored by a vowel, and in the case of reading a vowel, a letter. It's the idea that every syllable has at least one vowel.

Rollanda O'Connor, who's a researcher who studies reading and has done a lot of really successful interventional work in phonics, has turned that term into ESHALOV - Every Syllable Has At Least One Vowel. You just need to know the idea that every syllable has a vowel, or multiple vowel letters. One of the things kids need to know is that if they're going to break a word into parts, every part, every syllable, has to have a vowel, so that's the first thing.

The second thing they need to know is how to determine the pronunciation of single-letter vowels. When you have A, E, I, O, U, or Y by itself, without another letter next to it, it's not in a vowel team, it doesn't have an R after it, then it's hard to know what to say because there are really three options. There's the long sound, the short sound, and then the reduced vowel, the schwa sound. It's not easy to figure out which it is, and you need to know that there are three options.

You definitely need to know the long and the short. I don't know of any program that has conclusively shown that kids need to know the schwa sound per se, I'm not sure about that. What I do know is that if kids don't have a strategy for long and short, it's really hard to read words. Researchers who have studied reading interventions that have polysyllabic word strategies involved, long and short, have been successful.

What I add to that, kind of along the lines of syllable types, is the idea that if a vowel comes at the end of a word, it says the long sound, and if a vowel is in the middle of a word, or the middle of a syllable, it says the short sound. That is the same idea as open and closed syllables.

I've sort of concluded that we don't need to use the term open and closed, because it's extra information that kids don't need. But they do need to know that there's a reason that a vowel letter might be long or short, and so they can look at those, and they can determine which one it might be.

Then they do need to know that at the end of a word, if you have a final L-E, it says the /l/ sound. What people call the stable final syllable, or consonant-le, that's a very consistent pattern in English, that the L-E says /l/ at the end of a word, so that's helpful for them to know too.

Those are things they definitely need to know about syllables.

Anna Geiger: One thing I've heard you say before in presentations is that the one thing you want people to walk away with is NOT to use the open/shut syllable house with the doors. Can you explain that a little bit about what your issue is with that?

Devin Kearns: Yeah, so the syllable house is a technique for helping kids remember the terminology of open and closed and the sounds that go with open and closed.

For the uninitiated, the syllable house idea is that when the door to the syllable house is closed, the vowel is closed in and has to say the short sound. When the house is open, when the door is open, the vowel's at the end of the syllable and can say its name, can go outside and say its name. I guess it's free to shout its name kind of thing, and so it says the long sound. That's the strategy.

The reason that I don't think that's a good idea is that it's a form of meta knowledge. I was describing this yesterday in a presentation, it's like double meta knowledge. Meta knowledge is knowledge about knowledge.

What would be really important to know about long words and about single letter vowels is that there's a predictable way to determine the pronunciation of the vowel. The idea of open and closed is that you can determine the pronunciation is short when the vowel is in the middle or at the beginning, and it's long when it's at the end. That's been given the term open and closed, but the terms open and closed aren't really necessary.

It has a linguistic base. There is a reason that we use these terms like open syllables, they're called tense syllables. When the vowel's at the end, it's a tense sound, and it's related to linguistics. When it's in the middle, it's a lax sound. Open and closed are terms in linquistics that people use in association with the tense and lax distinction, but it isn't necessary for children to know that.

I cannot think of a reason kids would need to actually know that they're called open and closed syllables, except that you're trying to give them a way to remember that the vowel has the long sound or the short sound. That's the idea.

So the question is, why do they need to know the term open, to know it's long, and

closed, to know it's short? That's meta knowledge, that's extra stuff to know about the pattern that isn't actually necessary. So that's one thing.

In my judgment, it's adequate to say it's a long vowel syllable or a short vowel syllable. It has a long sound, it has a short sound, it doesn't need another name.

Now, as an aside, I'll say vowel team syllables or whatever, those are often also long vowel syllables, so you'd have to come up with the idea that if it's a singular vowel, it's a long vowel syllable and so on.

I say that only because I know skeptics will tell you that I'm wrong, because I don't know about this... I know a lot about syllables and sometimes I have to say these things so people know I actually do know what I'm talking about.

That's one level of meta knowledge, knowing open and closed.

Then there's a second level of meta knowledge, the house itself. The house itself is an extra form of knowledge, which is saying you have to understand this idea of this house. The idea of understanding the house is to help you understand the terminology open and closed, which then allows you remember the pronunciation of the vowel. It's like two layers of extra stuff that I think isn't necessary.

I will be clear, it's well intentioned; I don't think people are doing it just to make kids' lives difficult. That's not what they're doing. People think they need to know this stuff, that they need to know this in order to help them understand open and closed, and open and closed are really important for understanding how to read long words.

To one extent, I agree, but it just takes it so far to a point that's not necessary.

Anna Geiger: What would you say about the other syllable types? Are you in favor of teachers teaching, for example, long vowel patterns, and then having them read lists of words with those long vowel patterns? You would maybe say that you don't need to teach them that these are vowel team syllables, just teach them to read words with those patterns. Would you agree with that?

Devin Kearns: Yep, that's exactly what I'd say.

Anna Geiger: I know some people would say that there is no such thing as syllable types. Lyn Stone calls them zombies; she says there really aren't syllable types. But then many, many people also will say there are, so I am confused by that a little bit.

Do you think that they exist? Is it useful for teachers to know the syllable types?

Devin Kearns: I think it's useful for teachers to know that that's a concept that exists, but here's an example of how the idea of a syllable type is a problem...

One question is how many syllable types are there? People argue whether there are six of them or seven of them. There's the digraph syllable, which covers vowel teams, and then you have the diphthong syllable, which covers /ou/ and /oi/. However, some people who tell you that don't acknowledge also that every long vowel is also a diphthong, /ā/ /ē/ /ī/ /ō/ /ū/. They're diphthongs too. The /ē/ is really the only one that's not so much of a diphthong, but the rest of them are diphthongs. So if that's the case, then why aren't we calling them diphthong syllables also?

We have this other category placement, which is a digraph category, which also doesn't really work, because then we have things like I-G-H, and unless you're going to say the G-H is silent, and the I is an I by itself, which I wouldn't, I just put them all together and say it's one pattern, well, that's not a digraph anymore. That's a trigraph. So are we going to call that a trigraph syllable? I think the problem is that you end up with these increasingly complex divisions and so on.

English is what they call a quasi regular language. There are lots of things in the phonics system in English that work well. Really, the consonants are easy to figure out most of the time. They're pretty predictable, not all of the time, but often the consonants are predictable. Vowels are less so, and that's what makes it more quasi regular.

In English, everything is going to resist saying that it is always this sound; it is always this way. That's true of language in general, but it's particularly true of English. For Finnish and Bosnian and other languages, they are really transparent. In Finnish, when the vowel is longer, they put two of it.

Anna Geiger: Oh, nice.

Devin Kearns: For example in the word aakkoset, it says /ŏ/ at the beginning, and there are two A's to show it's not akkoset, it's aaaaaaakkoset.

But in English we don't do that all the time, and a lot of it is just historical. So I think it's helpful to understand the idea, but it's helpful to have a nuanced understanding too which is that, "Well, yes, those are diphthongs, but these other things are diphthongs too." I think, generally, my feeling is that it's helpful.

I think it's even helpful for teachers to understand syllable division, even though I don't recommend teaching it, because it's in the ether and there is some consistency to it in certain circumstances, so I don't think it's a bad thing to learn about.

Anna Geiger: Let's talk about that then. In Orton-Gillingham type programs, there is very specific syllable division. Anyone listening that's familiar with those programs knows how those work.

When I first started teaching first grade years ago I was definitely a balanced literacy teacher, and the program I was given to teach was Saxon Phonics, and I didn't like it. Now, I didn't have any belief in explicit systematic phonics instruction, so I'm sure that definitely got in the way, but I was also overwhelmed at the time by the very, very exact syllable division strategy. I thought, "Is this really worth our time? This is so many steps."

I wouldn't say it was as extreme in my Orton-Gillingham training, but there was a lot, and it took 15 minutes of our lesson for just a few words. "Let's look. Let's label all the vowels. Let's look where to divide them. Let's label the syllable types. Now let's sound it out. Now, of course, we have to adjust it for the schwa."

Like you said, they are extreme, and it is good for teachers to understand how words are split up, but maybe you can talk about... I know you've talked about percentages and how these aren't always very reliable. Maybe you can speak to that.

Devin Kearns: Yeah, so in terms of those division patterns, there are two kind of primary ones. The first one is the VC/CV, and the vowel is divided between the consonants, and the first syllable is closed and the vowel is short, so it's a short sound.

That's pretty reliable actually. In the study that I did of this, it was 79% of the time that you divided a word with that pattern and it worked. 79% of words all followed the rules. 15% of the time it didn't because of the schwa sound, so it didn't truly violate the rule. Then for some other ones, it was something like the A says /ŏ/, rather than saying /ā/ or /ă/. So for the most part, the VC/CV one works the way it should; it says the short sound.

The second major one, the V/CV one, is not very reliable, particularly for the letters A and E. If you're trying to guess the pronunciation of a vowel letter, you're trying to figure it out, and you do the V/CV, that does work more than half the time for A, I, O and U. It does work more than half the time in two-syllable words. It works less than half the time with the letter E, and that is when you get rid of the schwa as an option.

When you add in the schwa, NONE of them work more than half the time. That's not true, for the U it actually is pretty reliable, but the rest of the time we don't know which it is, right? And that's with two-syllable words! If you add in words with more than two syllables, it's an even bigger a mess.

Basically, it turns out that for the V/CV, it's really unreliable. It's very hard to tell what the pronunciation is going to be of that vowel before the consonant, so it doesn't make a lot of sense to teach kids these really detailed rules, because they don't work as well as we'd like them to.

Again, I think teachers should understand that there are these ways you can do these kinds of things. I think it's interesting. I know for me, I had never been taught that. I didn't have Saxon Phonics, I didn't have anything like that. We had Literature Works, and as far as I was concerned, it didn't.

I first learned about this when I had Orton-Gillingham type training, and I was mad! I was like, "Why didn't anybody tell me this before?!" But then over time, just like you, I spent so much time doing it, and it was really laborious, and I just thought, "Do we need to be doing this?"

That's why I started to study it further and found that actually maybe not so much.

Anna Geiger: I think that can be a little upsetting when teachers say, "Okay, well, I

finally have this thing that I think works, but half the time, or whatever, it doesn't work, so I have to tell the kids, 'Well, sorry, it doesn't apply here.'"

What hope do kids have? What can they do?

Devin Kearns: Two things about that. One is that, and I'm going to say something that sounds really counterintuitive, it's possible that teaching them something that doesn't work that well is maybe not a bad idea, which sounds funny.

Let me explain it further. Now this is particularly true, I think, for older children or for adults. I have this great quote from a paper in Annals of Dyslexia that involved an adult with dyslexia. The quote basically says that, "Not until I learned syllable division was I able to read." That's basically the message from this adult, really making a strong case that this stuff is essential.

I think the idea is that even though it may not work all the time, it gave this reader, this person, a way to get started. It gave them some confidence that there was something that they could do.

Edward Fry of the famous Fry word list, he talked about some of these patterns that we teach kids as their tools just to get people started. As long as you have some confidence that you can figure it out, then you can start down that road.

There's a reason to do that, and that's why I think teachers see benefits for kids. I think that's why teachers find that some kids like it and some kids respond to it. It does give them confidence, and when you're teaching it, you give them lots of examples that do work, especially to start, and then you give them the ones that are more complicated later, and so they can build some confidence that they can understand the system. Even though it doesn't work perfectly, it kind of gets things going, and so that's one thing.

There's a reason to say that in the end it's not a terrible, terrible idea to do it. It's certainly better than a strategy that doesn't involve looking at the letters at all, which is what the old picture strategies and so on involved.

So I'm not going to say that syllable division has not helped children. I don't think that's true. I think it probably has helped a lot of kids, but I always say this, "Is it possible if

you had done something different, could the kids have done just as well or even better?"

What I recommend is a flexible division strategy that doesn't involve the application of these very strict rules, and it just gets you out of some tricky things.

There are backup syllable division rules for all these things! So for a word like chicken, it's a C-K, so you have to divide it after the digraph. Now we have an extra thing we have to do, and if you don't have that rule, literally kids can divide it after the C-K, if we don't have a rule. Then as long as it looks okay and they say, "Chick," and then, "en," it's fine. But if you don't have that, then there's a long list of things you have to add to it. That's again because English is quasi regular.

Simpler is better. Also, it's faster and it's more likely to be something kids can do when they read.

Anna Geiger: How would you explain a flexible syllable division strategy?

Devin Kearns: Yeah, the first thing I said already is that they need to know... Let's talk about single letter vowels. It's a little bit easier if it's not those. If it has a single letter vowel, the first thing you do no matter what is to... You can mark the vowel, so put a dot under the vowels. You don't need to put a V. I always try to think about what's the simplest way we can do this? Then mentally, once they have learned this, they can do it in their brain. I have them put a dot under the vowels, or sometimes if it's a vowel team, I'll have the kids underline it, or if it's a vowel-R, or something like that.

You mark the vowels, and then you know that you have to have at least one vowel in the syllable, so you divide it so that there's a vowel in each one.

The idea is that you divide it between the syllables, and there isn't a specific rule about how to do that, as long as the parts look okay.

For example, say your word is describe. You can't do D-E-S-C-R, because S-C-R doesn't occur at the end of a syllable, right? But it could be D-E-S and then C-R-I-B-E, des/scribe, even though people would say, "No, no, it's de/scribe." It really doesn't matter because of the schwa anyway, actually. You can break it up in various ways, multiple of which are correct, and then, if the result isn't a word, then you try it the

other way.

Let's take the word major, for example. If you break it up after the J, and it is true that J doesn't occur at the end of syllables, but really, as long as it sort of works, it doesn't really matter. It can be flexible. So if you have the J at the end, now the A is in the middle, and we know that if a vowel is in the middle then it's a short sound. We can call it a short vowel syllable, or we just know that a vowel in the middle is a short sound. That's maj.

If you use a little card to divide it up, or use your finger, then take away the second part and you have or, so we now have maj/or. We blend that together, maj/or, maj/or, right? You have to turn the /or/ into /er/, because that's the flexibility part of this too. That's what phonological awareness is, having the flexibility to turn it into language that actually makes sense.

Then you adjust that and you say, "Okay, well, that didn't work, I need something else." That didn't work, meaning I didn't locate a word in my brain that sounds like that.

So then I switch it. Now I cover up the J, and now it's M-A, ma/jor, ma/jor, ma/jor, ma/jor. Yes, that's a word, and I can keep on going.

That would be the strategy to do something like that, and that does depend on knowing the word, the target, at the end.

If you don't know it, there are two things. One is when you're teaching kids phonics, it's a good idea, for the most part, to teach them words that they are a little bit familiar with.

The second thing is that if they don't know it, and they do it and their answer is wrong, but they don't have to say it to anybody else, like it's a brand new word to them, like a name or something, it doesn't actually matter if they say it wrong in their brain because there's nobody else to say it to anyway. The only problem is it can result in some embarrassment when you say it one way in your brain, and then later you say it out loud and everyone's like, "No, it's not Yosemite National Park, actually it's Yosemite."

Besides those situations, you should always be linking to the lexicon, finding the word in your brain that it's linked to.

That's the strategy, it's much simpler, AND something you can use easily as you're reading.

Anna Geiger: That's a hard thing to accept, I think, that they can't always land on the right word unless they've actually heard it before, but that's true with both ways, that's true with the syllable division, the very picky syllable division, and the more flexible stretegy like you said. That, of course, points to the importance of reading aloud to kids and getting them familiar with as many words as we can.

Do you recommend for a second grade teacher, or maybe a late first grade teacher who's teaching kids to read polysyllabic words, do you recommend making that a specific part of their phonics lesson, for a certain amount of time every day, and you just have a list of words that you practice with?

Devin Kearns: Yeah, it always just depends. I think that kids need strategies for reading long words. The reason that I started studying it was because nobody did it at the time. Yeah, I think that giving kids time on those kind of strategies is a good idea once they've gotten down a lot of the fundamental concepts about monosyllabic words.

You can have kids practice with polysyllabic words, even if you aren't teaching strategies for reading them. I know there are certain Orton-Gillingham based programs that do that, even before they've taught syllable division and all that. They'll teach things as though there are two syllables, like Wisconsin, even without dividing it up, you can see there are three.

Anna Geiger: So starting with those more regular ones.

Devin Kearns: Yeah, exactly.

Anna Geiger: The predictable ones.

Devin Kearns: Yea, the ones where you can look at the parts, or whatever, simply. Building in opportunities to practice reading words like that is a good idea. The more strategy they have to read long words, the better, especially after first grade, because

basically once you hit grade two, almost all of the new words kids learn have more than one syllable. More than half of them that they learn will have more than one syllable.

Anna Geiger: I can't remember, I think it was from Louise Spear-Swerling, where she talked about how when you decide to teach your students some kind of syllable division strategy, like the one you said, even simple with the dots and the lines, that it might be four to six weeks of ten minutes a day or something like that, until they internalize it. That's like what you said, the point is that when they get to longer words, they don't necessarily have to get out their pencil and mark it up, but they've seen that words are predictable, and that there's a pattern in there. It's not just something they have to just guess at.

Devin Kearns: You got it.

Anna Geiger: Maybe we can close out with talking about morphology a little bit. I think you've written about that as well. Does that help kids with learning disabilities learn to read longer words? And if it does, how should that instruction be carried out?

Devin Kearns: Morphology is really valuable for teaching kids with reading difficulties. In one of my first big studies, the one I mentioned before, I decided to compete morphology against letter sounds. I thought really the power is in the instruction of letter sounds, and if you look at the way kids process words, we're going to find that they're tuning into the consistencies of the letter sounds.

My study was to ask, "If kids know all the letter sounds in these words, can they read them, versus if they know all the morphemes in the words, can they read them?" I was convinced it was going to be the letter sounds that mattered, and it wasn't true. It was really the morphemes that made a difference.

If the kids could read the morpheme, they could then read the whole word, which in retrospect is pretty obvious, because morphemes are bigger pieces, they're bigger chunks. That's what makes them powerful is that they give kids a bigger chunk of letters that they can use, so it actually helps break up the word a little bit more easily. You don't have as many little pieces you have to break it into, and you can give students strategies that allow them to do that.

There are so many polysyllabic words are also are polymorphemic that it actually can reduce the size of the reading problem dramatically. If you think about one of those made up long words like antidisestablishmentarianism, it's actually not that hard to

read if you find all the affixes, and most of the parts of the word are affixes. If you can give kids a strategy to do that, it actually reduces the size of the reading problem.

For some kids with really severe reading difficulty, some of the phonological practice that we give them is very hard for them and doesn't seem to get easier very quickly. For those kids, having a strategy that allows them to think in bigger chunks so that they don't have to do as much phonological manipulation, that's a really, really good thing.

Teaching kids affixes is so helpful - to pronounce them and know what they are, but particularly for the purpose of phonics, knowing how to pronounce them and then recognizing them in words, finding them.

Some programs where kids circle them, I think that's a fine idea. Then you can break it apart, and you can get the base or the root word, or the root, whatever terminology you want to use, depending on what it is. Root would be not a word, like aud in audible, or whatever, base word being an actual word. You get down to that base word or that root, and then you can build it back together. So, aud, and then ible, audible, and so on. That would be a strategy that would be really helpful for students to do that.

Some people have done language play things where you can add on and take off different affixes, and that's in some programs too. Those kinds of strategies where you basically can look at affixes, and then sometimes manipulate those, can be really helpful.

Really the key is to help kids identify affixes, and then use those to peel them off. There's a strategy called peeling off where you peel them off of the word, find that base, and then put it back together. It can be really helpful for kids who have phonological processing difficulty.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, I was just going to mention that because I remember reading that, and maybe it was in one of your articles, with the peeling off idea. It also takes that attention away from having to label each section. So for the A-U-D, you wouldn't have to look at that as a diphthong syllable, or whatever you'd call it, it's just the root that you've learned to read, and by that point they should be able to do that.

Is there anything else that you'd like to share before we go? Would you like to talk about Phinder or anything else, or any projects you're working on?

Devin Kearns: Yeah, well, since you mentioned Phinder, I'll talk about it. I created a website a really long time ago now, where people can go to find words for phonics lessons. So if you're trying to remember A-I words, and you cannot think of a single A-I word right now, but you have to teach a lesson on it tomorrow... This is what happened to me because when I taught at a clinic, they were tutoring lessons for kids one on one, and so I was always like, "We're doing A-I tomorrow and I can't think of words."

I made this website to help people do that. It's pretty helpful. Actually, one point of pride is that UFLI, which most people know now, that manual, they actually used Phinder to find a bunch of the words in UFLI.

Anna Geiger: That's great.

Devin Kearns: Yeah, so that's one thing.

The other thing I want to say is, in all the syllable stuff, it's gotten a little heated, but I want to make sure that a few things are clear.

One, we are on the same side. The people who were upset with me about this, we are on the same side. I believe in systematic, explicit phonics instruction to a really great degree. The reason that I am making these points about syllables is not because I want to give anybody a hard time.

I would really like to not have to say anything about Orton-Gillingham programs that is not positive, because it's so much better than the alternative. Data doesn't support every single thing about these programs, but it is absolutely the case that things are evidence-based on the whole, and they are. Several Orton-Gillingham programs have positive effects, that's been shown to be true over multiple studies. Orton-Gillingham as an approach has decent effects overall. They're not dramatic, but I think probably because it's hard to write your own program, which is kind of what you have to do.

In general, those programs are not bad, but they have in them some strategies, and this one is a pretty big piece of it, but it is important to know that it doesn't have a great evidence base.

I didn't decide to do this because I wanted to make it difficult. I just wanted to think

about whether or not this is actually worthwhile.

What I want to put to the folks who sort of disagree about this is that everyone on that "team," so to speak, believes in the science of reading. At least we say we believe in the science of reading. That's the moment we're in, where people say, "I believe in the science of reading," and a lot of those same people are people who teach syllable division.

I also believe in the science of reading, but if we're going to believe in the science, we have to be scientific about it, which is to say that if the science doesn't take us in the direction that we want to go, then we have to challenge our preconceptions and basically say, "Actually you know what? That is not strongly supported by science," so that we're willing to accept new information and challenge our own beliefs.

If we don't do that, then we're going to "lose" in the science of reading debate. For people who are sort of the antagonists in this, it's easy to poke holes in the science of reading if it's evident that science of reading people are not being scientific. That's the danger we face, is that people aren't willing to face their own preconceptions and accept that maybe they're not right. If that doesn't happen, then we're easy targets.

That's why I started doing this was because I don't want to be that person. I don't want to be stuck in a situation where I'm having to say to myself... I'm basically lying to myself in order to support a viewpoint.

I just want to actually make a plea to people who don't agree about this stuff to think about the idea that we need to think scientifically.

I don't think all of the evidence is against syllable division, and again, as I said, these Orton-Gillingham based programs have positive evidence, so I don't want to say that they don't. I just want to challenge people to think about, if you want to win the science of reading war, then talk about science and believe in science.

Anna Geiger: Also teachers don't have to feel like even though they might appreciate a particular program, they don't have to be convinced that every single piece of that program is the best way. There are other things to look into, and not every piece of any program works for every child.

We can start in the same understanding that we need systematic, explicit phonics instruction, but how to carry that out can look different depending on who you're working with.

Well thank you so much! Are there any other future projects you're willing to share?

Devin Kearns: Well, right now I'm doing a lot of work with schools and teachers on data-based decision making, actually, so how to help teachers make really good decisions about what individual kids need. To your last point, not everything works for every kid.

In this project, what we do is we tell teachers, "Start with a program and teach it with fidelity." That means if it's an Orton-Gillingham based program that involves syllable division, do it as designed, because these programs do have evidence.

Then we evaluate the data. Every six weeks we come together after teachers collected weekly progress monitoring data, and we look at student performance.

Then what we do is we make adaptations. We actually change the program, but we're not doing it just because we think it's a good idea. We do it systematically based on data, and it's a big gear shift for teachers to basically say, "Hold off, don't make changes yet, look at the data and look at the data regularly."

We're teaching teachers how to do that, and it's really exciting! It's a lot of fun for me because... We're teaching teachers how to do this at schools, and I just love to go and listen to teachers talk about their kids, and look at the data for the kids, and figure out what can we do to help this kid better. It's really fun to do. It's so much work for people to figure out, but we've created some tools to make it easier for people.

Our project is running right now just in Connecticut. If you have Connecticut colleagues, we're looking for partners for our next year's project. Soon we'll have a website and free available tools to help teachers to be able to do that.

Anna Geiger: Oh, exciting.

Devin Kearns: That's really exciting coming up. Yeah, so it's going beyond just the program itself and into how do we make adaptations, and I really like that work.

Anna Geiger: That's wonderful, and that's what teachers really need help with these days is figuring out what to do with the data, and how to use it to help students.

Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate talking to you!

Devin Kearns: Yeah, it was really fun! Thanks for giving me the opportunity to share these things and asking these really good questions. I hope that people come back and ask you questions and email me questions too, and I want to continue the conversation. We're all hopefully on a similar side, so I want to meet people where they are.

Anna Geiger: Awesome. Thank you.

You can find the show notes for today's episode, including a link to Dr. Kearns' program, Phinder, at reachallreaders.com/episode165. 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.