Triple R Teaching

Hello, this is Anna Geiger from Reach All Readers. In today's episode I interview Alison

"The Phonics Playbook," where she explains how teachers can differentiate phonics instruction no matter their setting.

I know you're going to get a lot out of today's episode. Be sure to check out the show notes where you can see everything that Alison has to offer. Here we go!

Anna Geiger: Welcome Alison!

Alison Ryan: Thanks, Anna. So excited to be here!

Anna Geiger: You have been operating online for quite a while, but I know you also have quite a career in education. Could you take us back to when you started as a teacher and what you're doing now?

Alison Ryan: Yeah, absolutely. I have had many different roles. I started out as a classroom teacher. My experience was in pre-K, kindergarten, first, and second. Then after getting my master's degree, I moved into the role of reading specialist and interventionist, and then eventually helped open a school. I was the Director of Curriculum and Instruction and a literacy coach, so lots of different things. Nowadays I am leading Learning at the Primary Pond and I also do private reading intervention for homeschool kids.

Anna Geiger: You recently wrote a book, which as I record this, is going to be coming out in just a couple of weeks. When this goes live it will be available on Amazon. It's called "The Phonics Playbook."

Tell us about why you wrote this book.

Alison Ryan: Yeah, so I have the opportunity through Learning at the Primary Pond to coach a lot of different teachers and obviously have in-person coached many more teachers. One theme that just keeps popping up is how do I meet the needs of all of my students, and phonics instruction is one area where it is so important to meet the needs of kids.

Do you want me to talk more about that?

Anna Geiger: Yes, definitely.

Alison Ryan: Okay, awesome. Of course I know your podcast, your wonderful podcast, has all kinds of great SOR information, and I'm sure that you've talked about phonics many, many times. We know that phonics is important, but something what's a little bit tricky about phonics instruction is that it unfolds developmentally.

In my book, "The Phonics Playbook," I actually have this image of a staircase, and on that image I'm explaining how kids are ascending up this phonics staircase of different skills and they're all moving through the skills on the scope and sequence more or less in the same order. They're not going to be learning long vowels, imagine that higher up on the staircase, before they learn the short vowels. It's sequential.

But the thing about this is that they're moving up the staircase at different paces. You might have some kids that are on one lower step of the staircase, they're still working on CVC words, but then you have some other kids who are a little bit higher up, they're working on blends, and maybe you have some other children who are working on multi-syllabic words and long vowels.

That I think is one of the biggest challenges of being a classroom teacher in general, but especially when it comes to phonics instruction, because for phonics instruction to be the most effective, we have to target more or less where each child is on that staircase.

It's not that it has to be a 100% perfect all the time. You might have 25 kids in your classroom if you're a classroom teacher and you're not going to be able to teach to exactly where each child is. It's just not practical.

But at the same time, we can't be, for example, expecting kids that are working still on CVC words to absorb information about long vowels. If we're teaching that to them when they still haven't mastered a skill that's lower, so to speak, on the phonics staircase, it's not going to stick.

If this happens over time, what we end up with is kids who are in third grade, fourth grade, and up, and they have these phonics gaps from skills that they never mastered, which then impacts their spelling ability, their ability to read, especially as words get more challenging, like multisyllabic words. We don't want that.

Differentiation we know is a good thing, but especially so with phonics instruction, because it's so fundamental to kids' literacy development. We have to have some level of differentiation.

Anna Geiger: In your book you discuss three different models of differentiation. Can you talk about those?

Alison Ryan: I do, yes. I'll talk later about how you can kind of blend them, but model number one is whole group with built-in differentiation.

Model number two is phonics instruction that takes place pretty much solely in small groups.

The third model is only for kids who read fluently. It is small group reading instruction that also has elements of word study, so multisyllabic word reading, morphology, all those higher skills.

Coming back to the whole group model, it might sound funny that in a book about differentiation, I'm talking about whole group instruction because some people think, well, whole group instruction, that's not differentiated, but it's actually completely possible. It just comes down to intentionally planning the types of tasks that you're having kids do and using the right tools.

For example, if you're thinking about the different types of questions you're asking kids about words. Well, maybe some kids are just ready to tell you what consonant the word starts with, but maybe some other kids are ready to tell you the vowel sound in the

word. You can ask questions at different levels to meet the kids where they're at. Does that make sense?

Anna Geiger: Yes.

Alison Ryan: Then when you're doing things like having kids spell words, you don't necessarily have to choose only words that are appropriate for the average child to spell. You can add a word or two that are a little easier. You can add a word or two that are a little bit harder. That way, even if every word is not appropriate for every child to spell, you're still teaching whole group, but there's a little bit of something for everyone.

You can do that also when you're choosing tools and printables for the kids to use. One resource that I love to use, it's actually part of our phonics program From Sounds to Spelling, are these differentiated word sorts where we give you a core word sort.

For example, just to make this concrete, maybe kids are sorting words with OA and words with OW that are both representing the long O sound. We might have your average kid sort where you have words with OA, OW, maybe there are a few things like inflectional ending S or ING. That sort and those words are appropriate for the majority of your kids.

Then you might have the same sort, still OA and OW, but you have words that are a little bit easier. Maybe there a couple less words, maybe the words don't have any S or ING endings, maybe there are fewer blends. There's just less going on in those words for the kids that are maybe a little bit behind or not as advanced as their peers.

You can also have, and I know this sounds like a lot, but once you get in the routine of this, it's really easy to implement. You can also have a more advanced set of words where maybe it's OA words that are OW words that are two-syllable. There's more going on there. There might be some more advanced sounds that maybe your advanced kids have mastered, but the other kids haven't.

Everybody is doing the same core sort, but the difference is the words that they're sorting and working with.

Anna Geiger: For a teacher who wants to try something like that, what's a way to

figure out and then keep track of which kids are on those different levels? Then also I'm thinking about a whole class and you're distributing materials, how do you make that efficient when I would assume kids are seated all interspersed with each other?

Alison Ryan: Yeah, for sure. There are logistics that go into it.

With your first question, what I like to do is I'll print out different copies of the scope and sequence for different groups. I'm marking on that scope and sequence what skills that particular group has mastered.

Then when it comes to distributing copies, I might preload them into folders or I might have color-coded folders based upon which group they're in and they pull from there.

This also has to come with lots of discussions about how we're not always working on the same skills, and that's okay, that's normal. In "The Phonics Playbook," I talk a little bit more about that and also mention a read aloud that's good to kind of get kids in that mindset.

Anna Geiger: So even though a teacher might be using this model where it's whole group with differentiation, they still have this idea based on a phonics diagnostic assessment of who's at a particular place. It's not just, "I'm teaching everybody the same lesson and I'll just change the types of questions I ask." There's a lot more to it, correct?

Alison Ryan: Yeah, as long as you have the capacity for that, and I'm glad you mentioned the assessment piece. In "The Phonics Playbook," I give you a whole assessment that you can use with your students. Even when you're teaching whole group, we still want to have a really good handle on where different groups of kids are at, because otherwise we can't differentiate.

So yes, we're more or less doing the same thing with all the kids, but we do have to have that really clear picture of where they are.

Anna Geiger: Okay, so what's the second model?

Alison Ryan: The second model is pure small group instruction. Again, later I think I'll talk about how we can blend whole group and small group instruction, but in this model, the purest form is literally all of your phonics instruction happening in small groups.

This is the most differentiated model that I'm offering in the book because you can have different groups that are different points in your scope and sequence. One group is working on blends and short vowels, and another group is working on vowel teams. You are, again, moving up this phonics staircase with all of your kids, but they're just at different stair steps, so to speak, on that staircase. All of your instruction is happening in that small group, and it's based on exactly what those kids need.

Now, of course, there are definitely some drawbacks to this. One thing that can be really challenging is just the time constraints of the school day. Kids in K-2, often even into third grade, do need daily phonics instruction, so you wouldn't want to use this model if you can only see half or three quarters of your kids each day.

Another piece of this is that it is very time-consuming to plan for. You don't want to have five groups. You can maybe have three groups, but even then, you're prepping materials for each group, you're thinking through the skills for each group. It is very differentiated and it can be helpful when you maybe have a multi-grade class or a class with a big range of needs, but it is time-consuming.

Another kind of way to make this easier is just to have two groups. It's not truly small group instruction, but it's at least more differentiated if you happen to have a class with a big range of needs.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, I know that one way that some teachers have made this work, and it requires buy-in from everyone, but they work with other teachers across their grade level. Therefore you're only teaching maybe one or two groups a day, so you're only prepping two lessons because I know what you're saying. It is a lot because phonics has so many moving pieces for the whole phonics lesson, which I know you go through that in your book too. If you can have other people working with you and kind of pool your assessment data and then form your groups that way, kids can walk to a different classroom. But yeah, it does require a lot of coordination and there are a lot of moving parts.

Alison Ryan: It does for sure, for sure. This is not something where if I had a new phonics program that I was being expected to learn or it was my first year teaching, I don't think that I would attempt this. I would do whole group with differentiation, but if you can pull small group off or at least incorporate some small group instruction, it

really can make a big impact for the kids.

Anna Geiger: Some people like to do whole group with... I'm not sure how much differentiation they're putting in there, I'm not sure, but then they do the small groups after, but not every group every day. Can you talk to that a little bit?

Alison Ryan: Yes, we talk about that in the book because there is an option where you can teach your core phonics lesson whole group. You might introduce a skill, maybe do a little bit of practice, but then a lot of the follow-up can happen in small group.

You may need to see your lower groups a little bit more often. You are perhaps reading a decodable text with them, you are having them build words or maybe more words than you did in whole group instruction, and so you can kind of combine that where during the whole group instruction, everybody is at a certain point in the scope and sequence, but then when it comes down into small groups, maybe you're reinforcing, but maybe you're also going back and reviewing a skill. If you're on blends but some kids still aren't totally firm in CVC words, well small group is that time when, yeah, you could reinforce blends, but we want to make sure that they're really firm in CVC words.

If kids are more advanced when they come to you in your small group, it might be blends whole group, but maybe you're even pulling in some blends with vowel teams for those kids or silent E. You can just up the ante a little bit.

Anna Geiger: If teachers would do this model where they do the whole group with some differentiation, and then the small groups, how does it work for them to decide on a daily basis who I'm going to be meeting with and why? Is a lot of it just notes on the fly where I have a clipboard and I'm noticing these kids are struggling, or what's a good path for figuring that out?

Alison Ryan: Yeah, that is hard because on one hand you need to be planned out and intentional, but on the other hand, you also need to be responsive to what is actually happening in the classroom. I don't think there's one correct way to do this, but I'll talk about some different ways that I've done it.

We're talking about combining whole group and small group, and so I of course know, because I'm keeping up with assessment data, I'm doing a weekly dictation, when possible I'm listening to the kids read their blending lines or read word lists. I do have a sense I can kind of anticipate at least a week ahead of time who's going to struggle so I can make at least some tentative plans.

It is hard to make small groups sometimes because you're like, "Well, these kids kind of go together, but not fully," but I do think that it's important to kind of have that planned out based on assessment data where you can say, "These kids go together at least fairly well."

I will plan who I'm going to meet with. My kids that are lower, I will meet with them more often so it will not necessarily be a schedule that's the same every day. We're kind of rotating through the groups.

Then what I like to do is just be really responsive to what's happening. I come in with a plan, but if I see that kids are actually doing well with a skill, then maybe I don't need to meet with them. Or sometimes you think that kids are going to do so well with a skill and then you're like, "Whoa, my advanced group actually is struggling, or just these kids from my advanced group are struggling." I make some adjustments on the fly, and that's usually what works best for me. I start with a plan, but then I'm always kid-watching.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, that's where the art of teaching comes in, and that's something that takes a lot of practice and support to figure out.

Alison Ryan: Yes.

Anna Geiger: If a teacher would say, "Well, of those two models you've shared so far, I think either one of those would work for me based on my setting or my support." How would they decide which one to use?

Alison Ryan: Tthere are a couple of things that I would think about. Two main things are how much time you have, and then the needs of the students.

As far as time goes, ideally you want to have about 30 minutes for phonics instruction in K-2. I know that this doesn't always play out to be that many minutes in a real classroom in a real school, but you want to have that good block for K-2 that they're getting their phonics instruction.

If you have 25-30 minutes but no more, you don't have any extra time where you can be working on phonics for whatever reason, then you really need to do your phonics in a whole group setting. It doesn't mean you can't squeeze a small group in there, but if you have limited time, even fewer minutes than 25 or 30, it pretty much has to happen in whole group for efficiency's sake. So time is one thing I think about.

Then I also always look at the assessment data. If I have kids that are clustered, so to speak, if you can visualize the phonics staircase and the kids, maybe they're not all working on the exact same skill but in the same group of skills, well then I think to myself, I'm not sure that tons of small group is really necessary here because I can target a range of skills in whole group. Yeah, if I can meet with small groups, amazing. That's always a good thing, but I don't have to push myself and feel so concerned about having everybody doing different things in small group when in reality, they can move forward with their phonics learning if I'm teaching whole group.

You want to be thinking about how much time you have and the needs of your students.

Also, speaking on the needs of your students, I've talked to multi-grade teachers, and I did teach multi-grade one year where you have kids that are perhaps just coming off of kindergarten, and then you have second graders that are fluent readers all in the same class. In that case, I do feel like at least having two smaller groups or small groups is really important because otherwise I just don't know how you could feasibly meet all those kiddos' needs.

Anna Geiger: When a teacher is teaching whole group, let's say they've found a way to differentiate within that group. One challenge I feel is still there is feedback, especially when you've got 25 kids and they're all reading the decodable book. I was just in a classroom last week doing that, and I got to listen to maybe one or two kids read and that was it, and then we were done with that part of the lesson.

How can teachers really find out what their kids can do and support them and give that really important feedback with such a large group?

Alison Ryan: Yep, that's the million-dollar question. I guess if we're talking about pure whole group, you kind of have to be really disciplined as far as writing down who you're going to read with each day.

Now, I really have never done pure 100% whole group. I've always incorporated some

level of small group. Even if your school is saying, "Okay, these are supposed to be reading small groups." Decodable texts, that's reading, so you can sit down with them.

If I'm teaching whole group and I really want to focus on a certain group of kids or just be physically near a group of kids while they're reading, I might have the rest of the class be reading the text, and then I'll pull one different group each day to sit down at the table and read. Just that proximity of you being near them, even if you're not able to do an extended full small group lesson, you're still closer to them and you can really focus in on how they're doing.

I talk in the book a lot about what I call the differentiation dilemma, where we as teachers really see kids' needs on a deep level and we care about them and we want to meet their needs, but we want to let go of the idea of perfection because unless you're literally teaching one-on-one, you're never going to have perfect differentiation. You want to differentiate where it matters most; you can't do it all. Think about what is most important for this group of kids? What do they most need support with?

Anna Geiger: Yeah, I like that idea of knowing that during this part of our phonics lesson we're reading our decodable book, and I know that these three or four kids really need support, so during this part of the lesson, they're all going to be at this table, and I might not be there the whole time, but it's a reminder to me that I want to be listening into these kids and a reminder to them that I'm there to support them versus maybe getting a little bit lost as everybody else around them is reading.

I know when I was doing this last week in a classroom, there were some kids who really weren't participating during that time, and I would go up to them. They were not disruptive at all, they were just super, super quiet. You can just kind of hide if you can't read, and it just kind of breaks your heart. You have to find ways to really let those kids know you're there for them and then to help as needed.

Alison Ryan: For sure. Partner reading can help a little bit too if you're able to set that up.

Anna Geiger: Yes, as long as you teach the partner not to read all the words for the kid struggling. That's a training that has to happen.

Alison Ryan: For sure.

Anna Geiger: So you have a third model, which is more for kids who are already reading fluently. Can you talk about that one?

Alison Ryan: Yes. The big caution I have here is that this is not for your first grade, maybe even early second grade readers, because in this model you're doing small group instruction, but a big focus is text reading. You've got fluent readers that are able to decode at grade level, maybe even above, and their phonics knowledge is really solidified.

With these kids, you absolutely can have a whole group lesson where you're working on morphology and multisyllabic words, and I recommend that, but you may also want to have some of that instruction that's really focused on specific needs, and that's where small group can come into play.

It could be that maybe ten minutes of your small group is focused on them reading a text, some kind of text, and maybe five to ten minutes of your small groups, depending upon how much time you have altogether, is focused on that word work, the morphology, linking vocabulary and spelling instruction, decoding instruction, and so you're really doing both.

You could also set it up where sometimes a small group is solely focused on text reading, and sometimes you have a small group that's solely focused on word work morphology.

I personally like to do it that way a little bit better because I feel like it's so easy to get into a text that you're reading with kids and working on comprehension, and then you're like, "Oh, we don't have time for word work," and we don't want that to happen.

For this model, I feel like it is still helpful to have some whole group instruction in this area going on, but you can differentiate by adding a little bit into the small group, which may be focused primarily on text reading, and that's okay.

Anna Geiger: For an example, if you're doing multisyllabic word reading with your class and you've got kids who are managing these four- and five-syllable words, but then you have some kids who really need help with just two-syllable words, then you can break it down even more.

Alison Ryan: Exactly.

Anna Geiger: So if you're doing the whole class instruction, you're still, to some extent, going to be using some kind of small groups to support or remediate or accelerate.

What can the other kids be doing? How can you differentiate the center activities?

Alison Ryan: Yes, so I think one of the other challenges is you've got this differentiated phonics instruction going on, fantastic, but then that has to kind of bleed into the time when kids are working independently, not just when they're with you. Because if they're practicing one skill in phonics and asked to practice a different skill independently, we don't have that connection, we don't have that gradual release where they're getting the reinforcement of what they're working on when they're working with you.

I feel like centers don't have to be fully differentiated all the time, but with phonics I do like to have maybe color-coded folders again, where kids know, "Okay, I'm in the orange group and I'm going to pull from the orange folder." (Red, by the way, does not have to mean that kids are low. You don't have to do it like your typical red, orange, yellow RTI type thing.) That can signal to kids, "I need to get an activity out of this folder." You could do bins with color-coded stickers. I love my color-coding.

I know some teachers like to do this, and I've done this several years, a Must-Do/May-Do list where there are certain tasks that the kids have to do and there are certain tasks that they can choose to do. You can give different little menus to different groups of kids. I don't customize it to where it's like every child has their own unique menu, but maybe a third of the kids have this menu and a third of the kids have this menu.

Then to build onto that too, I would think about seeing how you can use what you're doing in small group or even whole group phonics instruction and have that become a center.

For example, if you're reading blending lines whole group, or even in small group, can the kids reread those blending lines as a center? Can they reread a decodable text? Can they write sentences about a decodable text?

This has so many advantages. Number one, they're building that fluency, they're rereading.

Number two, they know what to do because they've already done this activity with you, so it's not something that you have to reteach.

Number three, it makes differentiation in centers or independent work, however you set that up, it makes it easier on you because you're not having to come up with a full range of new activities. You're building on what you're already doing.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, that makes sense.

I know that people have a lot of questions about how to teach English language learners. What does the science of reading say about teaching English learners? We know that they need the same thing that native English speakers need, but there are some considerations, some ways to give extra support. Can you talk to that a little bit?

Alison Ryan: For sure. Like you said, English language learners need explicit, systematic instruction just like all kids in phonics, but they also need even more of a focus on vocabulary and language structures. Tier 1 words, your everyday words that maybe all of the non-English language learners in your class know, those kids may need more instruction on what those words mean.

What we don't want to happen is for them to become so well-versed in phonics where they can decode and they can spell lots of words, but they don't know what they mean.

We know that vocabulary development is so important for all kids, and vocabulary development also deepens word knowledge so that words stick. There's a better picture of the word in long-term memory. All kids need to know what words mean, but especially for ELLs, you're going to have to spend more time on vocabulary. This is true of phonics, but in all subjects and language.

With phonics in particular for my ELL groups, I find that I need to sometimes work with them on fewer words so we can spend a little more time discussing word meanings. So maybe if all my groups are going to practice spelling 10 words, maybe my ELL group is spelling 7 words, and I use that little extra bit of time to talk more about what some of

those Tier 1 words mean and give examples, showing visuals like pictures. I'm just slowing the pace so that we can do a little bit more language development.

You also want to get them talking so that they're using the words right, and they're not just listening to you.

Then another thing to watch out for, particularly as it pertains to phonics instruction and reading decodables, is word calling. This is just an informal term that means when any child, it could be ELL or otherwise, is decoding the words of a text, but they don't understand what the text means.

We don't want that to happen, but that can very easily happen with English language learners, especially with decodables, because decodables are a wonderful tool for getting kids to learn how to read, but sometimes they have uncommon vocabulary in them that they might not have heard. Even for non-English language learners, they might have language structures that are different from how we speak, like all text.

All kids need support with this stuff, but with ELLs, you may want to take decodable texts a little more slowly. Maybe instead of having them read through the whole text, you have them read half the text and then you stop and you ask them to retell. Obviously this is easiest in a small group setting, and if they can't retell or there are some points of confusion, then we need to go back and break down the meaning before we continue reading the text.

Again, this means that you may go through decodables a little bit more slowly with your English language learners, but that time is really well spent because you are developing their language skills and you're not just accidentally teaching them that reading is about getting through the book and saying the words. We're really making sure that they understand the meaning of what they're reading so that becomes habit and practice for them going forward.

Anna Geiger: Thank you. That's a lot of useful stuff to think about.

I'm going to move past this now. Thank you so much, this has been excellent for explaining the details of differentiating because I think that's where we tend to get stuck with how exactly does this work? I think you've laid that out really well.

I would like to have you talk a little bit about your spelling phonics program. Someone sent me an email actually a week or two after I had scheduled this interview with you, and she said, "I don't know if you take suggestions, but I would like to suggest Alison Ryan for your podcast."

I said, "Oh, I've actually scheduled it!"

She said I could share this, but this is what she wrote about your program. She said, "I was freaking out because I'd never taught kindergarten before. I was in a new school. The school had moved buildings. I couldn't find the literacy curriculum. I knew I had to find a phonics curriculum to teach my five year olds. I don't know what I typed in the search engine, but From Sounds to Spelling came up, and it was a godsend. The science of reading was not on my radar yet, but I was so fortunate to find this full phonics curriculum laid out for me with lesson plans and resources ready to go."

With that, maybe you could talk to us a little bit about your program and how it's being used.

Alison Ryan: Oh my gosh, that's so sweet.

All right, well, she's talking about From Sounds to Spelling, this is a phonics program that we have for kindergarten, first, and second grade. I created this program years before the science of reading got big, and the reason I created it was because A, many teachers, and I think things are getting better, but many teachers at that time just didn't have anything concrete to teach phonics with, which is crazy!

Then the other piece of this is the differentiation. I've been talking a lot in the book and here about how to differentiate instruction, but the reality is that phonics is just one piece of the day. Teachers are so busy and you really need materials that are pretty much ready to use.

With From Sounds to Spelling, I wanted to create materials that had differentiation tools built in, like those word sorts, even decodable texts at a core level, and then a level that's a little bit easier. I wanted teachers to have those tools that they could just print out and use because I know from experience how much there is to do, and I know how important differentiation in phonics instruction is. From Sounds to Spelling just makes that easier.

Anna Geiger: In addition to your phonics program, you also have literacy clubs and other resources. Can you share what else you offer?

Alison Ryan: Yes, so there's a lot going on at Learning at the Primary Pond. We have a YouTube channel, we have a blog, things like that. If you happen to work with struggling readers, I have a newer membership that is called The Reading Intervention Collaborative, and that includes professional development and printables really just focusing in on serving those kids that are behind in reading, which includes phonics and all the other skills. This is for K-5 teachers.

Anna Geiger: Wow.

Alison Ryan: We have reading specialists in there, special education teachers, English language teachers, classroom teachers, all kinds of teachers in there. I'm super happy with how that's going.

Then, of course, we have our literacy clubs. Those only open up twice a year right now, in January and July.

If you want to head to learningattheprimarypond.com, you can check out all that we've got going on over there.

Anna Geiger: Well thank you so much, Alison. I definitely encourage everyone listening to order your book, so they can learn more specifics about differentiation. We really just kind of touched the surface in this podcast, it's quite a comprehensive book.

Thanks so much for coming on today!

Alison Ryan: Of course! Thanks so much for having me.

Anna Geiger: You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode168. You'll find links to Alison's book, her From Sounds

Thanks for listening. 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.