Triple R Teaching

Hello, this is Anna Geiger from Reach All Readers, and in today's episode I'm cher. We're going to talk about the problems with over-testing, particularly over-testing literacy in schools. We're going to talk about what types of assessments there are, what's their purpose, which ones are not very useful, and why it's important to choose just a few assessments for specific purposes, rather than go completely overboard. I hope you'll get a lot out of this episode. Let's get started!

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Sean!

Sean Morrisey: Hi, Anna!

Anna Geiger: I'm so glad you're here. I enjoy seeing all your comments on X, as we call it now, and especially about vocabulary. Then I just got the book "Know Better, Do Better" by David and Meredith Liben, and I see that you have made your way into that book quite a bit. They talk to you a lot about some of the things they were sharing about building knowledge and vocabulary.

I know you know many things as a teacher, but today we're going to narrow in on assessments and the problem with over-testing.

Before we do that though, can you talk to us about your history as an educator and what got you to the classroom?

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, so with my history, my path is a little bit different. I went to graduate school for school psychology, and I became a certified school psychologist. I worked as a school psychologist for about eight years. Probably five years in I realized, "Ooh, I really want to go in the classroom and just teach." I have a lovely wife who took care of the three kids for about a year when I was kind of trying to do both, so I could go back to school. I became a certified teacher and I've been teaching for, I think this is my 17th year as a teacher.

Anna Geiger: Okay, so for people who might wonder, what is the big difference between being a school psychologist and a classroom teacher in terms of responsibilities? A lot, I know.

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, I mean there are kind of silly things, like the silly things I didn't realize when I became a teacher like, oh, your bathroom times, you've got to really space that out!

Anna Geiger: Yeah, no more drinking water!

Sean Morrisey: No. As a school psych, you can plan that easier.

As a school psychologist, a big part of my job was kind of assessing kids for learning disabilities who were kind of brought to child study teams and things like that, even as early as first grade. I think early on I realized, wow, reading is so key with academic success and it's just a major component of schooling. With all that time spent we're just kind of assessing for, "Does this child have a reading disability or not?" And then, "Do they qualify for special education services?" That was hard to do.

In the changeover, I just wanted to get in the classroom and actually teach and just have 20 to 25 kids where I could focus on their instruction. It was hard because you just had a lot of talking with teachers, trying to consult, and I don't think that was my forte. I think my forte is more teaching kids. Yeah, for sure.

Anna Geiger: So you come to this from a different angle than a traditional classroom teacher because assessment was a major part of your study to be a school psychologist. Whereas for teachers, I think it's just kind of shoved in there when there's time.

Maybe we can start by just talking about what's out there in terms of literacy assessments, and then we can start breaking down what's actually useful.

Sean Morrisey: In my district, and in my school, I think of about five different assessments that are out there.

You have curriculum based measures, and I still refer to them as that because of my school psych background, like Acadience or DIBELS or AIMSweb. My district early on uses AIMSweb for kindergarten and first grade.

You have those measures kind of screening for early literacy skills, and as the kids grow up we're talking about oral reading, what is their rate, their accuracy, and even some prosody as well. You have those measures that schools use, and they're pretty widely used now, for sure.

You have other measures that have come from the balanced literacy realm, informal reading inventories like the Benchmark Assessment System. My district still calls it Fountas and Pinnell, or even in my school, up until recently, we used Teachers College running records.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, so with those inventories, it's basically, like your viewers probably know, kids read a leveled text, answer questions, and then depending on how well they do, they're given a letter like A through Z where they fall on that.

Anna Geiger: Is the DRA like that? I haven't used it, but I've heard of it. Is that similar to the Benchmark Assessment System?

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, I think the DRA is. That's not one that I'm super familiar with, but I think they have a similar leveling system as well.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, yeah. So you've got the curriculum based measures like Acadience, you've got running records, and now I think it's gaining market share, I would call it the computer adaptive tests, that's like i-Ready and STAR. My district uses i-Ready kindergarten through I think eighth grade now.

Anna Geiger: Oh, wow.

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, these are tests where it's all on the computer, even for kindergartners, which we'll talk about in a little bit, which yeah, I shake my head at that as well. They're adaptive where based on the previous five answers, they'll change the level of difficulty.

Anna Geiger: So it kind of decides for you where you're going to fall pretty early on if you make some mistakes.

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, pretty early on if you make mistakes, and I think a guess here or there can dramatically change where you're headed.

For i-Ready in fifth grade, kids will spend probably about two sessions an hour each, so two hours taking that test on the computer, and it kind of gives you an overall norm reference score. It'll say like, "Oh, you're at the 50th percentile, so you've done better than 50 out of a 100 kids in fifth grade." They also have kind of a cut point of are you at a fifth grade level?

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Sean Morrisey: That's how they do that. Usually the cut points, from what I've read, are based on your state assessments. It's interesting, the cut point for i-Ready is the 66th percentile, so if you're at the 66th percentile or better, you're on grade level. If you're below that, you're not on grade level-

Anna Geiger: Interesting.

Sean Morrisey: ... which is kind of an interesting point.

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, yeah. We also have the typical state tests that kind of test

general reading comprehension and a little bit of general writing to prompts. They're not really diagnostic in nature, but you get the info of are you proficient as the state says at a fifth grade level?

Anna Geiger: Are those multiple times a year or just the end of the year?

Sean Morrisey: For New York, it's just once a year.

Anna Geiger: Like the outcome assessment?

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, so it's a difference from when we talked about the CBMs, the running records, and the computer adaptive tests, most districts give those three times a year. The state test is once a year, and then you may have multiple ones, depending on the state. Our state has two days for ELA, two days for math, and now fifth grade has one day for science.

That was new for us this year.

For science, it was basically kind of like a warm reading test, so it was a reading test, but based on scientific topics they covered in grades three through five. For fifth grade, it was long. The average student took about two hours and forty minutes to complete it. Think about that.

Anna Geiger: Wow, wow. So maybe before we get into which ones are... Did you list all the ones you wanted to talk about?

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, just one other thing because I think there's a lot of talk about K-2 because we talk about early literacy a lot, but when you get into upper elementary and middle school, districts are doing a lot of standards-based assessments. They'll have those three times a year where basically it's a passage and there might be main idea questions and they try to mirror it like the state assessment because they want to know, "How are the kids going to do on this?" It should be like the state assessment. That's just an additional test that some kids take.

Anna Geiger: So before we talk about the ones that are a problem, why so many tests? Where does that come from?

Sean Morrisey: I am kind of flummoxed. That's the word. I just don't...

I think district administrators think we need all of these tests, we need to test the kids on all these things, and we need to have tests on the computer. We definitely need early literacy CBMs, but I am still kind of baffled as to why we need four or five different tests throughout the year.

One thing that I don't think is talked about enough is time. At the start of the year, do we ever think about how much instructional time we want to set aside for testing?

I've never heard anyone in any district ever say, "Ooh, we're going to only spend 5% of our instructional time testing," because if we really looked at the time, I think teachers see it, but I think administrators, their eyes would be wide open if they saw how much instructional time we're losing.

Yeah, I just don't know where it came from historically. It seems like a lot.

I mean, in some regards, I guess in one case, like, I think i-Ready. Teachers in New York state get rated and we get a HEDI score. Years ago i-Ready put in how you can use i-Ready for the HEDI score, so-

Anna Geiger: What's HEDI score?

Sean Morrisey: I don't know what it stands for, but-

Anna Geiger: How do you spell that?

Sean Morrisey: H-E-D-I. It's basically how effective we are as teachers.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Sean Morrisey: In grades three through five, up until recently, our effectiveness was based on how the kids improved on i-Ready, which that's another whole podcast.

Anna Geiger: Ooh. Yes, it is.

Sean Morrisey: Maybe for administrators, that was was easy. It was like, "Oh, this is easy. We don't have to think about creating anything. It's there." Yeah, yeah.

Anna Geiger: So I guess when we think about the point of the testing, so we know CBMs... I usually just call them universal screeners because I still don't understand the phrase curriculum-based measurement. I don't get that, even though I've read the definition a million times.

Universal screeners we know are to find out who's at risk so we can give the proper instruction, so that's supposed to be very directly connected to instruction.

Then we would say for things like running records and Fountas and Pinnell's Benchmark Assessment System, those are supposed to be connected to instruction too, it's just that they don't do what they say they do.

Sean Morrisey: Right.

Anna Geiger: So they're not... Well now we're getting into something else, but that's what they're supposed to be. I'll wait until we talk about what's problematic, but-

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, yeah.

Anna Geiger: And then what about i-Ready, is that supposed to be a screener?

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, so i-Ready, well, that one's interesting because they call it a

diagnostic assessment, but as we talk about that, it's like they use it as a screener and a diagnostic assessment. I would say it's definitely, for fifth grade, more of a screener and not a diagnostic assessment. And we'll talk about why, yeah.

Anna Geiger: Oh boy. So then the state tests are more like the outcome-based assessment to see if they learned what they were supposed to learn in school. But it seems like we're sometimes doing the same thing twice. Is that what you see happening?

Sean Morrisey: That's perfect. Why have multiple comprehension measures? Basically, your computer adaptive tests like i-Ready are really, for fifth grade, a comprehension assessment. There are basically three domains: comprehending literature, comprehending information, and then they have a vocabulary part. The early phonics and decoding, by fifth grade, those measures are so easy, the kids have basically tested out, so you're not really diagnosing anything there.

So if you have an outcome measure, like a state test, and you can see at the end of third grade how those kids do, then with i-Ready in fourth grade, you're basically testing the same thing.

But then schools say, "Oh, but we can look at the i-Ready scores, and they'll sort of predict what the kids will do on the state test." They do an okay job of predicting, but it's just another measure that's the same. We already know with the state assessment how they're going to do on a measure like that.

Anna Geiger: What's the point of knowing how they're going to do? If it seems like they're not going to do well, then you're supposed to do something about it? Or you're just supposed to know, "Okay, this is how they're going to do." Is it supposed to affect instruction?

Sean Morrisey: Well, I mean, I think in some regards schools will look at how kids will do. But with i-Ready, and I think this is the big issue, it's labeled as a diagnostic assessment, so all the teachers think it's a diagnostic assessment.

It has a vocabulary sub-tests, so it kind of teases out vocabulary a little bit, but you don't know really if a student is scoring far below grade level based on decoding. Maybe they're only reading 50 words a minute. Or is it based on vocabulary or things like that? It's hard to tease out with that.

Anna Geiger: Just as a review for anyone listening, because I wouldn't have known this five years ago, the difference between a universal screener and a diagnostic is a screener tells you who's at risk and the diagnostic is supposed to help you dial in and figure out what exactly the problem is. But not all kids need a diagnostic assessment.

Sean Morrisey: Correct.

Anna Geiger: Teachers are dialing in to figure out what the problem is to know what they need to do to fix it. So yeah, those tests that have these broad things that they're testing aren't useful in that way.

Which ones would you say are just problematic all around?

Sean Morrisey: I think the most problematic are running records, like the Benchmark Assessment System or Teachers College running records. I think they're really problematic because of a few things.

Number one, even if they were really good assessments, it takes so long to administer.

Anna Geiger: It just takes so long, so long. I know.

Sean Morrisey: Coming from the school psych realm, I was always big into data. I'm still very much a data guy.

I actually figured out, I estimated, how much instructional time that takes to complete running records three times a year for a typical fifth grade class, in our district that's like 24. I mean, if you're doing them like you're supposed to, that's like 30 minutes a kid three times a year, so you're talking 36 hours just completing an assessment to get a "level", which really doesn't mean very much at all.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Sean Morrisey: When you talk about instructional time... I kind of break up my day into literacy, and I group science and social into that. Science, social, and ELA to me are all literacy and math is kind of separate. I figured out doing running records takes about 9% of our instructional minutes for the year.

Anna Geiger: Ooh. Well, that's a really good way to look at it. The percentage of your time really makes you think.

Sean Morrisey: 9%.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, and sometimes they can take more than 30 minutes, especially as they get older and they're reading longer texts.

I was a big running records person. I taught teachers how to give running records because I thought that information was valuable. I thought, "Well, this is what I need to know because I need to find their level and move them up, and this is the best way to figure that out."

Also, and this is the thing that people will still say about running records, which I understand, that you get so much out of listening to them read.

I agree that it is very valuable to listen to kids read. The problem of course with running records is you're trying to figure out what queuing system they're using, which is not what we're trying to figure out.

You can listen to them read when you're doing ORF with your universal screener, you get a lot out of that. Then there are places there to make notes about particular reading behaviors that they have. There are ways to listen to them read that actually give you useful information, and we want to listen to them read often anyway.

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, this has been brought up probably in the last month or two by others about if we're moving away from running records, are we listening kids read enough?

I think you could easily... I don't even think you need to administer an oral reading fluency measure. For instance, today, we were reading One Crazy Summer in my class, that's our novel for the next month, and students were chorally reading a few pages. Sometimes I'll sort of be like the leader where I'll lead the choral reading and I'll pace it out. Sometimes I have students do that.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Sean Morrisey: So today one student was being the pacer, and I was just walking around listening during choral reading time, listening to kids read right there.

Or if we're reading, like today, we were reading an article and students were repeatedly reading that article, like alternating paragraphs. Well, I'm walking around and listening to kids read there as well. I think you can easily do that in your school day. Yeah, for sure.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, thanks for pointing that out because many teachers are thinking about how to do reading instruction that's not primarily small group. Guided reading was primarily small group; there wasn't much whole class instruction at all. It's helpful to think about how you can listen to kids read. I know that choral reading is really valuable, and everybody's got to be reading, and you can check and see who needs support too.

What about computer adaptive tests?

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, so I would call computer adaptive tests the "meh." That's kind of how I phrase it. I wouldn't say they're terrible. I think they're better than maybe spending so much time on running records because they don't take nearly as much time.

Anna Geiger: You said i-Ready is one of them. Are there any other ones you can list from here?

Sean Morrisey: I think the big ones are i-Ready and STAR. I think those are used a lot in our country. i-Ready is used in our district at K-8, and it takes, I would say throughout the whole year, probably about six hours. So it doesn't take the 36 hours of running records, but six hours is still six hours.

And what are you gaining from them? What information are you gaining? It's a screener. Is it predicting how well they'll do on a proficiency measure like the state test? Yeah, I think it does an okay job with that. I think the research shows it does a decent job, but how is it helping you with instruction?

For me, it doesn't really help me too much with instruction, and that's why I'm not the biggest fan. When you look at kindergarten and first grade, I don't think there's one teacher out there using computer adaptive tests that say they like it for their kids. I mean, they're kindergarteners. You're spending time trying to teach them how to manipulate the mouse or click on things. I think that's kind of silly.

Anna Geiger: I remember when I was a first grade teacher, I don't know if this was a new thing, but they decided to do the fill in the bubbles for my first grade for the first time. It was maddening, maddening because I think all of it was so overwhelming to them. They were marking things wrong that I knew they knew. I knew they knew the answer, but they were just, I don't know. But I couldn't say anything. It was maddening. I thought, "This is just too much for them." It was just too much. And that wasn't with a computer screen.

Yeah, and the universal screening with the little kids is really fun to do actually. I get to volunteer to do that at my kids' school. It's amazing to me how much you get from a little kid in 10 minutes about seeing what they can do, and what they're struggling with, and comparing them to the people in their group. I can say, "Oh, I can see that a lot of kids are struggling with this," or, "This kid is an outlier," either in the higher or low direction. You can get a lot out of 10 minutes, so it's really great when teachers can do that.

But for teachers to do it, it's got to be quick, right? It's got to be really efficient.

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, and I think some of the issues with the computer adaptive tests too is what they do with the data. You have to be sort of an expert in data analysis to understand where the weaknesses are. Teachers, they don't go through test construction methods class.

There's a term called standard error of measurement, so basically any test that kids take in reading, it's not an exact score. There's a range. On an i-Ready in fifth grade if you score at the 50th percentile, so you're doing better than 50 out of a 100 kids, really the range is you're doing better than 40-60% of the kids.

And that's not 100%. There's only a 68% chance that you're falling between the 40th and 60th percentile. So just based on error, there's a third chance that you're below the 40th percentile or above the 60th percentile. We're not talking about a specific exact reading score. I mean the range is huge.

I even heard a story where students were getting ice cream parties for improving on i-Ready from their start score to their end score. Some kids who are really, really strong readers, they didn't "go up enough" so they didn't get the party, but they were grade levels above in reading.

Anna Geiger: Oh my goodness. Oh, that's very sad.

Sean Morrisey: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: Wow.

Sean Morrisey: You just shake your head on decision making like that when you just know...

Coming into fifth grade when the kids take i-Ready in the fall, I know the four or five kids who are going to make the least amount of growth on i-Ready because they scored a certain score in fourth grade, and on fifth grade they did markedly better. But that was error, that's by chance. You know they're not going to do that well in the future or vice versa.

I'll have kids who scored maybe in the 80th percentile in fourth grade in the fall, winter, and spring. They were consistently above grade level, and then they scored in the 40th percentile in the fall of fifth grade. Well, I know I don't even have to teach them that year and they're going to do better by the end of the year. There's error there. No one ever talks about that kind of stuff.

Anna Geiger: So what would the school leadership say in terms of why you're doing i-Ready?

Sean Morrisey: I think to collect data and to see which kids are struggling, so we could use that data point to put kids into different reading groups and things like that.

My thought to that is I think we could use other measures that do a better job, that will group kids even better than i-Ready.

That's kind of my thing, that it's not the best assessment for that. Even these tests, they'll group the kids based on how they answered the questions, but when veteran teachers look at the groups they are like, "I would never put that student with that student." They have different needs, and i-Ready is not picking that up.

Anna Geiger: So does i-Ready try to do the grouping for you?

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, they'll do the grouping for you. They'll say this is this group. They'll give you some general things like, "Oh, these kids generally need this." And then...

Well, they have their intervention part as well where they say, "Now it's adaptive so wherever they fell on this test, here are computer lessons that the kids could use that are basically tailored to that student."

Anna Geiger: Ooh, I don't like that at all. I think computers can only do so many things and no, I don't like that idea of the computer giving them their intervention either, but that's a whole different story I guess.

Sean Morrisey: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: So we've talked about how it's a problem to do too many because it's a terrible time drain. You said in your district some teachers are spending over 15% of instructional time completing assessments, and that's crazy because teachers are always saying we need more time, right? We always do, every day.

Sean Morrisey: Right, right.

Anna Geiger: And you're saying that more is not better when you have that opportunity cost, especially if teachers don't know what to do with it or it's giving you data or guidance that maybe isn't good.

Sean Morrisey: Right.

Anna Geiger: Anything else that you can share that might be a problem with giving too many?

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, I think just even additional ones. For instance, sometimes districts will try to create standards based assessments where we're like... The state test scores will come back and you get all these kind of piles and piles of data. For instance, "Your kids did bad on this question, it was main idea." Well, when you get down to it...

For instance, one year we realized where it might've been coded as main idea, but the question asked, "What was the benefit?" Well, the kids didn't know what "benefit" meant.

Anna Geiger: Right, right.

Sean Morrisey: It must've been like seven or eight years ago, and that kind of spurred my big learning about vocabulary because I realized, "Oh, I'm assuming that kids in fifth grade know some of these words and they really don't."

It was coded as find the main idea, but it was really that the kids didn't know what benefit meant. So the districts will say, "Oh, we need to teach kids how to find the main idea better. We need to come up with more lessons on all these different passages for main idea," which is just the total opposite of what you really want to do.

I mean, it's hard because even Tim Shanahan has blogged about this. I think he probably has five blogs about these standards based assessments and every one he starts off with, "Dear Administrators, you're not going to like this." That's how he starts it. But still, it feels like many, many districts still want to do this, and it's just not

probably the best practice.

Anna Geiger: Is that similar to, let's say with a universal screener, if someone does poorly on the nonsense word fluency assessment and the teacher says, "Oh, so now we've got to do lots of nonsense word reading as the solution." Is it similar to that where they score badly?

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, that's a great analogy.

Anna Geiger: So you're not getting at the root of the issue. Okay. Yeah. Just because you score badly on a main idea assessment, there are many other things that go into that is what you're saying, like vocabulary and all kinds of things.

We've talked about a lot of problems with assessments, but of course we know assessments are important and useful. If teachers had a choice, what should they do?

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, so I think this is key. I'm a big fan of screeners like Acadience. Early on, in kindergarten and first grade, assessing early literacy skills with phoneme segmentation fluency or even nonsense words is important to see if they're picking up the decoding skill.

Then as you move along, oral reading fluencies are so predictive of how kids are going to comprehend what they read.

I've actually had some data where in my classroom over a span of about four years, kids who are below the 60th percentile on oral reading fluency, like Acadience or AIMSweb, I haven't had one student proficient on the ELA assessment if they're below that. That's a pretty high correlation. So even if you're at the 50th percentile of fluency, I still haven't had one student proficient on the state ELA assessment, and our ELA assessment is pretty hard, so boy is that a big indicator.

I really like oral reading fluency measures. They're brief, they're standardized, all the kids are getting the same one, and you can progress monitor. They're more sensitive to improvement compared to the other measures that we talked about.

But it's hard because with the other measures, they know "progress monitoring" is a key word in academics now, so they'll put in, "Oh, aside from these three benchmarks, you can do progress monitoring." But on computer adaptive tests, I've done progress monitoring to see how close it would be, and the variability was crazy. It wasn't even... It's not like on Acadience where you're reading 100 words today, two weeks from now you might be at 108, then you go down to maybe 105, then up to 116. This is like you were at the 25th percentile, then you're at the 80th percentile, not even in the same geographical area.

Anna Geiger: So they haven't clearly tested these to make sure...

Just for teachers to know, because again, this is not something I would've understood five years ago, but the point of the screener is to figure out who's at risk and then you can dig deeper. So if someone is, like you said, below 60% on ORF, well then we have to figure out why. Is it a word reading problem? Is it a comprehension problem? If it's an accuracy issue, it's probably a word reading problem.

Now we give them the diagnostic phonics assessment so we know what to teach. Then that progress monitoring that we do every week or every two weeks, which is very, very fast, like a minute or two, that measures if what we're doing is working.

If it's a word reading issue and we're doing some multisyllable word intervention for 20 minutes a day, and we find out in two weeks that there's still no growth and we keep testing, but after six weeks there's still no growth, then we need to be doing something different. That's the point of progress monitoring to see if it's working.

But we have to start with something, and the nice thing is not everybody needs the diagnostic unless you're using it to form groups that might be useful. Do I have that right?

Sean Morrisey: Right. Yeah, I would say you're exactly right. I mean, if students are in first grade and they're reading 80 words a minute, they're breaking the phonics code. You don't have to do a phonics survey with them. They're on the path to strong reading, for sure.

Anna Geiger: I know a lot of people ask about comprehension assessments, and the ORF does correlate very well with comprehension. If kids are reading accurately at an appropriate rate, then most likely they understand what they're reading. But we do have kids who might be reading and not being able to answer any questions about it or

talk about it.

Have you found any comprehension diagnostic assessments that you like?

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, so I'm going to throw this one out there. I think of it more with vocabulary.

I'll give you a little bit of data from my classroom. When I go back to what I said where if you're below the 60th percentile on oral reading fluency, zero students were proficient in the state assessment. If you're above that, it's between 70 and 80%, so there's still 20 or 30% of those kids not proficient on the state assessment. So what's the reason?

For me, and this is a little bit anecdotal, but there's some research to back this up. I think vocabulary is a main piece. I think quick measures of vocabulary where it's still in the field, there's not much out there, as kind of a screener.

I think it's very, very important, so I do vocabulary measures that I've created, or I've used a couple of others. I give them to students, and they do very, very well predicting what students will be proficient on comprehension measures. I think they actually predict better how kids will do on comprehension measures versus two comprehension measures correlating with one another, if that kind of makes sense.

I'll give you a couple of examples. Here's an example of a multiple choice question looking at more academic vocabulary. "In subsequent weeks, we learned how to protect earth's resources," and the word subsequent is underlined. The four choices on what does subsequent mean are "earlier, later, superior, main." Do they know what that academic word is?

Here's another example, "The group comprises ten individuals." Comprises would be underlined. Does that mean "include, nominate, exclude, co-opt"?

Questions like that you could very quickly administer as a class. I found personally in my classroom that as a screener, they work really, really well.

Another one I do that's such a good screener is when there are four words, and I call it Odd One Out. One word is different than the other three.

I'll give you an example, "assemble, congregate, convene, disband." Obviously in that one, disband is breaking apart and convene, congregate, and assemble are groups or something being put together.

I have found that those kinds of questions really will put my kids into groups. Kids who do really well on that, they always are proficient. Kids who struggle on those types of vocabulary, well that's one reason they're not meeting these proficiency levels on comprehension tests.

I've been able to predict up until about 95% accuracy which kids will be proficient on the state assessment by using ORF and a quick vocabulary measure, which I don't think you can really ever get better than that. That's pretty high.

Anna Geiger: Okay, so if they do poorly on your vocabulary assessment, then what? How do you help those kids?

Sean Morrisey: In my classroom, vocabulary is kind of embedded throughout the day. I think with vocabulary compared to decoding, it's more whole group instruction, really teaching words, using words, and trying to embed even morphology all day long because kids just need just many, many language experiences throughout the school day.

Anna Geiger: Do you do anything different for those kids who you noticed were doing poorly on vocabulary?

Sean Morrisey: I think the big thing is multiple exposures. I have a really great relationship with my reading specialist in my building.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Sean Morrisey: She knows exactly what topics in science and social and primary vocabulary words I'm using. She in many cases is giving kids many more exposures in a

small group, so they have just more opportunities. That's one way that's been working out really nicely this year.

Anna Geiger: That makes a lot of sense. She's not just trying to build a vocabulary by picking more words, but she's taking the words you're already teaching and teaching them, like you said, and giving more exposures, which is what those kids probably need.

That's very helpful to think about what you do with that particular information. Anything else to share about what teachers can do with assessment results?

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, I think we're trying to get into the weeds too much with all of these different assessments.

I think we should just kind of take more of a simple view of reading. Obviously there are more factors, like sometimes kids aren't strategic readers or they're struggling with text features. But when we're thinking about the basics, is it a decoding problem, is it a language problem, or is it both?

If it's a decoding problem, you need to get to a certain threshold with decoding to improve your comprehension, so more time has to be spent there either in intervention or in Tier 1 in the classroom.

If it's a vocabulary problem, well, we need more intervention in vocabulary.

The issue is when kids struggle in both and we have a lot of work on our hands. Those students may need more instructional time throughout the day, maybe after school experiences or before school experiences, things like that.

Anna Geiger: That's why, like you said, teamwork is so important.

And that's why we want our Tier 1 to be strong, so we don't need them to be doing something necessarily completely different in intervention if our Tier 1 is strong. Then it can be more intense, more supported, and more small group.

In general, just to sum up, we talked about how there are lots of literacy assessments, but what we really want to figure out is who's at risk? Then we need to figure out what to do to help them, and maybe this might be something to share with an administrator who is over-testing.

I know you know a lot about this, and you haven't seen a lot of change in your district, or have you? Any advice for teachers who want to know what to do?

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, I think there is change. Even in my school, I have a wonderful principal, and she made running records optional.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Sean Morrisey: She didn't want to just mandate it because some teachers are still transitioning in that, but now they're not mandated. Now as a fifth grade teacher, I don't have to spend loads and loads of time doing that.

But it's having these discussions with administrators, and I think for administrators to kind of just... I think the big thing is to think about how many minutes of instruction you have and how much time do you want to set aside for assessment. If it's 15% of your instructional time, I think using common sense, that's just too much. It should be probably down to about 5% at most.

Anna Geiger: So really the big question to ask is, what are we getting out of this assessment and is it worth the time we're putting into it?

Sean Morrisey: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: Is it informing our instruction?

Well, thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to share about assessment or anything else?

Sean Morrisey: I've been a big fan of your website and podcast, so I just very much appreciate you having me on.

I think teachers will be nodding their heads, like, "Yep, that makes sense. That makes sense." It's just a matter of how do we get everyone in the educational world, including administrators, sort of on the same page, and how are we using this?

Maybe one more point is sometimes when you test too much, then we take a lot of time analyzing the results. I know in lots of districts, especially when we're giving tons of fall assessments, they don't want to make groups until after those assessments are done and after analysis. Then students aren't getting intervention for four to five weeks after the start of the school year.

Anna Geiger: Oof, yeah, yeah.

Sean Morrisey: My recommendation would be to ask how many of these assessments do we need to do in the fall since we have spring scores, and let's right away on the second day of school get these kids into groups. Then we can do quick brief screening assessments after the fact. Do we need to wait five weeks before intervening?

Anna Geiger: Yeah, no. The answer would be no.

Well, thank you so much. I think for teachers a good start is just to understand all the vocabulary around all this so they can have intelligent conversations about it, because I think it can be really overwhelming. For teachers who maybe don't have your background, they may not be aware of all the types of assessment and why they're useful. I'll probably put some links in the show notes that can help people that are still figuring that out. Stephanie Stollar does a great job explaining assessments.

Then for anyone who's interested in vocabulary, I'll link to your podcast episode with Melissa and Lori because that was a really great one about how to teach vocabulary and that can be applied across the grades too.

Sean Morrisey: Yeah, I would agree with you about Stephanie Stollar with MTSS, she just does a nice job explaining it in very understandable terms.

It's interesting that you mention her because I just put an email out to my principal and a couple other individuals suggesting maybe we can get together and listen to her, she was recently on a podcast. I think we do a pretty good job at our school, but after listening to that, maybe we could even do a little bit better. She just hits everything perfectly on how to intervene and use time efficiently and that sort of thing.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, for sure, for sure. Well, thank you so much! I really appreciate your time.

Sean Morrisey: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Anna Geiger: You can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode180. 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 community.

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