Triple R Teaching

Welcome back to our Balanced to Structured Literacy podcast series. In today's episode, you're going to get to listen in to my conversation with Lindsay Kemeny, who is a podcast host, a blogger, a teacher, and a mother of a son with severe dyslexia. She has a wonderful story to share with us today. You'll love to hear about his learning journey and how today he's an avid reader. We'll get started right after the intro.

Intro: Welcome to Triple R Teaching, where we encourage you to think differently about education by helping you reflect, refine, and recharge. This isn't just about trying something new as you educate those and trusted to your care. We'll equip you with simple strategies and practical tips that will fill your toolbox and reignite your passion for teaching. It's time to reflect, refine, and recharge with your host, Anna Geiger.

Anna Geiger: Hello everyone, and welcome! Today I'm excited to interview Lindsay Kemeny as part of our Balanced to Structured Literacy Series. I first found Lindsay on her blog, The Learning Spark, and she is now doing a podcast with some other educators called Literacy Talks. Welcome, Lindsay.

Lindsay Kemeny: Thank you. I'm excited to be here!

Anna: I know that I first heard you speak on the Amplify podcast and you talked about how you were a balanced literacy teacher, and then when one of your children really struggled to learn to read and eventually you found out it was dyslexia, it really changed your viewpoint. Can you talk to us a little bit about your early experience in teaching reading and balanced literacy, and then how that moved into something different?

Lindsay: Absolutely. I was heavily trained in balanced literacy in my early years of teaching and then in college as well. Teaching reading was always my favorite thing, so I used to confidently just say, "Oh, balanced literacy is the BEST way to teach reading!" Really, it's the only way that I knew.

When I think back to those early years of teaching, I feel like it was really kind of foggy.

It was just this hazy landscape where somehow I didn't really fully understand what it took for the students to learn how to read, but we just kept plodding through our leveled readers and then somehow, we're done with all these readers, so we'll go to the next level, and we'll go through those.

There were always these students that struggled. I don't feel like I really had a lot of clarity for what they needed and how I could help them, but I still loved teaching reading. I loved the whole idea of just being surrounded with literature and reading to children and by children and with children. But there were a lot of students that I didn't realize that I wasn't helping, and I didn't really realize it until later.

So I taught second grade for five years, and then I stopped teaching to stay home with my children and then I returned to teaching about five or six years ago. It was that first year back that I was teaching kindergarten. My son was in second grade at this time, so I guess it was five years ago. There were a couple things happening that same year that started to make me question the ways that I had been taught.

The first thing is that it was my first year teaching kindergarten and I was so excited to bring these kids back to my small group table and say, "Now that we've learned these letters, let me show you how you can read," but the books I had to give them were those predictable, repetitive texts, so I found myself having to say, "Oh, wait, you can't sound this one out. Look at the picture. Does it give you a clue?"

That's the first time it really didn't sit well with me because I thought, "Wait a minute. I'm giving them the wrong impression of what reading is." I had used all those strategies before and I never thought anything of it.

I remember when I taught second grade, a parent coming to me, kind of concerned, saying, "Well, they're just looking at the picture and they're figuring out the words by looking at the picture," and I remember saying, "Yes, that's what good readers do, they look at the picture to figure out the words," you know?

Anna: Yes, I know.

Lindsay: Because that's just, yeah, that was just ingrained in me. That's what I was taught so many times and I was just parroting that back. Then when I was teaching those kindergartners is when I was kind of starting to say, "Wait. They're not reading, they're guessing."

Then my son was diagnosed with dyslexia that year and that was... I just couldn't figure out why I couldn't help him. I knew he was struggling to read from the time he was little, and he had a really hard time learning the letters. I had so many concerns and I did all the things I was taught with balanced literacy, and none of it was working.

Really, once I started diving into dyslexia and, what do dyslexics need to read, what does the brain do when it's learning to read, that brought me to what EVERYONE needs when learning to read. That's when I came to what we now call the science of reading, this knowledge.

Anna: How did that work in terms of shifting what you're doing in your classroom? Was this a very slow process, or did that cause friction among other people who were used to you doing it a certain way?

Lindsay: It was definitely a gradual process. Even at first, even though I had those things happening my first kindergarten year where I was kind of questioning some of these practices, I didn't really connect it with balanced literacy at first. I was learning about dyslexia and I was in this dyslexia parent group that summer after my son was in second grade, and someone was asking about a certain program and another parent said, "Well, that's balanced literacy, which is basically the worst thing for our kids."

I was like, "What?" I've always thought that balanced literacy was the best way, and so it was kind of this gradual "aha" where I was piecing together the frustrations I had that year teaching kindergarten with the things I had been taught and understanding. Really, I guess, the definition of balanced literacy.

Then it was gradual changes. Even now, I feel like I'm every year doing things a little bit differently and applying new things. I think one of the first changes I made was getting rid of the repetitive, predictable texts for those kindergartners, just no more, none of those, and we're going to use decodable texts. I really want them to practice those sound-symbol correspondences and really develop automaticity with that. That was probably the first change and then making sure I'm teaching phonics in an explicit, systematic manner. I think those two things were the top because those were the biggest weaknesses, I think, with balanced literacy. Then it was just improving and refining things along the way.

Anna: I know that for me, hearing that there could be something wrong with balanced literacy concerned me because, like you said, I loved reading aloud to kids, I loved surrounding them with good books, and so I think for a lot of balanced literacy teachers,

that is their concern. They wonder, "If I switch over to whatever this thing is called 'structured literacy,' it's not going to be fun anymore for the kids or for me."

Can you speak to that and your experience in terms of maybe concerns you might have had and how it played out?

Lindsay: Well, I think it's kind of a misconception where a lot of people think, "Oh, now, it's just the structured literacy and we're just going to do phonics all the time. What about everything else?" That's the biggest difference, I would say, between balanced literacy and maybe structured literacy is the phonics piece, but there are others.

When we are talking about the science of reading, we're not just talking about phonics, there's a lot of other things that we're talking about, and so, yes, we still want those rich, read-aloud experiences, and we want to introduce and expose our students to other texts, not just to decodable texts, they need to be exposed to all different things.

I think there's just kind of this misconception, and I think really, phonics doesn't have to be boring, so you can do a lot of things to make it exciting and you can show your enthusiasm for it, which is kind of infectious. My students know that I love phonics time and I get really excited and I call myself a word nerd and they love that, too. Then, like I said, that's not the only thing we're going to do. We're going to address vocabulary and comprehension and we're going to work on fluency, and of course, phonemic awareness is in there, too, so there's just lots of different components to consider.

Anna: I think sometimes I'm thinking that people that switch from leveled to decodable, especially in kindergarten, it's a little hard at first because with leveled, it just seems like they're reading so fluently so quickly because they're using the patterns to finish the sentences, whereas with decodable, they have to really work hard. Can you speak to that in your experience and what that's like for you? When do you tend to see them get over that hump of it just being really hard through every word?

Lindsay: Yeah, it's so true. As a kindergarten teacher, it's so much easier to listen to them read a repetitive, predictable text where you're just like, "Yes, you got it. Turn the page. Yes," and they're not really reading, you know?

Anna: Yes.

Lindsay: But they've memorized it and it's so great. But you give them a decodable and sometimes the language is just off enough where they can't guess, so they're just struggling through sounding out and you're like, "Oh, my goodness, we sounded this word out three times already in the book and they're sounding it out again." It's definitely different, but that is what has to happen and that is allowing the brain to map those sound-letter sequences so they can learn and so they can retrieve those later. They'll map it and they'll be able to remember those words later. It's a process.

I love when I'm reading with the students, and I'll give them a lot of opportunities to read those words over and over. I like to do a strategy I learned from Nora Chahbazi, who's the founder of EBLI (Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction). I don't know if you've ever heard of that.

Anna: Yes.

Lindsay: She has this strategy called teacher read, student read, teacher read back. I will do this in small groups with my students where the little kindergartners will read a couple of sentences and I'm like, "Great. Now, listen to me," and they put their finger under the words and they listen while I read the same couple of sentences. Then they go back and do it, those same ones again by themselves. This kind of helps them. Well, it definitely allows more exposure to those words. Then the second time, they can read a little smoother because it's a repeat of what they just read.

I'm teaching second grade now, and I do that with my second graders as well, except it's maybe a paragraph or a couple of paragraphs, so they read it, they do that productive struggle, I model it, and then they read it again. I think that's something that helps that process when they're just kind of reading sound by sound.

I even had a student this year in second grade starting the year, she could only read three correct words in a minute, and every word was slowly sounding out each sound. So we just had lots of practice for her to read aloud, and of course, our phonics, and working on that phonemic awareness, too, and now, she's almost to grade level.

Anna: Wow!

Lindsay: I mean, it's no more sound by sound. It's so exciting!

Anna: That's awesome.

Lindsay: I just thought, she started at three, and I think she's at like seventy words correct per minute right now, which is awesome! We've got to be at eighty-seven at the end of the year, so we're trying, it's my final push. It's the end of March right now to try to get her there, but it's awesome to see that growth.

Anna: That is incredible.

What would you say to somebody, because I've received these emails, who say, "Well, there's no way I'm having my kids read decodable books. They're so boring, they don't make any sense, and they're not going to like it. They're not going to like it so they're not going to want to read them"?

Lindsay: Well, first, I'll say there's a difference in decodable books. Yes, there are some that are just awful, but there are also some that are wonderful and they're engaging and they have beautiful pictures and storylines and they're just high quality. So I would say maybe you need to look at a different brand, a different type of decodable, because there are some really great ones out there.

Second, it is so exciting to see how students get so proud of themselves when they're reading those, when they can actually read the text. I remember this little boy in my kindergarten class a few years ago that I gave a little decodable book. It's one of the first times at the beginning of the year, one of the first times he's actually reading, and he read the first page and he looked up and was like, "Mrs. Kemeny, I'm actually reading the words!"

Anna: That's so fun.

Lindsay: He just said it so loud and so excited. I mean, I could still remember how he said that, and it was just the most amazing moment. I think you don't want to deny them that experience, right?

I've seen there's some students that even with those repetitive texts, it's not going to matter, they can pick up how to read, but there's a large majority that will not get proficient without really having that explicit practice with the sound-symbol correspondences that you're teaching.

So getting some high-quality decodable text, and also realizing that it's not the only thing the students have to be exposed to. In kindergarten, I'm still reading them great literature and we're having discussions and talking about it. I'm teaching second grade now and we're definitely transitioning out of decodables because they're like training wheels and you want to get rid of them as soon as you can, so I have about two students right now who still need decodable texts, but everyone else is fine without it.

Anna: Can you talk to us a little bit about your experience with your son, how you figured out it was dyslexia, if you even knew much about dyslexia, and then what you've been doing to help him learn to read?

Lindsay: Yeah, so I just had no idea what dyslexia was. We had decided to do some outside testing because we couldn't figure out why he was struggling to learn to read so much. I just remember when that doctor told me, "It looks like dyslexia," I was just completely shocked.

I was thinking, "Dyslexia, what's that? Isn't that just where you see backwards? That's not what he has," which is NOT what dyslexia is, that's a huge myth that they see backwards because that's not true. I just remember going to tell his second grade teacher and saying, "They think he has dyslexia," and she's like, "Oh, I guess we need to change some things in his IEP," and I'm like, "Yeah."

It just kind of hit me, why don't I know anything about this? Then I started searching and researching. When I found out it's the most commonly diagnosed learning disability, I got really upset and I was really angry because I thought, if it's really common, why haven't I been taught about this? Why didn't I learn about it in college? Why don't I have professional development on this? How come no other teachers at my school know anything about it? It was frustrating.

Right away, at the end of second grade, we got a tutor, someone who was familiar with dyslexia and used a program that was supposed to be good for kids with dyslexia. Probably that is my biggest regret is that we only did it twice a week for that first year, but it was really expensive! That's what I could afford.

It took me a year before I felt comfortable and ready enough to work with him myself. I had done a lot of reading and then I also had gone to trainings, I had an Orton-Gillingham training and some others. After that year, the end of third grade, I took over his tutoring and I worked with him every day and over the summer every day

and that's really when we started to see progress. I wish we had started it earlier.

Anna: What would you point to as being the game changer? What made it click?

Lindsay: Well, it was pretty gradual. I think it was just the intensity. I was doing a combination of explicit phonics, which I never think he got, or at least I just think he needed a lot more exposure to phonics, and practice, and really a lot of practice applying it. So not just phonics in isolation, but applying it in texts.

He had practiced early on with decodables, but then we got to more complex text, and we would practice that, every night we would read together. He'd read a sentence, I'd read a sentence, he'd read a sentence, I'd read a sentence until he could do more and more. Gosh, like the last three years, we've been reading Harry Potter together and he reads a page, I read a page, but it was great! Having that complex text was really good practice! I don't know, it gives me chills when I hear him decode the word "unceremoniously." It's just exciting!

Anna: How does he feel about reading now?

Lindsay: He loves it. He loves it! I remember way back, I guess maybe third grade, or maybe that summer, the first time I saw him reading a book independently, and it was a little graphic novel, "Dog Man." I don't know if you've heard of those.

Anna: Oh, yes. My kids love those.

Lindsay: The first time I ever saw him pick up a book and read for fun, I snapped a picture. I was just so excited, I couldn't believe it!

Then I remember we went to this family reunion event the end of the summer, I guess it was right before he went into fourth grade, and that's the summer I had really started working with him. At that event, he introduced himself, said his name, and said, "I have dyslexia, but I can read fourth grade books." He was just so proud!

Anna: That's so cool.

Lindsay: It was really neat. He actually loves to read. We still read together every night and then he also does a lot of audiobooks.

Anna: Does he need accommodations in school to help him keep up?

Lindsay: Absolutely.

Anna: Do they give him longer for tests and things like that?

Lindsay: Absolutely. Yes, he's on a IEP, and he has a lot of accommodations. His dyslexia is very severe, you know, it's a spectrum, and along with dyslexia, he has dysgraphia, which is the writing disability, and dyscalculia, which is the math disability. Then he has a very low processing speed and very low working memory along with attention struggles, so I feel like it's just all of these things.

Anna: Oh, he's got it all. Wow.

Lindsay: Yeah.

Anna: To have all of that and for him to love reading is a big testament to the work you've done with him. That's really exciting, really exciting.

Lindsay: It's been great and it's been quite a process with him because the same time he was diagnosed with dyslexia, he was diagnosed with depression as well, and that got really bad the end of third grade year. I've written a little bit about that, but he made lots of suicidal comments. He said some of the worst things that you never want to hear as a mother and to see where he is now is just so amazing because I feel like his ability to read has improved his self-esteem and it's just gradually healed his little heart.

Anna: Yes, I remember you sharing that, that's what really stuck with me on the Amplify podcast interview that you gave. It really helps you think about it because I know when I was balanced literacy and I didn't know much about dyslexia, I would've heard, "Well, this way won't work with dyslexia, but that's just a few kids. It's okay. It

works for most kids," and I probably would've just dismissed it. But when you actually connect with somebody who has a child with dyslexia and you realize this is very personal and real, and, like you said, the longer you wait to take care of it, the more effect it has on their self-worth and all kinds of things. It just compounds itself and it's so important that we do something about it early.

What would you say to a parent who suspects dyslexia in maybe a kindergartener or first grader? What should be their first step?

Lindsay: I think the first thing I would tell a parent is to get outside tutoring because I wouldn't wait for the school to figure it out. I wouldn't get just any tutor, but I would make sure to get someone who is familiar with dyslexia and what we coin the science of reading, who understands structured literacy, so that would be my first thing.

Anna: Yeah, that's a good tip because that's something that may be a little bit more in their control because working with the school can take a long time, right?

Lindsay: Yes, exactly.

Anna: What would you say to somebody who is just getting started? Do you have any special books or podcasts or things that you recommend to get them going?

Lindsay: Sure. One of my favorite books that I think is really great for beginners that just came out like a year ago is called "The Art and Science of Teaching Primary Reading" by Christopher Such. I think that's a great one. I also, for my master's program, created a PD based on the science of reading and it's just meant to be a very beginner step, but I have modules for each of the five main components, and it's free, so I can send you that link if you want.

Anna: For sure, yeah. That'd be great.

Lindsay: I think that's a nice way to get started, but like I said, it's not everything, there's so much to learn. I also just started a podcast with two of my friends where we're all big literacy nerds, so we love to talk all things reading. If you want to listen to that, it's called Literacy Talks, and it's sponsored by Reading Horizons. That's on all your podcast platforms.

Anna: I'll be sure to link to all those things in the show notes. Is there anything else you want people to know before we sign off?

Lindsay: Well, I'll just say to think in baby steps. When you're getting started, it can be a little overwhelming to think of making all these changes, so I would just say baby steps. Start learning and add in one thing at a time. I have a specific blog post I've written with some first steps that I would recommend if you're just getting started with the science of reading, I can send you that as well.

Anna: For sure, I will definitely link to that.

Well, thanks so much. I'm sure a lot of people got a lot out of this, especially if they have a child they think may have dyslexia, learning from you and that there's the light end at the end of the tunnel is very exciting. Once the right help is given, success can occur, so thanks so much for sharing that. That's really encouraging. It was really nice to talk with you, Lindsay.

Lindsay: Yeah, it was great to be on, thanks for inviting me.

Anna: Thank you so much for joining me for this interview with Lindsay. You can find access to her free PD, her blog posts, and her podcast in the show notes, which you can find at reachallreaders.com/episode83. We're taking a week off next week for July