How to implement the science of reading with young learners - with Amie Burkholder

Triple R Teaching Podcast #221

I'm so excited to welcome Amy Burkholder to the podcast today. She's a former first grade teacher turned K-5 literacy coach. In this episode, we talk about her book, *Literacy Unlocked: How to Implement the Science of Reading with Young Learners*. We get very specific about those foundational skills with practical ways that you can apply the research to what you're doing in the classroom. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome Amy!

Amie Burkholder:

Hey, Anna, thank you so much for having me!

Anna Geiger:

I'm so glad to have you here.
We're going to talk about your new book, *Literacy Unlocked*, but before we do that, could you share a little bit about your history in education and what you're doing now?

Amie Burkholder:

Yeah, sure. I started my education journey as a first grade teacher, and I remember setting up my classroom and just being so excited about all the things you get excited about as a first year teacher.

But it didn't hit me until I was sitting about six inches away from a small group of students, when I realized that I really was not equipped to teach them how to read. I was a first grade teacher, and that's so important in that grade level!

I only spent about a year in the classroom kind of floundering and I said, "I have to do something."
I went back to school and got my degree as a reading specialist with really no intention of becoming a reading specialist. I just wanted to be able to support my students the best that I could. That helped me. Looking back now, I had felt that it helped me so much, but I didn't know I still had so much more to learn.

I then moved into a Title I position where I taught K-5 reading. That experience helped me to really understand kids as readers, but I still just kind of felt like something was missing.

I was Orton-Gillingham trained, and then I was asked to move into a position as a literacy coach. I first said, "No way. I love working with kids; I don't want to work with adults. That seems scary." But I did it, and I ended up hating it.

The first two years were just terrible, and I was just begging to go back to the classroom. I even interviewed to go back to the classroom, but as with any new journey, it just takes time to kind of settle in.

I ended up really loving that position and that's what I'm doing now. I'm a literacy coach and I've been LETRS trained, and I've really learned a lot regarding the science of reading and what good instruction is. I feel like the research that I've done and the courses that I've taken, along with just being in classrooms with students, has really helped make me a well-rounded teacher.

But when COVID hit, they took the literacy coaches out of our role and they put us into classrooms for a year. I call that my sabbatical because that's where I was teaching, and I realized that the curriculum we were using just was not the best fit for our students.

That's really when I started deep diving into the science of reading and all things literacy. That's kind of where what I call my real science of reading journey began.

Anna Geiger:

Why do you think the first two years of being a literacy coach were so tough, and what changed for you?

Amie Burkholder:

I was in a new school and making the shift to working with adults versus working with students. I was a lot younger than the people in the building, and that's always hard as a literacy coach to go in. Also the district that I work for, we kind of had these mandates in place for things that we should and should not be doing in classrooms. I kind of went in with this assumption that if the school that I was at was doing all of these things, then this new school was doing that too. But they weren't.

So part of it was my fault because I went in with these assumptions, and they just needed a lot of support. I gave that to them and we we're all just peachy now, but it just took us some time.

Anna Geiger:

You have some episodes on your podcast, I believe, about literacy coaching and how to build a relationship with teachers and so on. We'll have to link those in the show notes for anyone out there who's a literacy coach and trying to work on those relationships and easing into that role.

You are really now a literacy coach to many, many people because you've written your book, *Literacy Unlocked*: *How to Implement the Science of Reading with Young Learners*, which was just published as of this recording, and you really focus on the early grades. Can you tell me why you wrote the book?

Amie Burkholder:

Yeah, so I got an email about two and a half or three years ago now, and I was asked to write a book. I said, "No, I'm just a teacher. I am not a researcher. I am not a doctor. I do not have business writing a book." I turned it down.

Then about a year after that, I was at Big Sky at the literacy conference, and I was sitting in a session, and I was listening to the speaker present. I just kept thinking, "If I were a classroom teacher sitting in this room and I didn't have the knowledge that I have on the science of reading, I would walk away from this session feeling very overwhelmed and not sure really how to approach anything in my classroom."

And so I walked away from that session and I emailed and said, "I'm ready to write that book." I wanted it to be, "Here's what the research says, and here's how you can actually use it tomorrow."

It was really that session that made me realize that I can write a book because I do understand the research, but I also understand how to make it practical for teachers and students in the classroom.

So that's what I did! I wanted them to have real examples. I wanted them to have real lesson ideas and routines. I wanted to really share with them everything that I have always done in the classroom, and I wanted them to be able to just pick it up and use it as well.

Anna Geiger:

Well, you've definitely accomplished that. Let's talk about diving deep into some of these areas that you've written about.

One, first of all, is this idea of explicit phonics instruction and trying to marry that with leveled books.

I actually had a parent who emailed me recently saying, "I really don't think my child got enough phonics instruction in school this year. I know they're doing phonics, but I don't think he got enough and I know there are some gaps. When I asked the teacher if he could be in intervention or get some extra help, they said, 'Well, no, because he's level M so he's where he needs to be.'"

Obviously that shows a big confusion on the school's part about what explicit instruction means and then mixing it up with something not based in research at all. Why do you think schools are doing this, and why is this a problem?

Amie Burkholder:

I see this and hear this a lot. Oftentimes I feel like teachers are making the shift before admin or people at their district offices. Teachers are out there and they're doing research on their own.

What I hear and see when I talk to teachers is they have this phonics program that they have to use with fidelity. We hear that word a lot, but then they also have to use these leveled readers within their small group and they have the expectation that they're using those.

What I think happens is schools are afraid, and teachers in general are afraid, of this pendulum swing, and so they're kind of holding onto both sides of it because they are just waiting for it to swing the other way.

But what happens is if we teach our kiddos and give them good, strong, explicit instruction, and then we don't follow that up with application in a decodable text... If we follow that up with a leveled text and three-queuing, then what we're doing is we are taking their attention off of everything that we taught them in that phonics lesson. We're asking them to look away from those words and guess. That really creates this confusion and really reinforces habits that don't really support that long-term reading success.

It's really important that we give them that instruction. Then we show them why they got that instruction through decodable text and through things like dictation instead of handing them a leveled text.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, I like the part where you said showing them *why* we gave you that instruction. It shows what's the point.

I think perhaps what was happening with this child was that he was getting explicit phonics instruction, or somewhat explicit, but then he may not have been given decodable text to practice it.

Just getting the instruction but not the practice means it's not going to be learned as well as it could be, and for some kids, maybe not at all.

Amie Burkholder:

Yeah, and you see it. I tutor students as well, and I will ask their parents, "What kind of books are coming home?" Because you can almost always tell by the habits that they've created when they go to try to attack a word. You can tell that they've been using those three-cueing strategies for sure.

Anna Geiger:

What are you seeing when you can tell right away that they've been using three-queuing?

Amie Burkholder:

They'll look at the first letter. They automatically look at any picture support that might be there. They'll guess. All those things that we used to teach them to do, they do that. It's really hard to break that habit when they're used to doing it.

Anna Geiger:

We talk a lot in the science of reading space about phonemic awareness and how important that is. There's also a lot of research support for doing phonemic awareness with letters. But in doing that…

For example, doing sound mapping with a simple word like "cat," breaking it apart into sounds and putting a letter for each sound. If they can't even isolate the phonemes, so they can't even take /k/ / ă / /t/, and put it into "cat," it doesn't seem like letters are going to work quite yet. At least that's what I would think.

Do you have any thoughts on that, and what can we do if they're not even at the very basic level of isolating phonemes?

Amie Burkholder:

Yeah, so we think about phonological awareness and phonemic awareness. We know there's this continuum. I think there's this misconception that we have to start at the bottom of that continuum with rhyming and syllables and sentence segmentation, and then we can work our way up. Just like I said, when I taught kindergarten, in that curriculum that we used, we couldn't really move on from rhyming until they had rhyming. We couldn't move on from syllables until they had syllables.

We have research that tells us that blending, segmenting, and phoneme isolation are those skills that we really need to target with our kiddos, and obviously in print as soon as possible. But if kids are struggling at that level, it's okay to take a step back.

I always recommend stepping back and saying… If they're unable to segment, say the word "sun," for example, then you might step back to the syllable level. If they're still struggling at the syllable level, you might take a step back to that compound word level, so "foot-ball," and then it doesn't take them long.

They have to really understand how to play with words, and once they understand what you're asking them to do, they can quickly move back up into that individual phoneme level.

Anna Geiger:

The point of that is not to master syllable counting or to master rhyming or onset-rime, or whatever you're doing, but it's rather to show them that here's how we break words apart. Let's start with a bigger chunk first and then we'll get to the harder chunk, which is the smallest. It makes a lot of sense.

Following up on that question, do you think that there's room for phonemic awareness instruction without letters? If so, why and how?

Amie Burkholder:

Yeah, when we think about phonemic awareness instruction, research tells to do that blending, segmenting, and isolation, and also apply those to print as quickly as possible. If you really dive deep into what the National Reading Panel says, kids really need about six minutes a day of that instruction, and how we provide that instruction is really important.

I think that it's valuable to start your lesson with a phonemic awareness warmup, something oral, maybe blending and segmenting. One of my favorite games is just to give them some picture cards and all the students have different picture cards of whatever they were working on.

Say it was short A, then they all are short A picture cards. I will say, "The word is /k/ / ă / /t/, and they have to blend it back together and say "cat." If they have that card, they flip it over. The first student to flip over all of their cards wins. It takes maybe three minutes to do with them, and it just kind of primes their brain for what we're asking them to do.

We pair that with, say, a visual drill or an auditory drill. Now we're connecting the phoneme and grapheme for them. Then we can start putting in that work in the phonics lesson with that explicit instruction of putting the two together.

When we think about that, when we're choosing activities for phonics instruction, we want to make sure that we're choosing activities that are going to strengthen that phoneme-grapheme correspondence. That's where we're really making sure that we're adding those letters in and doing things like word chaining to really support them.

Anna Geiger:

I love it in your book how you give a lot of attention to handwriting. That's something that as a teacher I kind of dismissed as something that we didn't have to focus too much on. Now I understand how it's important not just for legibility, but also for literacy.

In speaking with Shawn Datchuk from Iowa, he talked about how it actually helps with reading skills because you're thinking about the sound and everything as you form the letters.

So I probably just answered the question, but can you tell me more about why handwriting is more than just a motor skill?

Amie Burkholder:

Handwriting and letter formation are deeply connected to reading and spelling. When they learn to form their letters correctly, they're really developing stronger letter recognition and that supports that automatic word reading.

I don't know if you've ever had a student where you're asking them to write a word, and let's say the word is “dog,” and all of a sudden they're looking around the room to find that letter to know how to form it.

Just like we want them to be super automatic with letter sounds, we want them to be really automatic with that letter formation too so instead of focusing on how to write the letter, they can focus on what they're writing.

I think that the act of forming that letter really, really cements it in their memory for them.

Anna Geiger:

I think one mistake I made was I had handwriting at one part of the day and then early reading instruction at another. How would you recommend combining handwriting with other literacy instruction?

Amie Burkholder:

I always tell teachers that there are these prerequisite strokes that we really need to focus on early in the year when we're teaching letter formation for the very first time. That's things like, “Can you draw a tall stick? Can you draw a short stick? Can you draw a slanted line? Can you do a circle back?” All of those prerequisite strokes are attached to the letters that we are teaching them.

Once we've really worked through that with them, I like to make sure that we're pairing that letter instruction with the sound that we're teaching.

So if we're teaching the letter M, I might teach them the letter M, we might sky write it, we may trace it, we may write it on paper, just really making that connection for them.

Anna Geiger:

Let's talk now about introducing new letters and sounds. What's a routine that you would recommend for teachers?

Amie Burkholder:

This is one of my favorite questions because there are so many different opinions out there on how to teach letters. Do we teach the letter name? Do we teach the letter sound? Do we teach them together?

I actually had Shayne Piasta on the podcast not too long ago too, and we were talking about this. She has some really good really get insights on this.

What I recommend is whatever you do, make it a consistent routine for every single letter. We really break it down into about five steps. We name it, we sound it, we feel it, we form it, and then we use it.

When I say we name it, we show them the letter name. I love how in your book you talk about the letter name as being an anchor for students. It's important to teach that letter name. “This is the letter M. This is the uppercase M. This is the lowercase M.”

Then we talk about the sound. I tell them what the sound is.

The feel it part is noticing what your lips are doing, what your tongue and your teeth are doing. We might pull out those pocket mirrors and let them see what their lips are doing when they're articulating that sound.

Then we form it. We go through that letter formation. If it's a letter M, for example, it's short stick down, bounce up and around, bounce up and around. We do that a couple times, but eventually after they have written it, say maybe three times, now they're writing that letter and they're saying the sound. "M spells /m/."

Then we will use it, whether it be where we're blending it, we're segmenting words with the letter M, or we're mapping those out with Elkonin boxes.

Repetition and consistency is really key. The letter changes, but the routine should always stay the same.

Anna Geiger:

Talking about making words with those letters, that's why we want to group the letters according to how we can make words as soon as possible.

How do you recommend introducing blending?

Amie Burkholder:

Yeah, blending is tricky too, because I've been doing some research on this. That traditional segmenting and blending that we do where we have students segment each individual sound, what I've found is that's not really how we read. We don't really read words like /s/ /ă/ /t/, sat. Really, we are blending them together.

We may have to use some traditional blending with our students, but I really like to practice just using oral blending together. We might do some blending drills together. Continuous blending is what I've really started to try to use with my students who are struggling. Continuous blending is really using those stretchable sounds and those continuous sounds, where they're holding on to each sound as they're blending it together. That seems to really help students who are struggling with blending, and it eliminates that kind of choppiness.

I'm sure that you've worked with kids when they read the word "cat," for example, where they'll say /k/ /ă/ /t/, and then something random will come out because they forgot those sounds from the beginning.

Anna Geiger:

So what do you do when students keep doing that sound-by-sound blending, but then they struggle to switch to whole word reading, which is a real problem. Is the continuous sounds the way you help remedy that? Are there other things that you do?

Amie Burkholder:

Yeah, I use the continuous sounds and it's a lot of modeling. I love pulling out that blending board and just modeling that for them, having them echo that word with me, having them choral read that word with me, and just really working through that.

I also love just taking the word piece out of it and doing sound drills with kids, because I want them to be able to recognize the sounds that they can hold on to, those continuous sounds and sounds that are pop sounds. If they can become really automatic with that, then we can put those sounds back into words and have them practice building fluency that way as well.

Anna Geiger:

We've talked about a lot of foundational skills: phonemic awareness, teaching letters and sounds, incorporating that with handwriting, and teaching blending.

What about high frequency words? I think traditionally there's been some unfair expectations of early grade teachers about what they should be teaching in terms of high frequency words, or what are often called sight words, in those early grades.

Can you talk us through some mistakes that have been made and what teachers should really remember most when teaching those high frequency words?

Amie Burkholder:

Yeah, so I will tell you, this is the one thing that I held on to. I was making all the different shifts… And I know for a lot of people it's the leveled text that they're holding on to. For me, it was the sight word instruction that I really held tight to - my word lists and my decks of cards - because I just didn't know how to teach it any other way.

I think so many teachers feel that way. I never think that teachers hang on to things because they don't want to do something different. I think it's always that knowledge piece there. That's what it was for me. It was like, "Okay, but I feel like this works. If this is working, why do I need to do it a different way? And doing it that other way scares me because I'm not sure how to do it." I think that's where a lot of teachers are.

I think, first and foremost, we have to recognize that not all high frequency words are irregular, right? We have a lot of high frequency words that aren't. Sometimes we have words that just have those partially irregular parts. Those are the parts, like in the word "said," that our kids kind of have to just know that that AI makes the /ĕ/ sound.

When I think about high frequency words, one thing that I always suggest to teachers is that when you look at high frequency words, really look at the irregular part.

In the word "said," for example, where would that best fit within your phonics scope and sequence? We might think AI, but AI is a vowel team, which is a little further in your scope and sequence, and that's too late to teach them the word "said." Realistically, maybe putting it with short E because it does make that sound, and so you're anchoring it to something that they're already learning. That's one recommendation that I have.

Then obviously, the heart part is a big deal and having them know that by heart.

I love doing that, but I also joke with teachers and say, "There are kindergartners that can't draw hearts, and it spins them into a tailspin!" So I always get those little… You can get them around Valentine's Day at the Dollar Tree. They're just sparkly hearts without the sticker on the back, because you know if they have those foam stickers they're going to slap it on your paper and it's going to be done for. That's just one classroom management tip. If you can just get sparkly hearts, you don't have to worry about the meltdown and the tears of not being able to draw their hearts.

Anna Geiger:

I honestly have never thought about that, but I'm sure that's true.

Amie Burkholder:

Yeah, many, many meltdowns.

I also think you teach them to map it and you teach them to recognize that irregular part, but also understanding that we can't stop there. I think that's that pendulum swing again, where I feel like we have given a dirty name to having a stack of flashcards or having a list of high frequency words.

We have to think of it just as with words that are completely decodable, how do we build fluency with those words? Lots and lots of repetition. It's still okay to have those cards and have games that you're playing and building that repetition and letting them see it in context. But we just have to think about that introduction piece first, helping them be able to really anchor the sounds, those phonemes, to the graphemes, and understanding why it might make a different sound.

Anna Geiger:

Yes, thank you. That was very clear. Like you said, the flashcards are demonized sometimes, and I think because initially we were teaching them as individual images to memorize. But when we've explicitly taught them, and even words that are phonetically regular, it's okay if you want to give a little extra practice with it because that's a word they're going to see all the time. You want them to map that word very quickly. It will help with all the reading that they're doing

Well, thank you very much. I would really encourage primary teachers, especially K-2, to get their hands on *Literacy Unlocked*.

Is there any else you want to share? Any other projects you're working on or places where people can find you?

Amie Burkholder:

Yeah, you can find me on Instagram, @literacy.edventures. My website is literacyedventures.com.

Inside the book, there's a hub where you can log in. The book is kind of broken up into here's the research, here's the research in teacher terms, and then here are some practical tips for implementing it. Then each chapter ends with a lesson plan that you can take into your classroom the next day. Those lesson plans are also available on an online hub for you to go in and print not only the lesson plans, but also the resources too.

Anna Geiger:

I think the lesson plans are what really make your book stand out. I highly recommend it.

Thanks so much for joining us, Amy!

Amie Burkholder:

Thank you for having me!

Anna Geiger:

Thank you so much for listening. To get a link to purchase Amy's book, as well as to her podcast and her website and other resources, please visit the show notes at themeasuredmom.com/episode221. 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, themeasuredmom.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.