



Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here from The Measured Mom, back with another episode in our Old and New summer series.

If you checked out last week's episode, you got to hear a replay of my conversation with Gina from Get Lit. She shared her very interesting story of coming out of balanced literacy because she discovered that her daughter had dyslexia. It's a story with a wonderful happy ending, and now she continues to teach her students, her first-graders, as well as help many people on her Instagram account.

Today we're going to continue the conversation from last year and we're going to talk all about sound walls, what they look like, how to use them, and how they can help your students.

Anna: Welcome back, Gina!

Gina: Thanks for having me again. I'm so excited to be here!

Anna: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself for the people who maybe didn't catch last week's review episode?

Gina: Sure. I am a first grade teacher in a public school and I also tutor. I am an Orton-Gillingham Academy trained associate, working under the mentorship of a fellow, LETRS trained, and I was a balanced literacy teacher until my daughter was diagnosed with dyslexia. That brought me down the road of evidence-based reading instruction and the science of reading.

Anna: Tell us really quickly about how you share that with other teachers.

Gina: On my Instagram, I try to educate and advocate for dyslexia, and I just do little reels and little educational posts on my Instagram account, @get_literacy.

Anna: So the last time you were on the podcast, about a year ago I think it was, we talked a little bit about sound walls and how it would be great to have you come back and tell us more about that. Now you have another year behind you of using sound walls with your students. Maybe we could start by helping people understand what a sound wall is.

Gina: Sure. Okay. So a sound wall is a combination of a mouth picture, I like to use real mouth pictures, and the graphemes that match that sound. So there is the vowel valley which has all the vowels on one side, and then the consonant chart is on the other side. It is a visual for students, and I do explicitly teach everything on the wall throughout the school year.

Anna: All right. So just for people new to sound walls, there are two parts to it, like she said, there's the vowel valley and the consonant sound wall. The phonemes, the sounds, are usually represented by pictures of a mouth.

Now I listened to Jan Wasowicz, she was with SPELL-Links. I watched her training on sound walls, and she was not a fan of putting the mouth pictures up, so everybody's different. Just know that there are many different ways to do this. Most people, myself included, appreciate the mouth pictures, so those are there. That's representing the phoneme, the sound. Then when Gina mentioned grapheme, she means the letter or letters that represent the sound.

So a sound wall with a mouth making the sound of /ch/ would eventually have CH and TCH listed underneath because those are both ways to spell the /ch/ sound.

Maybe you can tell us what research says about sound walls.

Gina: There is not any research that I know of and that I can really speak to. I'm not sure if they're starting to do research, but there is research... This is more of a tool for students and for teachers to use that does have research behind it.

Anna: Exactly. I think some people are against sound walls because there is no research that I know of right now. There may be some being done, in fact I think there

is, but there's no published research about the use of sound walls.

So we have to be careful when we talk about them. We don't want to say first of all, that they're not "the science of reading" because the science of reading is research. It's not a thing or a tool. But we can say that it's a tool to teach the things we know are we are supposed to teach like phonemic awareness and phonics.

We know very much that phonemic awareness is very important for success in reading, things like isolating, blending, segmenting, and manipulating phonemes.

Then, of course, we know that a systematic phonics instruction is also important.

Can you talk to us a little bit about your sound wall routine and how you use it to teach phonemic awareness and phonics?

Gina: Absolutely. Going back to even the mouth pictures, I know some people aren't fans, but having first graders, I really think it's an important tool for them to have that visual. I really got into it during COVID when we were still wearing masks, and I feel like it was very helpful, that's when it began.

What I do is, in beginning of the school year I put post-its over all the letters, the graphemes, and I unveil whatever the sound is that we are working on.

In first grade we start with short vowels, so I'll probably do one short vowel a week. My first graders are coming in already knowing their basic sounds of the alphabet, so we fly through that.

So I'll unveil the sound and let's say we're doing short A, I will hold up the short A card. I use Tools 4 Reading, that's where I was trained and that's the sound wall and the cards that I use. I'll hold up their card with A on it. All my students have a mirror, and so we practicing saying /ă/, and we look at what our mouths are doing. We talk about what our mouth's doing.

Then I'll give them words with a short A sound in there for them to repeat. I want to know, "Where do you hear the short A sound - beginning, middle, or end?" I'll give them

all different words, and they'll tell me where in the word they hear that sound. They'll continue to look at the mirror to make sure of their articulation and they're doing it to match the picture on the wall.

Anna: Is that when you're teaching the spelling of short A as well?

Gina: Yes, but this can go deeper once we get into long vowels. I won't be teaching all the long E spellings because I teach first grade. So I'll unveil it when we do maybe busy E, and then all those different spellings will still be up there, so my higher readers will look at it. But I tell them not really to pay too much attention to that, and we just focus on the one spelling at a time.

Anna: Okay, so you actually reveal all the spellings at once, but you just focus on one, is that right?

Gina: Right, yes, because I'm not going to cut that little post-it up and try to make it harder.

When it is helpful too is in the second half of first grade, when now my students are encountering more of these patterns. I see them look on the sound wall all the time, and they'll look at the pattern that they're trying to figure out. They'll look at the mouth picture, and they'll figure out on their own, "Oh, that's a long E, I should try the long E sound for this word." So it is helpful for them when they're trying to decode on their own.

Anna: Well, it's interesting too because I watched a live presentation with Wiley Blevins at the Wisconsin Reading League Conference last fall and he actually said that he doesn't like it when people are covering up everything before they teach it because there are advanced kids or kids who are further along that could use that information. So I think it has to be a balance for teachers. Having the whole wall open at once can be very overwhelming, but at the same time, we don't want to block information from kids. So it's probably just a trial and error kind of thing.

Gina: It is. That's really interesting, and it is what works in your classroom. I feel there are some people that like to put words under there too, instead of using a word wall, they move their words and put them up on their sound wall as they go. So it's whatever really works for your classroom and your students, and I think it depends on what grade you're teaching as well.

Anna: So what you're saying is that some sound walls have the phoneme pictured by the mouth and then underneath it, they reveal the graphemes in isolation, right? So if you're teaching the sound of /ē/ and the spellings of /ē/, then you might have just the letter E, the letter EE, letters EA. But the other option is to have an actual keyword with maybe those letters highlighted or in a different color or underlined-

Gina: Right.

Anna: ... so two different ways. I know Tools 4 Reading does the individual graphemes and not actual words.

Gina: Right.

Anna: So there's lots of different ways to do it. So that's how you introduce a new spelling, by having them practice the sound.

Tell us more about how your students use the wall.

Gina: So they will use the wall for both spelling and reading. I got really excited when last year I had a parent send me an email that said, "My daughter's in the mirror right now."

What's great about the wall and the mirrors and really diving deeper into the sounds and their articulation is a lot of students will spell "train" instead of with TR, it might be CHR or JR. So I teach them, "Look in the mirror. What is our mouth doing?" And they will even start doing it at home. They'll pay attention.

I don't remember which sound it is, because a lot of our sounds are very similar in how we articulate them. It's just a matter of if they are voiced or not.

So my students will use it to self-correct, to help with if they see a spelling pattern they don't know, or when they need to spell to remember it.

Anna: So maybe can you give us a very specific example of a child trying to read or spell a particular word and then how the sound wall would help?

Gina: Sure. So short I and short E are very easily confused by students, and if you start with short E, if you say /ĕ/, /ĩ/, it's just a slight movement in their mouth. So for a word like, "pen." If a student is trying to figure out if it's short E or short I, my student would grab a mirror, go up to the wall, look at where if they're trying to say "pin" or "pen," look at which sound they want, and try to make sure they're matching their mouth in the mirror to the picture on the wall.

When I do teach it, we talk about the vowel valley, which I don't know if you know, but the way it is set up is helpful for them as well.

Anna: Sure. The vowel valley has to do with how open your mouth is, so it's shaped like a V and like a valley. I'll provide links to my blog post about the sound wall in the show notes, but it talks about how you can actually have your students say all the sounds with you as you go down the wall and go up the wall and notice in a mirror how their mouth is getting more open.

There's other things you can do I've heard where you have kids see how much of their finger can fit between their teeth when they're saying certain sounds, and then how as you move down the wall more of your finger can fit. That can help them just think more about the distinction between those vowel sounds, which are very close.

What about your students that are more natural at reading and writing? Do they use the sound wall very much, or is this really more a tool for kids who are struggling?

Gina: You know what? Actually my high readers really were interested in the sound wall this year. I had the schwa covered up because we really don't get too much into that and they were BEGGING me. They're like, "We want to know what the banana sound is because it's awesome." There is also a picture that matches besides the picture of the mouth. There's also a visual of a picture, so it was a banana. So it actually was fun for them.

They liked learning that, and they're reading words that would have the /zh/ sound in it for like treasure. So it was helpful for them for words that they were encountering, and they picked up on how to use it really quickly. At times, they would even ask if they can

look under a post-it and I would say, yeah, they could run up there and look.

Anna: Yeah.

Gina: It's not in hiding, it's not secretive. It's just to, like you said, to me it's not to overwhelm all the whole class.

Anna: Sure. So what is your feeling on teaching kids the words, the big words, that are connected with the sound wall like fricative, stop, and affricate? Have you tried it, not tried it?

Gina: Yes, I do use the words. I'm not expecting them to use those words with me. I'm not expecting them to know it either. I personally don't know if there is any research or anything that says that that helps kids when learning sounds.

I'll use it because my consonant chart is set up with tongue placement and then airflow. So I'll say, "Okay, this is a stop. That means we can't hold that sound." So I use it as an instruction when I'm doing the explicit instruction, but I don't know if it really makes a difference.

They love learning nasals for instance, because we all plug our nose when we're doing the nasals, so I'll say, "Oh, that's a nasal." But getting them to say fricative and know that is tricky. Plus, whenever I say that in my classroom, they all start cracking up. They think I'm saying a bad word when I say fricative.

Anna: I know.

Gina: I go, "That just means there's friction," and then I've got to explain what friction is...

Anna: Yeah. Well, I know there's some people that really love teaching it, and this is all just from basically what I read in Facebook groups. I don't think there's any research at all on this, but just they like teaching it because their kids like the big words. Then there's plenty of other people who are concerned that you're filling their brain up with something that's not useful, and you should make space in their working memory for

what they really need, and you're wasting time. So again, it's really got to be just what a teacher feels best fits their class. But I would definitely want to say that that's not necessary for kids-

Gina: Right.

Anna: ... to know those big words.

Gina: No. No. They're still learning it. It's just, to me, a matter of instruction where I might as well say the word, but I'm not expecting them to know it on their own.

Anna: Yeah, no, I agree. What would you say might be some challenges with using a sound wall or things to avoid?

Gina: I think like you said with overloading them, their working memory, and giving them too much at once, like trying to do a bunch of sounds at once because you're trying to fly through it or catch up.

Also giving them sounds before they're ready. I've noticed with some kids, it is still overwhelming for them. It is still a lot to say, "Okay, now we're doing long E, now we're doing long A, all in one week."

Really, you have to be very prescriptive about it, I guess, to your class, and to your students. Maybe it's more of a small group thing that teachers can do if they feel like their class is such a wide span if they have their struggling readers all the way up to very high readers. Maybe it's too much to do whole group instruction, and they could do it more small group and really hone in on to what their student needs and how much they need of it.

Anna: And wouldn't you say that the sound wall lessons are coinciding with your phonics lessons, right?

Gina: Oh, yes, yes.

Anna: So then if you're teaching whole class phonics, then it would be probably whole class.

Gina: Right.

Anna: But if you're teaching new skills in small groups, then it would be there. The tricky part with that, I would think, would be when you're teaching phonics and small groups, which I'm all for if that's what needs to be done, then you have different parts of the wall revealed for different groups.

Gina: Right.

Anna: Have you run into that being an issue or a challenge for you with your class?

Gina: No, you know what I've gone through with what to do with the sound wall even with my tutoring kids more one-on-one. There are pictures, I think, printables that you can get of a sound wall. So I would just have my students have their own little individual sound wall in a binder or in a page projector and just do it more that way than having the visual up on my wall.

That is a question I get a lot on my social media and my Instagram. People say, "I don't have that kind of wall space." If you see a picture of mine, it is taking up a lot of real estate and I still, with my district, I am required to have a word wall as well.

Anna: Okay.

Gina: So people are asking, "How do you find the space?" and I said, "Well then find an individual one for each student or a smaller printable one that you could just have at your desk. It might not have the mouth pictures, but it's better than having nothing."

Anna: It's a reference for students.

Gina: Yeah.

Anna: So that's interesting that you're required to use a word wall. I know nowadays there's a million conversations out there, articles and everything, about, "Take down your word wall, put up a sound wall." Are you finding that you can still make use of a word wall or is it just a compliance thing?

Gina: I am still making use of it because if it's going to be up, I want it to have a reason. So the way I actually adjusted it, I asked for permission, and they said it's fine as long as I have my word wall up. I don't need to have the word coffins, like the shapes of the words.

Anna: Yes. Oh, yes.

Gina: Yep. So because now that we know we don't visually memorize words, we don't need to do it like that. So what I am creating, it's my summer project, I started doing it throughout the year, is sound boxes and putting those words in sound boxes. If they are irregular, I put the heart part, the heart on there for the irregular words, and I added digraphs, because my biggest aha for when I started studying about the sound wall was that our students are trying to find the word "there" and how to spell "there." What sound on the alphabet starts with nothing on our word wall? If there's a T, how do they know it's a T? T says /t/. So that was one of my big aha moments, plus knowing we don't need to memorize the word shape and the word coffins. So I added digraphs to my word wall, and I'm changing all my words that I'm required to have into sound boxes.

Anna: Oh, yeah. Tell me what you mean by sound boxes.

Gina: So if the word is "chat." "Chat," if you segment it, it has three sounds, /ch/ /ă/ /t/. So then I'll have the CH in a box, the A in a box, and the T in the box because I do a lot of word mapping in my small groups so my students are used to seeing that.

Anna: Yeah, that's really smart. Of course, I know what sound boxes are, I'm not sure why I was brain freezing there, but I had never thought of doing that for a word wall. That's really cool. Of course, doing the digraphs makes perfect sense. I don't know why that never came to my mind. How do you choose what words you put up there?

Gina: It's the words that we're required to. I think they're the Dolch list.

Anna: Oh, okay. Okay. Gotcha.

Gina: Yeah.

Anna: Okay.

Gina: So that's what my district wants up and that's fine. Like I said, as long as I can alter it to make sense to my students and how I'm teaching those words, then let's give this a try. Again, I'm just coming up with this on my own, so we'll see how that works next year.

Anna: Yeah, I'd love to talk to you about that after you try it, because that makes perfect sense. When you're teaching the words explicitly and showing them why you spell each part the way you spell it, having it as a reference can be perfectly fine. I think the issue with word walls so much was that it was supposed to be like a memorization piece.

Gina: Right. Yes.

Anna: Then also, like you said, it was so hard to find some of those irregular words because of how they started.

Anything else that you'd like to share about sound walls? Maybe questions that people ask you on Instagram, commonly asked questions that you could answer for us?

Gina: Yes. A lot of questions are how do I use it? I think we covered a lot of them.

What does my instruction look like? I do believe that with the sound wall, having a mirror available to your students is very important for them to make sure they're looking at their mouth themselves. So there is a mirror set up by my sound wall so that my students can walk up and self-check on their own.

Another question, "Is the real estate available in a classroom or in a reading specialist or interventionist office going to be enough?" Tools 4 Reading, who I took their course and whose materials I use, do have posters too. I don't know if I mentioned that.

Anna: Okay.

Gina: So it's a poster with the real mouth pictures. I actually have those in my basement where I tutor for my tutoring students.

Using the other question, do we really need to say affricate, fricative, stop, nasal? Again, like I said, I don't know if you really have to hone it in and have your students repeat those words to you, but use them for instruction.

What was the other one? I just think it's that I've seen huge gains with it with my first graders with just confusion of sounds.

Anna: Sure.

Gina: This is such a big age when they're coming in and they're spelling and we're not overloading, but their memory is becoming very loaded with this sound this week, this spelling, and now we're adding another spelling for the same sound, and it sounds so similar to this sound. Their little mouth without their teeth and everything else that's going on, they're growing, trying to figure it out. The sound wall really has made BIG improvements in my classroom, and I really see my students using it daily.

Anna: That is wonderful to hear. In the show notes for this episode, I'm going to share a free sound wall lesson. I don't at this time have a full set of lessons, but it's basically a template that somebody could follow to create their own. Also, if you would buy Tools 4 Reading, I'm assuming lessons are included with that.

Gina: Yes, they have a manual.

Anna: Also, Gina mentioned the Tools 4 Reading training, which I have taken as well for sound walls. We'll provide a link to that so you can check that out. Then also, I'll provide a link to Gina's Instagram where you can find her.

Also, she's got a special way where you could set up a consult call because anyone who runs an Instagram account knows how hard it is to keep up with all of those messages. I let so many go, it makes me feel really bad, but they just float away. I lose them if I can't answer them in the moment. So that would be a way to really pick her brain and get some really good answers.

Thanks so much, Gina, for joining us. I always like talking to you.

Gina: Oh, me too! Thank you again for having me. I was so excited to come back.

Anna: You can find the show notes for today's episode at themeasuredmom.com/episode128.