Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger from The Measured Mom here, and welcome to the Triple R Teaching Podcast! You are listening to the third in our series of posts about teaching phonics.

Today I want to talk about Orton-Gillingham. This was something that was really confusing to me for a long time. A lot of people told me about it, mentioned that they used that approach, or that they were certified in Orton-Gillingham. I didn't know what any of that meant. I want to clear that up for anyone who has questions and also to address some criticisms of the Orton-Gillingham approach.

First of all, Orton-Gillingham is not a curriculum, it's an approach. There are many curricula that base their instruction on the Orton-Gillingham approach, but it looks different depending on the program. Orton-Gillingham is direct, explicit, multisensory, structured, sequential, diagnostic, and prescriptive. I know that was a lot, we're going to look at what some of those things look like in an Orton-Gillingham lesson, but I want you to know that those are the qualities of Orton-Gillingham.

Orton-Gillingham was named after Samuel T. Orton and Anna Gillingham, who both were born in the late 1800s. Orton died in 1948 and Gillingham in 1963, so this has been around for a long time. Samuel Orton was a neuropsychiatrist and a pathologist who focused on reading failure and related language processing difficulties. Anna Gillingham actually learned from him and she was also an educator and psychologist. The Orton-Gillingham Approach was pioneered by these two people and, of course, named after them.

It's generally meant for being used in a one-on-one setting, but now it's becoming more mainstream as we're understanding that structured literacy is appropriate for all learners. Now we're seeing small group lessons modeled after the Orton-Gillingham approach and even whole group programs basing their lessons on Orton-Gillingham. It was initially designed for learners with dyslexia, but now many educators believe that it is useful for all students.

The Orton-Gillingham approach directly teaches the fundamental structure of language. It begins with sound-symbol relationships and then progresses to more complex

concepts.

A big part of Orton-Gillingham is its multisensory lessons, they are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

I'm currently being trained by IMSE, the Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, so that in a few months I should have my Orton-Gillingham certificate.

Their lessons look something like this. A few times a week, you are to use a three-part drill, which is visual and kinesthetic. The visual drill is when you show flashcards of all the sound spellings you've taught so far, and students should do something like this. A says /ă/, F says /f/, or they can just say the sound of the letter that's on the card. There's also a kinesthetic drill where you say the sounds and they write the letter that represents the sound in sand or some other surface. So, if you said, "The sound is /f/", they would say and write, "F says /f/." And when they say, "/f/," they're underlining the letter.

If you've taught them multiple ways to spell a sound, they can divide their tray into two, three, or even more. So I might say, "There are two ways to spell this sound, divide your tray into two parts. Eyes on me. The sound is /s/. Repeat, /s/."

Then they would write, "S says /s/, and SS says /s/." Later on, they would also add the C, and anything else they learn that represents that sound. Eventually with some vowels, for example, they're going to have quite a few in that sand.

The drill ends with a blending drill. So you have a board and you have cards that go on it, and each card has a letter or a set of letters depending on the sound. They have blends on single cards, and they have digraphs on single cards. You point to each item, students say the sound of it, and then blend it together. It might be "/fl/, /ĭ/, /p/ - flip." Sometimes it makes a real word, and sometimes not, so they put their thumb up or down to show whether or not it's a real word.

Then you're going to explicitly teach the new phonics skill. There are different things to include here. In the approach that I'm using they want you to use a physical object as an anchor for helping them remember the concept and to start with an alliterative sentence. For example, if I'm teaching the sound /m/, I might say, "Listen to this sentence: Many mumbling mice make music in the moonlight. What sound do you hear repeated in that sentence?" And they would say, "/m/." That's actually starting with phonemic awareness.

You're going to teach the rule, so I would say, "This is the letter M, it represents the sound /m/." Then you'd have them practice writing the letter M in the sand. Depending on how far along they are, you're also going to dictate words and sentences for them to write.

There's a very structured procedure for doing this. If I said, "Write the word 'mat,'" they're supposed to pound the word, "mat," (said while pounding fist onto other hand). Then they're supposed to break it into phonemes by tapping with their fingers, /m/-/ǎ/-/t/, then they pound again "mat," and then they write it on the line.

For writing sentences there's also quite a structure for that as well. You dictate the sentence, you pound the syllables in the sentence, they pound and repeat with you, you point to all the lines and say the words, they point to the lines and say the words, and then they write. It is very, very structured.

IMSE calls irregular words, "red words," which other programs may call the same or something different. These are high frequency words that need extra attention because they don't follow all the spelling patterns. The procedure for teaching red words in the program I'm using is that you introduce the word, you count the phonemes in the word, you talk about how to spell those phonemes, and you talk about what's unusual - ahout the part of the word doesn't match what you think you would see.

Then there's a very structured way of practicing the word. They write it with crayon, with their paper on top of plastic netting that you maybe use for sewing I think or some of knitting, I'm not sure, I'm not a sewer, but something like that! So they write it with crayon, and then they trace it with their finger. They integrate all these multi-sensory things. They also tap the word so they would tap the spelling on their arm. So if the word is "said," they would start at their shoulder and go down to their wrist, S-A-I-D. And then they say "said" by sliding their finger from their shoulder down to their wrist. They do that multiple times.

Orton-Gillingham gets deep into the structure of language. In addition to teaching these basic sound-spellings, children learned about syllable types and syllable division. So you're looking very closely at where to divide a word into syllables based on the position of the vowels and the consonants. Then you identify the syllable types after you've divided and read the word.

Orton-Gillingham is really about teaching phonics, but a full approach like IMSE's also

includes comprehension and vocabulary. Those things though will be more something that you would come up with on your own versus following a strict scope and sequence. At least that's been my experience.

That's an overview of what Orton-Gillingham looks like. There are criticisms of Orton-Gillingham, and I think some are legit and some, maybe not so much. Let's talk about that.

First of all, many people will say, this is very old, it's been around for a super long time, and it's not backed by research. The tricky part about that is it's hard to create a study that examines the efficacy of Orton-Gillingham, and there are different reasons for that.

Number one, there's many different programs that call themselves Orton-Gillingham or legitimately are based on the Orton-Gillingham approach, they just look at things differently. It also depends on the training of the teacher. If you have a teacher thrown into a classroom, expected to teach using the Orton-Gillingham approach, and it's brand new to them, it's not going to be as effective as somebody who's taken a year or two training. It also depends on whether you're teaching it with the whole class, small group, or one-on-one. Anything done one-on-one is going to be more effective probably than a whole-group approach, just because you're able to be very diagnostic in that one-on-one setting. It's a little more tricky when you're working with a larger group.

It also depends on the severity of the disability. We're being told now that twenty percent of children have dyslexia, but there's a big range of dyslexia. You have some kids who just have slight dyslexia, and that can really be handled by some structured literacy interventions, and you have kids who are severely dyslexic.

Finally, it's hard to measure the efficacy of Orton-Gillingham because we don't know what's happening in the rest of the day. If you have a child right here, who's getting Orton-Gillingham tutoring once a day, but in the classroom they're being taught to use three-cueing as they're reading and solving words, then it's a little hard to know versus somebody who's getting Orton-Gillingham and structured literacy in the class. All that said, it is hard to research.

Recently however, there was a study reported in the Reading League Journal, and I will try to find that specific journal and link to it in the show notes. This is what the authors wrote at the end of the article,

"In summary, the findings from this meta-analysis do not provide definitive evidence that OG interventions significantly improve the reading outcomes of students with, or at risk for, word learning, reading disorders, such as dyslexia. However, the mean ES of 0.22 indicates OG interventions may hold promise for positively impacting the reading outcomes of this population of students. Additional high quality research is needed to identify whether OG interventions are, or are not, effective for students with and at risk for WLRD."

This isn't specifically saying that Orton-Gillingham methods are bad, or they don't work, it's just that statistically it has not been proven that they are significantly better.

I think it's good to remember that phonics instruction should be systematic, sequential, and explicit. That's what research tells us and Orton-Gillingham is all three of those things.

However, one specific piece of Orton-Gillingham that research has not proven to be making any kind of difference is the multisensory approach. Common sense could tell us that it makes sense that we should involve different parts of the body, but that has not been proven by research, which is interesting because the multisensory is really the heart of Orton-Gillingham.

As someone pointed out in a Facebook group I'm a part of, what you would probably really need is a study that compares kids learning with Orton-Gillingham, but leaving out those multisensory things like writing and sand and arm tapping, and then kids who received the same instruction with those multisensory techniques. I don't know if a study like that is forthcoming, but that's really what you would probably need to test the validity of these multisensory actions.

One criticism of Orton-Gillingham is that it doesn't incorporate phonemic awareness. People say that's because as the original creators of this approach created it before we really knew all the research about the importance of phonemic awareness. Now I have to say, in my experience, it's not true that OG does not include phonemic awareness because we know this now, so programs are incorporating it. However, I think there is a valid criticism that OG typically goes from print to speech rather than speech to print, which we're finding may be more effective.

I don't think this is a hard thing to change in your lessons. If you're teaching a new sound, instead of saying, this is an A and it says /ă/, or represents /ă/, you could switch it around. You could give that alliterative sentence. You could talk about the sound. You could show a card from a sound wall where the sound is represented with the picture of the mouth, and whether it's voiced or unvoiced, and you could talk about that sound.

If I'm teaching the sound spelling of, /m/ is M, after I've given that many mumbling mice sentence, I could say "The sound we're going to spell today is the sound of /m/. Look in this mirror. What is your mouth doing when you make the sound, /m/? That's right, your lips are coming together and you can hold the sound /m/ for as long as you want. Plug your nose, can you still make this sound? No, not really. So, /m/ is something that we call a nasal sound."

Now, do they need to memorize that this is a nasal sound? No, they do not, but it can be helpful to give a little bit of information as they see where it belongs on the sound wall. And then you would say, "One way we spell the sound /m/, is with the letter M." Then you could help them make the letter M in the air and make it in the sand.

Personally, I think that having them form those letters with their finger and underline is good for letter formation. I've been using the Orton-Gillingham approach with my youngest as I work to get certified, and when we started he was constantly mixing up capital and lowercase letters or forming letters incorrectly. That constant practice of writing in the sand and my insistence that he forms the letters correctly has made a huge difference. So, whether or not it helps them remember the sounds and the spellings, I'm not sure, but the value of doing that for forming letters, I found to be really important.

Another criticism of Orton-Gillingham is that there are too many rules. There are definitely different approaches to teaching phonics that are also very good, that are not as rule-heavy. I think that there is something to this criticism because when you are teaching this explicit way of dividing words into syllables and the syllable division patterns, there are so many exceptions that you have to teach that it gets a little overwhelming. So, I am still on the fence as to whether I think that these very deliberate syllable division practices are worthwhile because they do take a lot of time to teach, and I do think we need to reserve a lot of time in our lessons for students to actually practice reading connected text.

That would be my criticism of Orton-Gillingham. It feels like there's a lot of word-level activity, and not as much connected text opportunity. If you are spending a ton of time doing this long procedure for red words and doing syllable division practice and doing dictation, it can be hard to fit in reading connected text, and that's the whole point! That's what we're trying to get! I would want to be careful that I'm not crowding out the connected text reading and making that just be sort of the last thing we do, if we have time. That should really be what we're doing a lot of so kids can orthographically map these words and see the value of the isolated practice that they're doing.

One thing that I think is very good about Orton-Gillingham is its focus on encoding, which is spelling. My little guy has been a strong reader from the beginning. When I started teaching him using decodable books, he caught on very quickly, but spelling is not the same. You can be a very strong reader and be a struggling speller, or just not a very good speller.

I really like the dictation exercises in Orton-Gillingham and the sentence dictation. I have found that those are really powerful. A lot of those spelling rules that feel like a waste of time actually really come in handy you when you're spelling. I wouldn't want to say to get rid of rules altogether, I definitely don't think so, because having those as a reference is really helpful when spelling.

Another criticism of Orton-Gillingham is that comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary are not in their lessons. This really depends on the program. If you're following IMSE, which is meant to be something you can use with the whole class, they do let you know that you need to include those things in the lessons. It's just that, I think I said this earlier, you have to come up with those on your own. They give you lots of examples and ways of doing this, but I wouldn't say it's necessarily part of a curriculum. It's something that you need to come up with.

I don't think that has to be a bad thing. There's a lot of really good interactive, read-aloud programs that you can buy, or you can just do them yourself. In those you teach vocabulary and you teach knowledge and you teach comprehension skills and strategies. You have to make sure that this is important to you and that you include it consistently in your day.

Now, of course, when you're reading a decodable book, there are comprehension questions at the end. IMSE includes that in all of their decodable books, and I include those in the decodable books that you can find on my website. That is really important! You want to make sure the decodable book makes sense and lends itself to questions and discussion.

As for fluency, well, we know that fluency really depends on automaticity with word reading. I think there's a lot of that in Orton-Gillingham. After you dictate the words and they write them, they should read them again to you. You can also have other lists of words that they read. But again, my encouragement is to make sure you're including lots of connected texts, and that it's not just lists of words, but actual stories in books or passages. Definitely make sure there's plenty of time for applying the phonics knowledge that you're teaching.

This was a bit of a longer episode, but I wanted to give you the big picture of what

Orton-Gillingham is all about, as well as get specific about what lessons could look like, and then examine some criticisms of Orton-Gillingham and my response to those. If you'd like to find the show notes for this episode, you can do that at themeasuredmom.com/episode69. Don't forget to check out my membership for loads of support with your phonics teaching, no matter what approach you're using. You can learn more about the membership at themeasuredmom.com/membership. We'll talk to you next week!