



Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here from The Measured Mom, and I'm so excited to kick off the first of our series of interviews with teachers who transitioned from balanced literacy to structured literacy. Our first interview is with Savannah Campbell of Campbell Creates Readers. She's got an amazing presence on Instagram. She also has a wonderful blog and TPT store, and I know you're going to enjoy the conversation today. Her love for students and her passion for helping them really comes out. The only issue is that when I was recording this, I did not have my mic set up properly so my audio is not very good, but Savannah is the star of this episode and you will hear her nice and clear. 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 entrusted 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 everybody! Welcome to another episode in our Balanced to Structured Literacy Series today. I'm really excited to welcome Savannah Campbell. She's a reading specialist and she is active on Instagram, on her blog, and in her Facebook group. They're all called Campbell Creates Readers. Welcome Savannah!

Savannah Campbell: Thank you, Anna. I'm so excited to be here! As I told you when you reached out to me, I have followed your blog for years!

Anna: Yeah, I am very honored. You are rocking it over on Instagram so it's exciting, very exciting, to hear that there was a connection.

Can you talk to us a little bit about your understanding of how to teach reading and how that looked for most of your teaching experience?

Savannah: Yeah. So I like to say that I was born and raised in a balanced literacy world. I've been teaching for eleven years, and all eleven years, I've taught at the

school that I went to as a kid, so it's a really special place for me. From the beginning, I've always cared and I've always tried my hardest and I've always had relationships with children. And yet, I couldn't figure out why my kids weren't performing the way I knew they could.

I actually have two master's degrees from William and Mary - one is in elementary education (I got that in 2011), and then I got my reading specialist degree in 2015. And I hate to say it, but neither one of those programs taught me how to teach children how to read. I did everything they told me to do, and my world was really centered around authentic literacy experiences for children. I thought that if I just gave them the right books and if I just could help them find their voice as writers, they would magically learn to read and write.

I just remember always thinking, "What is missing? Is it me? Why am I not making progress? I'm doing everything. I'm reading all the books." I would read like twenty professional development books each summer and do everything I could. And yet, it still just wasn't working.

It wasn't until about 2018 that I realized it's because no one had ever taught me about, and I hadn't learned, what explicit instruction was, truthfully.

Anna: Except you probably learned that it was boring, right? That it wasn't something you wanted to do?

Savannah: Yes, that's right! They made it seem like if you just taught children something that was like a no-no, like you can't just teach children stuff, that they have to discover and they have to explore and they have to categorize. It's just so funny, looking back now, how I never realized that you kind of just have to teach them some things.

Anna: Yes, and I am totally with you, we probably read a lot of the same books! I loved all the Fountas and Pinnell books, Lucy Calkins, Regie Routman. I just devoured them, they're full of notes and I still have those in my basement.

Savannah: And Richard Allington.

Anna: Oh yes. They made it sound so inspiring, and I think that's positive, because we

want to be excited about teaching reading! But I was just talking to someone else today, and in Lucy Calkins' "Art of Teaching Reading," I think the book is like six hundred pages, and there's only like six pages about phonics! So it's about dreams, which is very exciting, but that won't get kids to read.

Savannah: Well, and it's funny that you mentioned that and the likability factor. I literally would talk about Lucy like she was my friend. I read all of Lucy's books, "The Art of Teaching Reading," "The Art of Teaching Writing," and I would go around quoting them. And you're right, they make it feel so much like a craft, it's very much what you bring into it and the teacher's personality and all these things, but it's so flimsy. The actual instruction part of it is SO flimsy, but it makes you feel good.

Anna: So true.

Savannah: And that's I think how they fooled us for so long.

Anna: In some ways, they're correct, how they say that what the teacher brings to it is so important. That's really important, but at the same time, if you don't equip the teacher with what they need to give to the kids, then it's just not going to work. Personality won't teach someone to read.

Savannah: I agree, and there's a difference between being a good teacher and bringing your own spin to it, and not actually giving teachers the skills to teach. That's what I think that they were really missing for a long time. It's hard to reflect back on sometimes.

Anna: I know, I know it is. If you're able to, can you share any examples of something where you look back and you see what the issue was now, but you didn't know it at the time?

Savannah: Absolutely. I remember I taught these fourth graders and they were these boys who were so smart, and they were so articulate, and they were so funny, and they just had everything going for them, except for they couldn't read. It's not that they couldn't read CVC words. If it had been that obvious, I think we would've noticed it. They knew their letter sounds, they could do CVC, where it's that kind of a thing, but there was just some disconnect between how intelligent and articulate they were and what they were able to do in print.

I couldn't figure out the disconnect, and I remember thinking, "If I can just put the right book in their hands." I thought that was going to be the magic solution. I bought every book, literally every book, that I thought that they might have a shred of interest in. At the end of the year, guess what? They still couldn't read, and they still didn't love to read, because I never actually taught them. It wasn't until years later that their mothers actually told me that they got diagnosed with dyslexia.

In my reading specialist program, my professor had actually told us that dyslexia doesn't exist.

Anna: Oh my goodness.

Savannah: And that was 2015 that I went through that program!

Anna: I'm totally with you on that one, and I feel so bad because of it.

I started out teaching with third, fourth, and fifth grade for three years, in a combined class. Then, after that, I taught first and second. I didn't know anything, except what I had learned growing up, about learning how to read. I didn't know anything! I didn't know about a phonics scope and sequence or what order you should teach it.

I had these third graders, looking back I'm sure there were two of them that had dyslexia, and I had just told their parents to read to them more and give them more books and just practice, practice. And when I had a third grader who was spelling CVCE words as CVC words, it just never occurred to me that I should give her an assessment and sit down and work it out.

For years too, when people would email me in my blog and say, "I need help with my child with dyslexia," I would just say, "I really don't know about that, but here's some websites."

I never considered that it was something I should really study. I just thought it was just kind of this rare thing that only a few people know about.

But now we know many children have it and all teachers should understand it. So that's sad to hear that they were still giving that bad information not that many years ago.

Savannah: Well, and too, the teaching that benefits children with dyslexia can benefit all. It's not going to hurt any child, but for some children, they absolutely HAVE to have it.

There's one other thing I was going to say about balanced literacy and how attractive it is. I truly think that, for teachers, it's made so much sense because that's how we learn to read. So many teachers were part of that 40% that are going to learn to read, no matter what.

I felt like when I grew up, as a child, I just opened a book and I knew how to read, and so it was difficult for me to understand why, for some children, that didn't work. As teachers, many of us are readers and we love to read, and we don't understand how it can be a different process for those children. Not that we learned to read differently, but that it's not the same ease with which I had learned it.

Anna: Well, when I think about why I was, for so long, against this explicit teaching, I think it's because that's how I learned to read back in the eighties, with explicit teaching.

Savannah: Oh, really?

Anna: Yeah. So I'm older than you, I'm sure, by quite a bit. My mom taught me to read when I was like five with a little notebook, which I still have, of a decodable story that she wrote and illustrated for me. I actually just posted about it on Instagram.

Savannah: Oh wow, that's so cool!

Anna: So that's how I first learned to read, but my memories of reading in school were that I was bored. I was a quick reader so I was bored by the decodable stories that we had. That's a whole different issue because when you talk about explicit teaching, it can also be differentiated and everything. But balanced literacy just is so exciting!

Savannah: It is. It's almost like you try to get to the end point, in balanced literacy, too quickly. You try to get to the authentic books and the writing whatever you want, way too quickly without realizing that we have to actually teach them how to do both of those things.

Anna: I read somewhere that sometimes, with balanced literacy and whole language, it's like we want to see our kids pretend to be adult readers. That's what we do by giving them these leveled books, where, all of a sudden, they're fluent because they just figure out the pattern and then they sound like they're really reading, so we think they are. But when you learn to break down the Simple View of Reading and you understand that when they're not actually decoding, that it's not real reading comprehension, it's a hard pill to swallow because you've been doing it for so long.

Savannah: I absolutely agree. It is. I love what you said about we're having them pretend to do what readers are doing. That's so true.

Anna: It's so true! So, what got your attention?

Savannah: Yeah, so in 2019, I was Orton-Gillingham trained. The state of Virginia was sending seventy-five teachers, twice a year, to be Orton-Gillingham trained through Dawn Nieman, with the Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators, AOGPE.

I remember sitting there, during the four or five day training, and I was like five months pregnant at the time, and I'm sitting there like, "Why did nobody tell me this? Why did nobody tell me this? Oh my gosh, I never knew!"

I literally never knew there were rules. Nobody in my entire life had taught me that there were rules for English. In fact, they told me that English doesn't make sense, and I believed them. I kind of just sort of thought my children would miraculously weave their way through this thing that doesn't make sense.

That's why, I think, we try to put them in these authentic texts because it's like, "Oh, well, English doesn't make sense. You just have to see it a whole lot. And if you see it a whole lot, then you'll learn to read."

But then, when I learned things about the fact that TCH says /ch/ when it comes right

after a short vowel, I was like, "What? That's a thing?" Or the fact that words in English don't end in I, and so, that's why we use AI in the middle and AY at the end, OI in the middle, OY at the end. That really just lit a fire, but I have to say it wasn't a complete transformation overnight.

At the time, I was teaching third grade. So I started with one kid, this one kid in third grade who nothing seemed to be working for. He started staying after with me and doing it. All of a sudden, this kid was able to spout these rules that I didn't know until I was in my thirties.

But the thing is, I still wasn't fully transitioned because the very next year I was hired as a reading specialist and in that first year, I was using LLI and I was trying to somehow meld LLI with this explicit phonics instruction. So what I would do is I would teach the phonics rules and then I'd give them a leveled text. We had to have our Orton-Gillingham person come in and observe me, and she was like, "Savannah, I think you're losing a little bit of the explicit systematic nature." And I was like, "What do you mean?"

Anna: For our listeners who don't know what LLI is, could you explain what that is and how it works? I can say it's from Fountas and Pinnell, it's their intervention program, but tell us more about how it works.

Savannah: LLI is Leveled Literacy Intervention and it's through Fountas and Pinnell. There's different colored kits, kindergarten is an orange kit, first grade is a green kit, second is blue and on and on. These kits cost thousands of dollars a piece, I think, maybe \$3,000 a kit. Basically the focus (I know that they won't say that this is the focus, but this is how it was presented to me), is taking children through a series of leveled texts and getting harder and harder.

One thing that I had really liked about it, at the time, was with LLI, if you did a level D one day, the next day you would read a level B, then a level D, and then, a level B. It was an easier one and a harder one, but it is fully rooted in leveled text. Every year when I taught leveled text, I felt like my goal was to get them through a certain number of levels.

I didn't really see it as my goal being to equip them with certain skills. It was all about the levels and not the skills I wanted them to leave me with. So I was still trying to push them through the levels, because in a lot of places, that's how they're still assessed. They're still assessed with things like DRAs, and so, I thought that's what they still needed to do. I was trying to do both the phonics skills that I had learned, but then I thought they needed the authentic practice in a leveled text.

Anna: So this was the first thing. You started doing Orton-Gillingham, and she said to you, "This doesn't match up." So then, what was the next thing?

Savannah: So I think the pandemic is what really moved me along on this journey. I was telling you, before we started recording, that in March of 2020 when the world shut down, my cueing strategy posters were still on the wall. For those who don't know what those are, those are things like, "Get your mouth ready. Skip to the end. Does it make sense? Look at the picture." All of those strategies that are actually teaching our children to guess. They were still hanging up on my wall.

When we shut down, T/TAC, which is an organization through William and Mary, was doing a book study of Kilpatrick's "Essentials for Preventing, Assessing, and Overcoming Reading Difficulties." And so, every week for several months during the pandemic, I sat there on Zoom with a group of teachers for about an hour and a half. We really dug into the book and it helped me understand it in a way that helped me to more fully shift over.

I have to say that I'm also extraordinarily lucky for a couple of reasons. My district was making the shift already, and my district reading specialist is very gentle with the way she helps people shift. She never makes you feel like she's attacking you. And so, when she was first talking about not doing the cueing strategies, I was like, "Over my dead body!" But she knew how to gently usher me into it. The second thing is, I have an administrator that really believes in me and knows that I'm doing what's best for kids. That's been really helpful because as I've transitioned, I haven't been afraid to try these new things. I knew that there were people that were supporting me in my school, so that was extremely helpful.

But then, I think, the floodgates opened. I had my first tiptoes of OG and then that book study, and then it was like, I was all in! I can't tell you up from down, because everything I did was, all of a sudden, about understanding how children learn to read. And I eventually became LETRS trained, I've done both volumes of LETRS, and I've got 30 more hours of Orton-Gillingham training under my belt. I've done The Reading Teacher's Top 10 Tools. I've tried to do as many things as I could to help myself understand better, for the sake of kids.

Anna: Awesome. So now you're a specialist versus a classroom teacher, can you talk to us a little bit about your first steps when a child comes to you and what some of your sessions look like?

Savannah: I'd love to! I teach kiddos K through five, and most of the children that I come across need the explicit phonics instruction. Most of the time, if they're at a point where an intervention needs to be in comprehension, they're way past the phonics level. With the phonics that I'm doing, they would need morphology and that kind of thing. But my groups are really either targeted on letter sound and phonemic awareness instruction or phonics instruction.

We do our universal screeners three times a year. After our fall universal screeners, we use STAR, but we also use something called PALS, which is a uniquely Virginia thing. Once we get those scores, when they come to me, I do a couple of additional assessments.

For the older kiddos, I do a spelling inventory and I do the Gallistel-Ellis, which is a phonics screener. Between the spelling inventory and the phonics screener, I have a pretty good idea of their decoding and encoding abilities, and that helps me to start.

Overall, I really do a typical Orton-Gillingham lesson, where we go from the sound level, to the symbol, to the word, to the sentence, to the connected text level. You're really thinking about building from the smallest unit to what we want, which is the connected text. So I follow pretty much that, and it's a lot.

One thing that I've started incorporating, that I just never realized the importance of, is review. I think that if every teacher in this country could set aside ten or fifteen minutes a day in their classroom to review skills taught, I think we would have a much better outcome for students. There simply isn't enough time spent reviewing reading and spelling.

Every day I always try to think about, "Am I giving my kids enough time to read and enough time to spell the skills that I've taught them?"

Anna: Okay, so you recommended a Kirkpatrick book, "The Essentials of Preventing Reading Difficulties." Are there any other books or resources that were helpful to you, that you would recommend to people getting started?

Savannah: Yeah, so there's a few books. I really love "Know Better, Do Better" by Liben and Liben. They were administrators who started their own school and they're like, "Huh, this is weird. Our kids don't know how to read." So they did all this research into what works and they ended up being instrumental in changing things in New York

City. I think they've had a big impact in changing and moving away from the Lucy Calkin ages. "Know Better, Do Better," I feel, is very friendly and very to the point. It's got a good balance of theory and practice to it, which makes it pretty accessible.

Kilpatrick is good, but Kilpatrick can be a lot. "Equipped for Reading Success," I think, is a lot friendlier than the "Essentials of Assessing, Preventing, and Overcoming Reading Difficulties" book. But even "Equipped for Reading Success," when you look at it, is a hefty one, whereas "Know Better, Do Better" is pretty short.

I also am obsessed with Lyn Stone's "Reading for Life," but I will say, if you are just moving away from balanced literacy, you probably shouldn't read it because she's got this snark in her book that I just adore. I adore it, but she literally has a chapter in the book about cults and comparing balanced literacy to a cult. So if you're trying to gently move away, don't go there, go to her later.

Anna: I'm totally with you, and actually, I just talked to Heidi Jane, from Instagram and TikTok, and she recommended "Know Better, Do Better." That's actually the first book that I read. I think I bought Lyn Stone's book on Kindle, and I started to read it and was very offended by how she talked about balanced literacy. Recently, I bought all of her books in print and I enjoy them a lot, but I was not ready at first, so that's a good point.

Savannah: Oh no, you have to be ready. But I will say, I think, the first thing all people should read, if they are trying to transition from balanced literacy to structured literacy, is the Emily Hanford "At a Loss for Words" article or listen to the podcast. I think, for many of us, that's the article that we were like, "Oh, oh. Yep, yep. This isn't good."

I actually was speaking to a parent, recently, who has a son who was having some difficulties. I was like, "Does your son look at a word and look at the first letter of the word and just guess?"

And she's like, "He does. That's exactly what he does!"

And I was like, "Why don't you read this article? I think this will give you a little bit of insight into what's going on."

And she was like, "That was fascinating!"

Anna: Yeah, well, that article was what it did it for me, but not right away. I just got mad the first time I read it. I think it was probably a year later that I went back to it and my whole goal was just to refute it. I was thinking that have to study this, so I know what to say, and I couldn't come up with a response because she was right.

Savannah: Well, and I think we need to be okay with being mad at first. It's okay to be mad that what you thought was true for a very long time is turning out to not be true. And it's okay to be mad, but because I know that we're educators that care about children, I hope that through our anger, we also have open minds and that we always take it back to what's best for children.

Anna: Yes, very well said! Your interest in doing this led you to branch out on social media and share. Can you tell us a little bit about how you got started on Instagram? And then, how that branched out into your own online business?

Savannah: Yeah, so it's really weird looking back because when I first started on Instagram, I remember thinking, "Okay, if I just post pictures of my dog and my baby, I'll get a million likes," and I had no idea what Instagram was about. So I was just posting a bunch of nonsense and then, I don't even know the first science of reading-ish posts that I did, but it started getting traction.

I realized, "Well, hey, if we're not talking about this in teacher prep programs, then this is a place that we can talk about it." And so, I just started talking and I've never stopped, I guess. Instagram was my first because as I told you before, I had quit Facebook. I feel like Instagram can be less toxic in some ways, and so I really focused all my energy on that.

I just found this incredible community. There's so many people that are willing to talk to you and listen to you. I think my first person that really listened and spoke to me was Meredith, from Creativity to the Core. She was just so good at helping me work through things. Then I realized that I wanted to be that person too. I want to be the person who can listen and can help you problem solve, whether it's your own child, as a parent, or if you're a classroom teacher because I, once again, have been extraordinarily lucky in the district that I live in. Many people are doing this alone and you shouldn't have to.

So by being on social media, I hope that we can let people know that they're not alone. When you have all these people coming in your face about balanced literacy and you're starting to wonder if maybe you do have this wrong, then you have this place that you can go to and you can get facts. I guess that's just kind of who I want to be. I want all

children to have a chance to live a literate life and it's going to come through the educators who are teaching them.

Anna: Well you have a lot of really interesting phonics facts and other things and challenging quotes that you put on Instagram that really inspire people to think. I like how you say you're not going to sugarcoat it. You're just going to say how it is, and that's really important because that's really how you get people's attention. It's just by saying it straight out.

Savannah: When we get caught up in all of this stuff, I think we forget who it's about. It's about these children's actual lives. I told you that I teach at the school that I went to as a kid, and it's a Title 1 school. These kids are growing up in the same apartment complex that I lived in. When I think about how I broke that cycle of poverty, I think about a mother who loved me and the fact that learning to read came easy to me. Then when you have these children who are living in these adverse circumstances and reading isn't easy for them, we have a responsibility to those children.

It's not just about reading words or balanced literacy or Fountas and Pinnell. It is about an actual child's life and that is somebody's baby. So many of these parents are desperate, because they don't know why their children can't read, and the teachers are telling them to just read twenty minutes each night, and they're like, "We're reading an hour and they still can't read."

It doesn't have to be that way, because we know almost every single child can learn to read. We have an obligation. They're babies, and they're our babies. Now that I'm a mom, I'm even more fired up about it.

Anna: That's awesome. I always said, as a teacher, there's nothing like sitting down for a parent teacher conference and talking with the people who love this child who was driving me crazy, more than anybody in the world, to give you a whole new perspective.

Well, thank you so much for all that you're doing on your Instagram and on your website. We're going to link to all those things on the show notes and definitely encourage people to check you out and follow you on Instagram and check out your TPT store. It has been so nice to talk to you, Savannah, and to hear your story. You have a lot of good perspective for people who are maybe stuck in the middle of trying to jump over from balanced to structured literacy. Thanks so much for sharing.

Well, that concludes my interview with Savannah. I'm sure you got from that interview what a special person she is and how dedicated she is to her students. In the show notes for this episode, which you can find at themeasuredmom.com/episode80, you will find links to Savannah on social media, as well as her blog and her TPT store. I hope that you will check her out because she has so many wonderful things to share. We'll see you next week!