Understanding the Orton-Gillingham Approach - with Pryor Rayburn

Triple R Teaching Podcast #189

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of Reach All Readers and creator of Reach All Readers. In today's episode, I speak with Pryor Rayburn, a fellow in training with the Orton-Gillingham Academy.

We walk through the principles of Orton-Gillingham and how Orton-Gillingham approaches might differ from each other, but how it all comes down to following and applying the principles. We talk about specific parts of the Orton-Gillingham approach that may not, at least not yet, be supported by research and what that means for teaching.

She also shares a very interesting and practical way to teach high frequency words, in particular those words that have challenging meanings. For example, the word "the." Meanings that are rather abstract; words that tend to trip kids up. We talk through how to specifically teach those words with a focus on meaning. I hope you enjoy today's episode. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome, Pryor!

Pryor Rayburn:

Hi! Thanks for having me.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you for being here. We're going to talk more about the Orton-Gillingham approach, but before we do that, can you introduce us to yourself? Talk to us about how you got into teaching and what you're doing now.

Pryor Rayburn:

Sure. As you said, my name's Pryor Rayburn. In my business, Orton-Gillingham Mama, I create no-prep resources and trainings for educators because I really want them to be able to reach all the kids in their classroom and hopefully save time while doing it. I'm also a fellow in training with the Orton-Gillingham Academy. I'm currently the director of a live online associate level Orton-Gillingham training with the Key Learning Center. We started this summer and we will continue the 70 hours of coursework throughout this school year. The training also includes a teaching practicum for each trainee, so it's a very comprehensive training. Lastly, I'm also the co-author of decodable books for young readers called Ready Reader Decodables.

Anna Geiger:

Before we pressed "record," you said that way back when you started teaching, you very quickly weren't feeling right about the balanced literacy approach that was happening at your school, and you started getting trained at Orton-Gillingham right away. Can you talk to us a little bit about the beginning of your education journey?

Pryor Rayburn:

Sure. I was an assistant teacher in a third grade classroom, and immediately my heart went to those students who it was my job as the assistant to be reading with and help giving them extra support. I realized there was something else going on. My brother is dyslexic, so I did have a little bit of schema on what some of the signs were, but I did not have any additional training in how to support struggling readers.

I did have students in my class with full accommodations already. I saw them being pulled out and getting something called Orton-Gillingham tutoring, and I was very intrigued. So that next summer I got trained with the Orton-Gillingham Academy at the associate level, and I've never looked back.

Anna Geiger:

What do you feel was the most important thing you got out of that training? What new understandings did you have?

Pryor Rayburn:

I think as a child, I was taught and brought up in the whole language approach, but I didn't even know what that term was. I mean, luckily I was in that smaller percentage of students who were probably going to learn to read effectively regardless of the curriculum or approach. My brother on the other hand, he really struggled.

I think I'll never forget sitting in my first day of class or second day, whatever it was, and the Orton-Gillingham teacher talking about how the spelling pattern C-K comes after a short vowel sound. I had no concept of that. Now, at the time, and I think I still am, a very good speller, but I could not have told you why. I think understanding the structure of the English language was my biggest "aha" moment.

Moving from the sound level, connecting those to the graphemes, to the syllables, to the words, to the morphemes. I'd never heard of the term "morpheme." Really how that all works together in the structure of the language, and now learning about how the brain science tells us how all brains learn to read. Kind of putting all that together was kind of my big "aha" moment.

Anna Geiger:

You said that you're a fellow in training with Orton-Gillingham Academy. What exactly does that mean?

Pryor Rayburn:

Fellows in the Orton-Gillingham Academy can lead Orton-Gillingham trainings under the academy guidelines and principles independently. As a fellow in training, I am in a multi-year training program where I am helping lead trainings under the supervision of a supervising fellow. I'm helping write the curriculum and the syllabus and help supervise the trainees through their practicum. It's definitely a joint effort as a fellow in training, and I'm very lucky with who I work with at the Key Learning Center. They have got phenomenal experience and perspective in this. I'm able to learn from some of the best in the Orton-Gillingham world, and I am just thrilled to be on that track, but I've still got some learning and more coursework to go.

Anna Geiger:

So basically, they're training you to be an independent teacher, but they want to make sure you're doing it right first, and that's why you have all this time with them.

Pryor Rayburn:

Exactly.

Anna Geiger:

For someone who may not know what Orton-Gillingham is, I know a lot of people think it's a specific program, and we know it's an approach. Can you talk about what it is and what it means? What is the approach?

Pryor Rayburn:

I think one piece that has gotten perhaps misconstrued, and I don't know if that's the right term, is the fact that the Orton-Gillingham name does not have a copyright or trademark. Really, anyone could use that term. But not all programs, curricula, or trainings are created equally, and they don't come with the same level of teacher knowledge.

For example, if you're taking a comprehensive multi-year training that includes clinical teaching and gaining feedback, that will provide really a different level of teacher understanding compared to a ten-hour or thirty-hour course in Orton-Gillingham. That's really more tied to a scripted program and one that doesn't include a teaching practicum.

Again, the trainings that I help lead through the Orton-Gillingham Academy are really tied to the standards and guiding principles. Even under the Orton-Gillingham Academy, different fellows, their training might look different. They might go in a different order in a sequence, but they are all bound by the guiding principles and standards for that training.

Anna Geiger:

Okay, so what you're saying is that just because something says "Orton-Gillingham" does not mean it's the same as any other Orton-Gillingham program. People are allowed to use that term "Orton-Gillingham" named after Samuel Orton and Anna Gillingham back in the thirties, I think? Was that when they kind of started this?

Pryor Rayburn:

Correct, so it's been around for a hundred years or close to it.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, that's crazy. So it's an approach. What do these approaches, what should they have in common? As we said, someone could call themselves Orton-Gillingham. But in general, if they really are aligned with this approach, what should we see?

Pryor Rayburn:

Again, when I talk about those principles, we want it to be explicit and systematic, simultaneous multisensory, very cognitive in its diagnostic prescriptive approach. You're using the student's errors either from a lesson or from assessment to guide your next lesson. You would also be using or attending to really all of the strands in the reading rope too.

I think a big perhaps myth or misnomer about the Orton-Gillingham approach is that it's just about phonics, but we are teaching oral language and vocabulary and attending to background knowledge in addition to that word recognition.

Anna Geiger:

And maybe that just depends on the program, right? Because there may be a program that basically just focuses on the phonics piece of it, the foundational piece of it.

Pryor Rayburn:

Well, that's a good point. And when I say "we," I should preface that with this is a training that is accredited and under the Orton-Gillingham Academy umbrella. So yes, there are other programs that come from the Orton-Gillingham lineage, but when I talk about those principles and what we're teaching, I'm talking about an Orton-Gillingham Academy training.

Anna Geiger:

When I think about Orton-Gillingham and I think about what makes it Orton-Gillingham, I think about a very structured scope and sequence. The one that I used when I was trained was based around syllable types. Would you say that that's pretty universal?

Pryor Rayburn:

I would say a lot of Orton-Gillingham based programs or approaches do utilize syllable types and syllable division.

Anna Geiger:

Another thing I would say that's very strong in them, which you mentioned already, was the multisensory piece. In the program that I used, they did arm tapping for high frequency words. They were supposed to write with a red crayon on top of a piece of paper on top of this plastic netting type stuff. They were supposed to practice letters, sounds, and sand. Then there's also a heavy focus on mastery before moving on. Would you agree?

Pryor Rayburn:

Definitely. All of those components are some of the components seen in an Orton-Gillingham lesson. That teaching to mastery is important, I would say. Perhaps not where it would hold you back because it's the structured flexibility of giving the student what they need to keep going while still continuing to review as needed. It's, I think, a great approach that you can be pushing them forward while still supporting their underlying needs.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, so I think in the way that you're talking about it, are you talking about it a lot in terms of a one-on-one intervention? Or are you talking about it as a whole group type of instruction?

Pryor Rayburn:

Great question. There are Orton-Gillingham programs that are intended more for whole group. I would be talking about more intervention, one-on-one, or small group for students who either have a diagnosis of something like dyslexia or who are showing signs of phonological deficits and struggling in reading and spelling.

Anna Geiger:

To get trained in Orton-Gillingham, there are many different options. You've gone a very high-level route, a long-term detailed route, and some teachers may not be able to do that, but they still want to

know, "Well, how can I take what we know from what works in Orton-Gillingham for the kids in my class who are struggling?" Are there some general tips that you would share?

Pryor Rayburn:

Gosh. I think we're very lucky in this educational landscape to have podcasts and very accessible research articles. There's so much alignment with the structured literacy principles and the Orton-Gillingham principles. I would dive into, you can look through... The Reading League, for example, has tools for curriculum to figure out which curriculum might align better with what you're looking for. Diving into Linnea Ehri's work with orthographic mapping, and David Kilpatrick, the importance of phonemic awareness, and not relying on those larger phonological awareness skills like rhyming or syllables and moving as quickly into phoneme level, blending, segmenting, manipulation, moving as quickly as you can. Because that's where these the deficits for these students are causing reading and/or spelling delays.

Anna Geiger:

So a teacher says, "I have a child who's struggling with learning to read. I've heard of Orton-Gillingham. Now what?" I guess I'm looking for more specifics. Can you walk us through, what could a lesson look like through the Orton-Gillingham Academy? How they would teach it for a child learning to read CVC words?

Pryor Rayburn:

Sure, and this is very broad strokes here because again, one of the principles is that it is very individualized. But I'd say generally, ideally maybe, you could start with a warmup drill. This would be a quick one to two minute kinesthetic activity that is warming up, I call it their "brain muscles."

Then going into a visual and auditory drill. where you are showing a student graphemes, individual graphemes, those are the letters that represent sounds, on a card to help build the letter-sound correspondences.

Then the other side of that is the auditory, where you are pronouncing the sounds and they are spelling the corresponding graphemes on paper. Again, knowing that reading and spelling are two sides of the same coin.

Then with those skills that they're working on in that visual and auditory drill, we would have students read words with those patterns, spell words, read them in sentences and spell them in sentences. Again, that's moving very simple to complex; the sound level to the word level and then to the sentence level. That's a big chunk of the lesson, so that's a lot of review and reinforcement.

Because again, if you were working with a student with dyslexia, they need that level of review. A student without dyslexia, they probably don't need that level of intense explicit review. But I'd say the majority of our lesson, that's going to take up the majority there.

Then after the review and reinforcement part, you would move into new information. Based on the student's needs, where it makes sense, you would be introducing a new, it could be spelling pattern, it could be a syllable type, it could be a grammar concept, it could be a new irregular word pattern.

You are going to, again, move simple to complex with that. After you explicitly teach the new skill, the student is going to practice it by saying the sounds, if that's applicable, spelling, writing words with that pattern, reading sentences, spelling sentences with that, and then reading connected text, ideally with that new skill.

Once an Orton-Gillingham practitioner is confident with kind of, I'd call that the foundational pieces, they are then weaving in more vocabulary. They're weaving in the syntax, the parts of speech, grammar, written expression. There's so much that can go into an Orton-Gillingham lesson, more than just the phonics of reading and spelling.

Anna Geiger:

Can you talk a little bit about how you weave in the other sides of the reading rope?

Pryor Rayburn:

Going back to that review and reinforcement section, and if you were looking at me, I would say it's this, I have a big chunk because there are a lot of skills.

For example, if there are ten skills that you're reviewing and reinforcing, and you're talking about even at the CVC level, like you mentioned. If the student is working on short a, short i words, short u words, short o, and they read the word "bat." Yes, they spelled "bat," they read "bat," and that's great. One could stop there, but what a great opportunity to talk about multiple meanings of the word "bat." I call it "serve and volley," so it's not just the teacher one-sided saying, "A bat is a flying animal," or this, but engaging them in conversation. "When have you seen a bat? When have you used a bat?"

For example, they might say, "In baseball."

"Great. Do you know another type of bat?"

"This is the nocturnal animal that's flying around at night."

"Ooh, that's wonderful."

"Do you hold a bat, or could you bat?"

Talking about the different parts of speech. We like to say that's "working your words." These wonderful Orton-Gillingham tutors and practitioners work so hard to make excellent word choices that align with the skills their students need to review, but it really goes beyond just the phonics pattern. It's, "How can I put so much teaching into one word?"

For "bat," they're reviewing the short a reading and spelling. They're talking about the meaning piece. They're accessing their background knowledge, their oral vocabulary. Do they know multiple meanings? Parts of speech? A lot of that can be done orally, and it can also be done written once they spell a sentence. Then going back and saying, "Great. Now can you underline the subject of that sentence? Great, that's wonderful. Where's the action or guiding questions? Where are they? Is the dog running?"

I'd say it's more of the working your words and working your lesson, beyond just the phonics component, is how we build those other pieces up the reading rope.

Anna Geiger:

That's something that teachers would be trained in with the Orton-Gillingham Academy?

Pryor Rayburn:

Exactly.

Anna Geiger:

Let's move on to high frequency words and teaching those to become sight words, words that we recognize automatically. We talked via email a little bit about orthographic mapping and what you think some traditional or current trends in high frequency word instruction are missing.

First of all, remind us what orthographic mapping is, and then we can talk about what you would add to, for example, the heart word method.

Pryor Rayburn:

Yeah, sure. Orthographic mapping is the cognitive process we use to store words for long-term automatic recognition. I do just want to say it's not a skill, it's not a form of curriculum, but it is a cognitive process. During this process, the brain science tells us that our brain rapidly attends to each letter in the word and attaches the letters to the sounds and to the word's meaning.

So when we read a word like "sock," our brain connects the letters on the page, or the graphemes, to the individual sounds in the word, /s/ /ŏ/ /k/. Then it connects those to the word "sock" and the meaning of "sock" in our oral vocabulary. In terms of that meaning, that would include multiple meanings of "sock" like we discussed. For example, the article of clothing we wear, or a synonym for hit or punch, and then the verb "to sock," or hit something.

In order for students to orthographically map a word, they must work through sounding out words in order to correctly connect the sounds to the letters to the meaning. Really this is one of the many reasons why memorizing a word or using context gets in the way of students' reading fluency. If we encourage that guessing or using picture clues, then we're robbing them of the chance to orthographically map the word.

To link that to sight words and irregular words, like you mentioned, the research tells us that we orthographically map phonically regular and irregular words in the same manner. So until we teach our students a systematic way to connect letters in an irregular word to their sounds and those letters and sounds to the word's meaning, our students will not have an efficient and effective way to master those irregular words for reading or for spelling.

Anna Geiger:

I heard this somewhere and I can't remember where, but they said something like, we think about connecting the sounds to the letters kind of like glue, there's all this glue that goes down, but then pushing on it to make it stick as the "adding the meaning" part. I thought that was an interesting way to think about it.

Pryor Rayburn:

I love that.

Anna Geiger:

That meaning part, that emphasis on the meaning, is not always addressed. Can you talk us through how to do that? And in particular with words that have kind of an abstract meaning, like the word "was."

Pryor Rayburn:

Correct. I think there's a lot of great discussion about this with Katie Pace Miles and Linnea Ehri, and talking about function words versus content words.

Function words are those that you said that don't have a lot of meaning on their own like "was" or "to." There are other high-frequency words or irregular words that have a little bit more meaning to them that a student would comprehend. But for those function words, and once you have walked down a framework of connecting the letters and the sounds together is, opportunities to use that word is a great way for those function words.

You can even work in comparing them. For example, "from" and "to." How would a student compare those? How would it be if I was sending a letter "to" a friend or if I was receiving a letter "from" a friend. You could draw pictures with the students so that they see that "to" and "from" do matter. They have meaning, and they add to the sentence and the word meaning.

The beautiful part is once they have orthographically mapped these words for spelling, for reading, and they attend to those meanings, this is when they don't start substituting words, and they don't start skipping them in their reading, because their brain is attending to them as meaningful parts of the sentence that will help them comprehend.

Anna Geiger:

Let's say a teacher has a child who just cannot remember the word "the." Could you give a specific way? What would you do for that particular word?

Pryor Rayburn:

I would walk through... And I've created a course on this because I know teachers are just desperate for it. They say, "Give me a framework that I can follow with every word," and that's really what I wanted to help them do.

It's first talking about it and using it in context, before they even see it, "the" red bear, or "the" car in the driveway. Then you could show them the letters, the written form, T-H-E, and you're connecting it to the sounds. The T-H grapheme is connected to the /th/ part, and that's hard to say when you can't see me saying it. The E is connected to the /ŭ/ or the /ē/, however you are pronouncing it. Explicitly connecting with elkonin boxes is a great way to do that.

Having students then spell it, read it, not only in isolation, but in context, in phrases. Again, "the red ball," "the truck."

Then like I mentioned earlier, it doesn't sound like it's that big of a deal, like, "Ooh, how do I add meaning to the word 'the'?" But if you start explaining to your... Give your student examples of, "Do you want 'the' red car or 'a' red car?" Wow, that could look really different.

Or for at a student level, if they've honed in on a stuffed animal in the toy store, "Do you want 'a' blue bear or 'the' bear?"

They're like, "No, no, no! I want that one!"

'"Yes. So that's where the word 'the' holds more meaning."

You could compare it to, "Okay, so when would we use the word 'the' compared to when would we use the word 'a'?"

Anna Geiger:

Interesting. So you could bring a little set of trinkets, and one of them is obviously better. Then, "Do you want 'a' trinket or do you want 'the' trinket?" That's a really good idea.

Is this something... Is there a place where teachers can get these kinds of ideas? Is that something that you offer in terms of, "What route do I go in teaching this particular word?"

Pryor Rayburn:

Yeah, I think anyone could, with the skills they have and that even we've talked about, could absolutely start adding in that meaning piece. I've created those teaching templates where it walks you through, you say it in context, you are connecting the letters and the sounds, you are using it in a sentence. Then ideally, having the student use it orally or written in a sentence. I have the templates already done for 190 of the most common high-frequency words and irregular words.

Also, again, I teach a course on this called "How to Teach and Master Sight Words in Five Minutes a Day." Because I know for some, probably say most teachers, the idea of adding something else into their busy day or to their planning just sounds impossible. I wanted to make it very attainable, not only for the teacher, but for the students.

Then also what I teach them to do is, yes, you're explicitly teaching these words, but also I'm teaching you how to group them together. Ones with shared phonics patterns you can teach together, and then you are aligning those with your phonics curriculum, so they're not in isolation.

If you are teaching the word "the," for example, you might teach it alongside open syllables. Or the word "from," you might teach it when you are teaching the concept of consonant blends, because the "f" and the "r" are working together as a consonant blend.

Again, we want to set them up for success on the parts of the word that they do know, that are expected. Like in the word "from," /f/ /r/ /ŭ/ /m/, that's four sounds, and three out of those four sounds have their expected spellings. Wow. For a student who is used to trying to memorize the whole word, how wonderful for them to realize, "Oh, I know three out of the four of those sound-spelling correspondences, but my teacher's just going to teach me just that remaining one unexpected spelling and sound."

Anna Geiger:

So I'm curious, I know different phonics programs have different approaches for what kids do when they're writing the letters. For example, for writing "the," some programs will have them, as they write the "t-h" they say /th/, and as they write the "e," they say, /ŭ/. In my Orton-Gillingham training, it was reciting the letters. Do you have an opinion on that?

Pryor Rayburn:

Yeah, I think there's not sufficient research yet to say at that granular level, which one is right. I would say in my Orton-Gillingham training in 2007, that was the same case for me. It was more focused on the letter names. But the more we're learning about how students orthographically map words, it's connecting the visual symbols on a page to the sounds and then to the meaning. So are the letter names as important? That's the piece that I would love for a very smart researcher to dive into.

I think right now, I would argue that connecting the sounds and giving the students a platform... Because when they're sounding out a word, "the," what they're doing is isolating those individual sounds. They're not isolating the letter names. So if we're giving them a platform to isolate the sounds and then connect it to the visual image of those symbols on the page, what a wonderful way to make it a very explicit systematic process.

Anna Geiger:

Are you saying that you would come down possibly on the side of having them say the sound as they write the letter?

Pryor Rayburn:

Yes. I've talked about this with some other fellows in the Orton-Gillingham Academy. One might say that for students who need the extra scaffold of also saying the letter name, that could be appropriate. But quickly moving to just the sounds, I think, would be a wonderful approach for a lot of students.

Anna Geiger:

There was a recent article that came out last year, 2023, in The Reading League Journal about elements of Orton-Gillingham that are supported by research and those which are not. Of course, it talked a lot about that explicit systematic piece, which we know is very well-supported by research. That direct instruction with scaffolding, the structured and sequential approach, diagnostic and prescriptive.

But there were a few areas that... They were clear to say, just because we can't find evidence for it doesn't mean it's not effective. But right now, there is not sufficient evidence to show that the multisensory piece is the thing that makes a difference. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Pryor Rayburn:

It is important for us not to conflate the lack of substantial research with a large body of research that doesn't support an approach. Those are two different things.

In terms of my thoughts on multisensory instruction, I do kind of have two thoughts. One is making the distinction between multisensory and then simultaneous multisensory. In the Orton-Gillingham principles, at least under the Orton-Gillingham Academy, it's that simultaneous multisensory piece that we're looking at. It has nothing to do with sand and tracing letters in sand. There's nothing wrong with that, I hate to say it, but there's nothing magical about sand, and that's not going to make or break a student learning the sounds that could absolutely help with engagement.

It's the simultaneous, so you are hearing, seeing, saying, doing at the same time. That might be with learning a letter sound and a letter name, but simultaneous multisensory also involves the kinesthetic piece of your mouth and lip formation as students learn new phonemes and graphemes that represent the sounds.

One piece that I think is going to be really interesting as researchers dive into this is... Simultaneous multisensory approach is just one of the many Orton-Gillingham principles, but these principles are intended to be used in concert with one another and not as isolated principles. I can understand why there's not yet been substantial controlled experiments comparing instructional practices with and without multisensory components, because I would find it nearly impossible to extricate one principle from another in order to research the efficacy of only one of the principles.

Anna Geiger:

It sounds like you're talking about multimodal instruction. Is that right? Are you familiar with that?

Pryor Rayburn:

I'm not, so tell me more about that.

Anna Geiger:

My understanding of that, and I could be getting it wrong, is that it's using multiple senses to do the task, which sounds like what you're talking about. Versus, "The difference is this particular multisensory thing that I'm inserting," right?

For example, like using your finger in sand. It's not the sand, it's that you're saying it while you're moving your finger, right? You're moving and you're talking, you're doing all these things at once. I think I've heard Jan Hasbrouck talk about that, and others, so that there is research for that, but it's not the same thing as adding another sense in there just to add another sense. Does that make sense?

Pryor Rayburn:

Correct. I think that's very well said.

Anna Geiger:

Then we'll talk about one more thing that was addressed in the article, and that's multisyllabic word reading. I know that every Orton-Gillingham program is different, so I'm not sure what they teach you in the Academy, but the system that I learned was very, very specific, and it was very time-consuming. I mean, it took a good 15 minutes of our lesson to label the vowels, find the consonants, decide on the pattern, split it up, label the syllable types, and pronounce the word. What are your thoughts on the traditional Orton-Gillingham approach to teaching multisyllable words?

Pryor Rayburn:

Yeah, I'm glad you bring that up, because syllable division is one tool we use to help students visually focus on the patterns within words. Those patterns are some combination of vowels and consonants. I think about how skilled readers, they already have a strong awareness of syllables and they've internalized the orthographic structures or the spelling patterns within our language.

Yet most of the students we work with in our very individualized one-on-one lessons, they have not internalized that structure yet. What do poor readers do when they come across, especially those multisyllabic words that they don't know? They're going to guess or they're going to skip it. What we're teaching with syllable division is, "Guess what? You don't have to guess." There is a structure to the words in our language, and you the student can learn that through syllable division.

I would say that I think of syllable division more as a scaffold and as one tool to help bring the students' awareness to the syllables and the vowels in those syllables.

But I wonder if syllable division gets a bad rap, because you're right, I would say a lot of some Orton-Gillingham-based programs keep that tool in their instruction far too long. I would say you only want to keep syllable division in for your student when they need it. As quickly as you can remove that scaffold, that's our goal. We want them to decode and read these independently.

I will say sometimes in the practicum when I'm watching students, they will code because they think that's what they're supposed to do or ask their students to do, and the student can read it just fine without. Really that's your cue that the student no longer needs it. We're not just coding vowels and marking syllables just to make something visual. If they don't need that scaffold, we're taking it away.

Anna Geiger:

Some people would also feel that doing this, teaching that elaborate syllable division as a scaffold, for some kids is cognitive overload. Have you seen that? Or have you been in a situation where you were teaching it to a child and you realized, "This is just too much. I'm going to go about this a different way?"

Pryor Rayburn:

I have. I think that's the wonderful part of the level of training that I've been lucky enough to have and I would wish for anyone, and I would love to share with anyone. It's the structured flexibility of the Orton-

Gillingham approach. I am able to, if I have a child in front of me where that is too much cognitive overload, I might transition as quickly as I can with that student to teaching them to flex the vowel instead of going through and coding visually the vowel sound and the breve and the macron, and where would you divide it.

When they come across a word and they're using their set for variability... If they come across the word "seven," S-E-V-E-N, and they read it "see-vin," and I say, "Well, let's flex that vowel." Before that, I would've explained to them what that means.

Then they take that first vowel that they said was long, "see-vin," and they change it to "seven."

"Yes, that's a word I know."

I would say that's kind of another scaffold away from the more explicit syllable division that I would say is more traditional. That can be a very successful tool for a lot of students when they're ready, but they would also need to be able to have a level of phonemic awareness where they can isolate the vowel and manipulate it.

So again, structured flexibility. "Is your student that's in front of you ready for that?"

Anna Geiger:

Would you say that the long training that you're going through, years long, correct, is really to equip you to make these decisions in the moment? Whereas if someone is just following an Orton-Gillingham program, they might not have the knowledge to know how to make these decisions, and therefore the learning process might be slowed down because they're following the constraints of the program versus looking at this individual child and making accelerative decisions based on that.

Pryor Rayburn:

I think you've hit the nail on the head. I would say that anyone who has gone through even the associate level training through the Academy... And I'm only speaking to that because that's what I know. I don't want anyone thinking that I'm bad-mouthing anything else, because I'd be the first to say, I don't know about those trainings, so I'm just speaking about the Orton-Gillingham Academy training.

But I think, one quote that I always love that Anna Gillingham once said, is "Go as fast as you can, but as slow as you must."

That's where we really want to get our students into a place, and with our training, to your point, is the structured flexibility. I think of it as, you know, guard rails. I don't go bowling a lot, but I've gone with my kids. I still need the bumpers. As any trained, wonderful Orton-Gillingham practitioner, we're all using the same systematic explicit approach, moving simple to complex, but the structured flexibility within that allows us to attend to the individual needs of the students in front of us.

Anna Geiger:

Well, thank you so much for untangling that, because there are so many Orton-Gillingham approaches out there, and this is the first time I've really understood maybe some differences with the Orton-Gillingham Academy. That's very helpful.

Also thank you for talking about incorporating meaning into high frequency word instruction.

And you did say that you had a gift for the people listening to this podcast. Can you talk to us about that, and we'll make sure to link to that in the show notes?

Pryor Rayburn:

Sure. To your point about if you've got an eager teacher that is excited to try weaving in, meaning, for example. I've got a great free game that you can use with any of your high frequency word lists, sight word lists, whatever your program is calling it.

It also includes the framework that I was talking about. Moving from step one all the way through to make sure that you're attending to the meaning, the sounds, and the graphemes in those words. I can't wait to share that with teachers so that they feel empowered. This is something they could put in place tomorrow with their students, so I'm excited.

Anna Geiger:

Well, thank you. I'll be sure to share that and your blog post and your course and all those things in the show notes. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Pryor Rayburn:

Awesome! Thank you so much for having me!

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode189. 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, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.