Triple R Teaching

Well, I have a treat for you today. In today's episode, you're going to hear from Gina of get_literacy on Instagram. Not only are you going to hear how she has implemented the science of reading in her first grade classroom, you're also going to learn how she got help for her daughter with dyslexia. We'll get right into it 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: Hello, everybody. I'm very excited to be talking to Gina from get_literacy on Instagram. She has some hilarious reels out there that you really need to check out when you're learning to move from balanced to structured literacy. She is a classroom teacher, and she also has a daughter with dyslexia and just has a really unique perspective for us. I'm excited to have her here. Welcome, Gina!

Gina: Oh, thank you so much, Anna. I'm so excited to be here!

Anna: So before we went live here, you told me that you're kind of a late comer to teaching, that you had gone back to school. Can you tell us about your education and how you got into teaching?

Gina: Yes, absolutely. So out of high school, I wanted to be a teacher, and it just didn't fall into the cards. Once my son was full-time in kindergarten, my husband was like, "This is the time. If you want to go back to school, do it." So I went back to school full-time and got my graduate degree in education. So now I have been a teacher for three years.

Anna: Okay, awesome. You're teaching first grade, right?

Gina: I'm teaching first grade currently, yes.

Anna: Tell me about your move from balanced literacy to more of a structured approach in the science of reading.

Gina: In school, I was taught balanced literacy, and the first district I worked at was a balanced literacy district - lots of running records. I had my finger on the pulse of their reading, I had their instructional level, their hard level, and their independent level three times a year, lots of MSV.

Then with my daughter, we were noticing problems with her reading, and writing, and having trouble in school. I knew something was wrong, though I never was educated in dyslexia, but I could feel it in my mom heart that something was wrong here.

Now I'm a teacher, and I'm seeing what my third grader is doing, and I'm seeing what my students are doing, and now I have a sixth grader - she was in sixth grade at the time. Something wasn't right.

So we went through the whole process. We took her to a neuropsychologist, and she got diagnosed with dyslexia. In that timeframe it was COVID, and I started the Instagram page to read stories to my students and my friends' kids live. I just thought I love picture books so I wanted to share that.

But at that time I was trying to look into dyslexia and teach myself as much as I could. I fell down the science of reading rabbit hole, and as soon as I went down that road, there was no looking back. I did change districts, I am currently in my home district, and I am allowed to implement what I feel is right. It isn't such a strict, balanced literacy district.

Anna: What would you say has been your biggest shift, even if you haven't been teaching very long, but just in these few years, what was your biggest shift once you began to understand the current research?

Gina: I definitely got rid of leveled books. They were gone immediately. We used decodables. I put a sound wall up. I orthographically map words with my students in small groups, and we do a lot of syllable work. So I feel like it was really just going into

a very explicit and systematic approach to how I was teaching them.

Our school already uses Heggerty, so we had that phonological piece in daily, so I didn't have to do too much to supplement there. But it was really just going back to the phonics skill we're working on. I'm not going to overload you with doing the three-cueing system, and we're not doing that here anymore. We're done looking at the picture to help us. We're done looking at the first letter. We are going to learn the skill. We're going to learn the sound. We're going to talk about it.

Anna: So for someone who is in balanced literacy and nervous about shifting over... I'll just tell you all the things that I thought. Decodable books are boring and there's really no room for comprehension there, and they're not going to learn to read fluently because those books are so stodgy and they don't make sense. As for phonics, I don't want to do drill and kill. I want it to be meaningful. How would you respond based on your experience right now with how things are going with your students?

Gina: I would say my goal, too, is for comprehension with my students. But how can they comprehend if they can't read? I've read some leveled readers that are some snoozers, too, so don't come at me with that. That's what I would say. But no, seriously, the decodable reader is not the end game. They're not going to be reading decodable readers forever. These are to give our students the confidence. My students are SO excited when they can read this book, because it's the words they know! It's the skills I taught them. Then their confidence builds, and then their fluency gets better.

It's going through our systematic, we're doing our phonics skills and THEN they can read a leveled reader or any book they want. I do have people that have said that. There are teachers that still go by the level saying, "Well, we need to know our students' level." I feel if that's something you still have to do in your district, which I do understand, coming from a very strict district, I still think you can supplement in your small groups. Find a decodable that they can read, there's so many online.

Anna: Have you had your kids kind of transition out of decodables once they're at a certain level? Or has that not really been the case yet for you? I know that after COVID it's been hard.

Gina: Yeah. I definitely don't feel that. Especially with first grade, I feel like there is plenty to work on. I do have some readers that don't need the decodables so we're doing more syllabic work and morphology. They're at the point where I can do that kind of stuff with them. I'm still finding decodables or texts that support what they need without labeling them a letter.

Anna: So how do you approach whole group versus small group? Do you do on-level whole group and then differentiate in small groups? Or do you just use small groups for your phonics instruction?

Gina: I do both, because we do have a phonics skill that we have to work on, according to my first grade team in the district. This week is long U. So I introduce it whole group, and we do some orthographic mapping, whole group, of some irregular words or high frequency words. Then I differentiate when we get into our small group. Then I work on the phonics skill that those groups need, plus the skill that we're working on the week for first grade.

Anna: Switching gears now, can you talk to us a little bit about your daughter? Tell us about how early you noticed that things were wrong and your experience in finding help for her.

Gina: She was always in Reading Support since first grade, so we did know that she was a lower reader, a struggling reader. She graduated from Reading Support somewhere in the fourth grade, I think, and she was doing good. I was always told, "She's such a sweet girl."

It was sixth grade when it really hit home, and I think it was because I was teaching. I had the education fresh out of school. My son was in third grade, and I was teaching third grade, and I'm looking and I'm like, "Something's wrong here." She's in sixth grade and I'm comparing what we're doing, and I go, "This is not right. This is not okay. What's going on?"

I emailed the teacher and she said, "Oh, she's so nice. She's doing well. She's trying her best."

I finally kind of lost it and was just like, "I know, she's awesome! But she can't read. I'm done being told how awesome my daughter is. I see it every single day. She's amazing, but we need to know what's going on." And then COVID happens.

It was during that time when I finally took her to a neuropsychologist. I'm like, "We have to take it outside. We have to figure out what's going on."

Anna: So where do you find a neuropsychologist? Where do you even start, for people who are in this situation?

Gina: I Googled, and I asked a lot of friends that either know therapists or are in the therapy industry. A friend of mine is a therapist, and she said, "This lady is great. Call her." I just was asking anybody who would listen.

We finally got in with her, and that testing is amazing. I wish they did that for everyone. I mean, if it wasn't so expensive, it would be so good to have that information on every child. So we got it done, we found out everything, she's dyslexic. It was very classic. Her IQ is high, but all the testing showed she was dyslexic.

Then I went to my friends that were reading specialists and I'm thinking, "Okay, now what do I do? What do we do from here? The school knows, and they can give her as much support as they can, but this needs to go further."

A friend of my said that Orton-Gillingham is the best method for dyslexia. So then I started looking for tutors, and that was very difficult in my area, but I did find one. Ironically, it was my mom's neighbor, but she didn't even know that's what she did. She was outside talking to her neighbors one day, and they're like, "Well, that's what SHE does. She's an Orton-Gillingham tutor!" It really was very serendipitous.

So my daughter started working with her, and I was also working with the school, but I'm like, "I'm just struggling. What are we supposed to do at the school? I'm so emotional about this. I know I'm a teacher, but I wasn't taught about dyslexia. I wasn't taught how to support someone in this situation. Plus she's in sixth grade, and I'm lower in early education."

The tutor goes, "Well, I'm an advocate, too." That was, again, the best money I ever spent to have her at those meetings. She was able to tell us what to get in her 504. Just so people know, she does have a 504, because of another health issue.

That actually really helped with making sure what was in her plan was what she needed health-wise, plus spelling isn't used against her, for testing she can be pulled, all the things. I started researching dyslexia to help my daughter and all these Instagram pages started coming up. I went down the science of reading rabbit hole, and I never looked back. And here I am!

Anna: That's so funny, because most of the people I've interviewed so far, it's the same timeline, around when the pandemic started. For me, it was 2019, 2020, it also just happened to be at that same time. Can you point to any specific thing you read or saw that just turned the light on for you or really got your attention?

Gina: Yes. It was when I learned that we are born to speak, not to read. It really resonated with me when I started learning about how the brain reads. I thought, "Wait, this makes sense. If our brain isn't wired to read, we have to teach our brain to read." Then when I learned about orthographic mapping and the fact that yes, we're visually inputting information - reading, but that's not how we're processing it.

Then it made sense for dyslexia and the different parts of the brain that are working and how we can support our students. Teach so everyone can learn to read. So that is really what hit home for me.

Once I started understanding that and just having that sound wall up in my classroom for a month and teaching kids using mirrors and orthographically mapping words, I was seeing my first graders do things that were just shocking. Their parents are emailing me saying, "We were working on this and she ran to the mirror to make sure her mouth was making the right position, and she told me that sound is the TH sound, because my tongue is between my teeth."

And it's like, "Yes! They're getting it." It was so cool.

Anna: Do you have a sound wall lesson every day? Or how do you fit that into your instruction and how does it look?

Gina: I took the Tools for Reading Sound Wall Class, so I have their sound wall. They have a book with a lesson, and they have cards with all of it on the back. So at the beginning of the year, my sound wall is up. I have the vowel valley and I have the consonants in the articulation order, and I put post-its over all of them that we haven't used yet.

As we introduce one, everybody gets a mirror. I show the sound, we talk about what our mouth is doing, we talk about the sound. We do some phonological awareness, like where in this word do you hear the sound? The whole thing.

This year I used Tools for Reading's scope and sequence, but I think it kind of got off from what we were doing in the classroom. So, I'm learning, and next year I will follow what I'm doing in the classroom, instead of trying to do it that way.

The kids love it. I had a little boy today who got up out of his seat and went over to the sound wall. And I go, "Where are you going?" Because, you know, I was teaching.

And he goes, "Well, I'm checking the sound!" He was trying to read the word "wait," and he goes, "I don't know AI." But then he looks and he goes, "Yes, I do!" over at the board.

I'm like, "Oh, okay. I'm sorry." It was just so cute. It was so cute.

Anna: Do they use it a lot for spelling, too?

Gina: Yeah!

Anna: That is just awesome. You said your daughter's doing Orton-Gillingham. We were just talking about this before we started recording, that some people in the science of reading community criticize Orton-Gillingham, which I can't quite follow exactly why. I think because there's not as much specific research that says Orton-Gillingham is superior, and there's a lot of reasons for that.

One is that Orton-Gillingham, for those who are listening, is not a program. It's an approach. There are a lot of different approaches for Orton-Gillingham - there's Barton, there's IMSE, there's a whole bunch. So it's hard to test, because there's just so many factors.

So there are a lot of people who are critical about it, but I always find in those discussions that the people who chime in to talk about it are not the tutors. It's the parents. The parents chime in and say, "This is what finally got my dyslexic son or daughter to read."

I just find that interesting. Not that we should necessarily base what we do on testimonials, but it's just, to me, that says something.

Gina: It does. I've seen it work. I mean, my daughter is reading! She's on grade level, she got into honors math next year for high school, she's doing fantastic! She needed that OG just to, I don't know, give her a little push, like, "Okay, we got it. We're going."

Anna: For those who are listening, I did have an episode about Orton-Gillingham a few weeks ago. It's episode 69, and I talked a bit about Orton-Gillingham and what that means and what it's all about.

Can you talk to us about how your daughter feels about herself now, her confidence? What have you noticed? And has she articulated, "Now I get it"? What's that been like?

Gina: Absolutely. That sixth grade year, again, it was just such a terrible time for her. She was also taking, I forget what world history class she was taking, but they were learning these crazy big Greek words and stuff.

Anna: Yes, my son is doing that right now, it's crazy. All the stuff they're learning about world history, I wonder, will he remember any of this?

Gina: Exactly! But on top of that, imagine not being able to read. I mean, she could read, but she was not reading at the level she should have been for this kind of thin, and she couldn't write. So she would sit at the computer, because they were making a slide or something, and it was so odd to watch. She could verbally tell me absolutely everything, but she could not even start to type. It was as if somebody was holding her, physically. And the tears! It would take an hour just for her to get a sentence. It was heart wrenching. I was just like, "This is not right. Something's not right. What is going on?" Then, like I said, we could read her a book and she could verbally tell me everything.

We travel to the national parks, that's kind of our family thing, and we do the Junior Ranger Programs. If anybody's not familiar with them, they're the programs the national parks do. There's so much history in those programs, and they have so many cool lessons, and they learn so much! She could tell me about some rock we saw at Yellowstone and the history of it, because she was told it. She has a great memory. She just couldn't get it on paper. And she couldn't take it off the paper.

So now, I mean, she just comes in, goes upstairs, does her homework, and doesn't need it checked. I used to have to sit with her to do her homework. Now I don't even see her, she's got all the confidence an eighth grader should have.

Anna: That's awesome and amazing and really, I'm sure, encouraging for people who are listening who are in the hard part right now. So what would you say to a parent who came to you and said, "I think my child has dyslexia. What do I do?" What would be their first step?

Gina: The best thing we did was take her to the neuropsychologist and get a full evaluation. If you can do it, it was so incredibly helpful. I loved the information we got from it. It was very nit-picky on how her brain works and really helped us to be able to help her. I'm an OG advocate, because I've seen it work. I would find possibly an OG tutor or at least a dyslexia specialist or advocate that you can talk to and that can support you by going to the school and making sure your child has the supports they need at school.

As parents, we can get really emotional, even if we're teachers and we're supposed to know. When it comes to your kid, that all goes out the window when you sit in a meeting with people telling you what's wrong with your child. So the greatest thing was having somebody next to me who was speaking, knew the laws, knew what the school had to do, and knew what we needed to do for her. I would really suggest that.

The "Overcoming Dyslexia" book is great. I honestly haven't gotten all the way through it, but the parts that I read were amazing.

But really just finding, I would say, an advocate as somebody who can support you, who knows, and that can speak for you and your child when you're starting to get the supports that are needed.

Anna: Right, and I'll just plug the book, "Dyslexia Advocate." Did you ever read that one?

Gina: You posted it, and I have not read it, but I put it in my Amazon cart immediately when you posted it.

Anna: That's a really good book, because it's by a dyslexia advocate. I think her name is Kelli Sandman-Hurley. She walks you through all of that, like what to do at an IEP meeting. It's a lot of step-by-step, and I think it would be really good for parents that are just trying to get a starting place. I think hearing from you about the success your daughter's had is just super encouraging for parents whose kids are really struggling. Thank you so much for sharing that.

Gina: Oh, I hope so.

Anna: What would you say to someone who is a classroom teacher and they're starting to hear about the science of reading and they want to make some changes? Are there any specific resources you would recommend, first of all? And then what would be a first step in making a change?

Gina: Yes, I've thought about this, because I thought about how I dove into this deep and never looked back. And I'm thinking, "We're busy," but I was lucky my kids are older so I can sit and read a book at night. I don't have little ones anymore.

I've read a lot of books. "Equipped for Reading Success" has a lot of phonological awareness exercises in it, and I really think "Shifting the Balance" by Burkins and Yates was good because it was an easy read. It has six ways to bring the science of literacy into your classroom. I think they take it with an approach that yes, some of us still have to be in a balanced literacy district, but these are ways you can implement it.

If you don't want to read anything, there are plenty of blog posts out there that you could look at. But I do believe that there's a lot of people out there now, and the science of reading is getting to the point where you have to be careful. You have to make sure you're reading somebody, I don't want to say an expert, because I'm not an expert, but somebody who... I don't know how to say it.

Anna: Right. Yeah, we were just talking about this. The science of reading is something that people are glomming onto, as with anything that's popular, so you do have to be careful.

But Burkins and Yates have a really great book for people moving out. In fact, they're actually going to be in this podcast series, they'll be coming up a week or two, probably, after this episode airs. So we'll get to hear directly from them.

Any other books or resources you'd recommend?

Gina: I am currently almost done with "Reading for Life" by Lyn Stone. That is fantastic, it's a great read. And the three books that come to school with me every day and come home every day are "Uncovering the Logic of English," "The ABC's and All Their Tricks," and "Speech to Print." I am constantly resourcing those for word lists, for making sure that I'm teaching the phonics skills right, and for the rules. They're not just things that I've read, but I regularly flip through them, and teachers come in and ask me a question, and I can directly flip to that rule.

Anna: We'll put all those in the notes for everybody.

Any last tips or a starting point when you're just trying to start to move to structured literacy, any recommendations?

Gina: Yes. Any small improvement you're going to make is going to be a huge benefit to your students or your child. Don't feel like you need to go in and jump right in. If right now, this year, or next year, all you can tackle is that you are going to connect speech to print for your students by orthographically mapping then just focus on that. Or you're just going to do phonological awareness and make sure you get that into your small groups, or maybe your one thing this year is going to be decodable readers. Don't overwhelm yourself.

My principal tells me all the time, "If you're thinking of doing better, you're already doing better, because you're concerned. You want to do it."

Your kids are going to benefit from any little thing that you decide to do, even if it's once a month, once a school year, you're going to implement something. There are people on social media that want to help. People ask me questions all the time. I try to answer as much as I can. So feel free to ask. We're all learning. And be open minded, that's huge.

Anna: Yeah. Right. It is hard. You were only in it for a little while, so that was good for you. I should just say this. Savannah Campbell and I talked about this a few weeks ago, but the "Reading for Life" book by Lyn Stone is excellent, but not for someone who's just getting started, because she's pretty snarky about balanced literacy.

Gina: I like her humor. Her humor is like mine.

Anna: Yeah, and speaking of that, that would be a good transition now to talk about your Instagram. Tell us what you're doing with your Instagram account, Get Literacy. It's get_literacy.

Gina: Yeah, I wanted it to be Get Lit, but that was taken for some reason already. So get_literacy, like I said, started as just a place where I shared my love of picture books. That's another thing that I just love. There's so much we can learn from picture books at any age. I was just doing it as a space to say, "This is a great book I found, and I'm going to do a live read aloud so my students can join in," because it was COVID, we were virtual, and my friends' kids could join. But as I went down the science of reading rabbit hole, I was like, "Listen to this, what I just learned. They're saying this." So I started posting what I was learning.

I definitely feel like learning and unlearning is hard, and it's scary, but let's have some fun. I want to help anybody I can. I want to encourage parents that have struggling readers because I've been at that end of it. Now I'm at the teaching end. I feel your pain, I've been there, and if I can just reach a couple people by helping them with their child, or their students, or their classroom, that's all I need.

Anna: Well, in the show notes, we'll link to your Instagram account so everybody can follow you there and also all your recommendations, and people may reach out to you on your Instagram to talk to you about some of the things you shared today. But thank you so much, Gina. It was really nice to have you with us.

Gina: Thank you so much for having me. This was so much fun.

Anna: Thank you so much for listening today. You can find everything that Gina and I shared, all of our links, at reachallreaders.com/episode85. See you next week!