Triple R Teaching

Today we get to hear from Sarah Paul of Sarah's Teaching Snippets. She is an online educator as well as a reading interventionist. She shares a lot of helpful information about how structured literacy looks in the classroom AND in an intervention situation. Really, structured literacy is for everyone. We'll get right into the episode 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 everyone! Today in our Balanced to Structured Literacy series, we're very excited to welcome Sarah Paul. Sarah has been blogging at Sarah's Teaching Snippets for quite a few years. She is a reading interventionist for K-3, and, like everyone else in our series, she started as a balanced literacy teacher and now has put out quite an amazing amount of content related to structured literacy. So we're excited to talk to her today. Welcome Sarah!

Sarah Paul: Thank you! I'm so excited to be here.

Anna: Can you talk to us a little bit about what you learned about teaching reading way back when, and how that started to shift for you?

Sarah: That's such a funny question because I love to talk about how when I was in college, before I became a teacher, I didn't learn anything about reading, and then I was trained on the job my first couple years of teaching, but I was trained with the balanced literacy model. This is back in about 2003. Like most people, I loved it and just really ate it up and took pride in learning about reading.

Then it was around 2008 I want to say, when I had a student really struggling, who we later found out had dyslexia. It really sent me down this path of why what I'm doing

isn't working and I want to figure this out, and also just the mystery of dyslexia, and not understanding why none of my classes talked about dyslexia. I had of course heard the word because I had a cousin, a couple of cousins actually, with dyslexia.

So I vaguely knew about it, but I didn't know anything about it really. And so I started studying it and I read Sally Shaywitz's book and I started to think, "Okay, I'm going to start trying some of these suggestions and different ways of teaching with this student."

Then that turned into, "Oh, actually, there's a whole reading group that would benefit from this type of instruction." So I started digging a little bit deeper and then I just sort of by accident heard Louisa Moats talk.

She came to Oregon where I'm from and I just happened to be able to go to this conference. Of course, at the time I didn't know who she was, but it blew my mind! Everything she had to say was like, "Whoa, I'm doing this wrong!" I hate to say doing it wrong because that sounds kind of harsh, but I really started to reflect on how I was teaching everything. But at the time, I didn't know anybody doing anything differently, and balanced literacy was the "right way" to do it so I just didn't have that confidence to change everything right away.

So I put a toe in the water and slowly did it for this group and then I noticed, "Oh, actually this is working, let me try this for this other group that's not that far behind, but maybe something else will work for them. Okay, now it's working for them." And anyway, it just slowly expanded. At the time I was teaching first grade, but then I moved to a different position, and that's when I totally changed to what we now call structured literacy, but it didn't have a name back then.

Anna: So you've been at this for a long time, it sounds like.

Sarah: Yes, but kind of on my own just sort of searching and figuring it out. The International Dyslexia Association had put out something about structured literacy and I just looked for anything I could find, and I had some classes through the Dyslexia Training Institute, and my local Decoding Dyslexia chapter in Portland also was doing some different presentations so I was learning there, and I learned a little bit through Barbara Steinberg's Reading Specialist.

So I was just looking anywhere I could to find information at the time about dyslexia. The science of reading wasn't a term, I just really was trying to figure it out and was

thinking, "Gosh, I just think this works for everybody," but I wasn't brave enough to completely transform to what we now call a structured literacy classroom.

It was a little easier when I became an interventionalist, a reading specialist, because for all those kids I could justify it. I could say, "Well, these kids all need it!" So that's when I really made the bigger switch, but I really was just kind of trying to figure it out and made some mistakes along the way and probably got a lot of things wrong, but that's how I learned.

Anna: Well, I'm sure people listening are wondering, what did you change for that particular child? What were you doing that wasn't working and then what did you do that made the difference?

Sarah: Well, for one, I was using just leveled readers. It was your classic, "Why is this student stuck at level C?" Well, that's because that's as far as you can get when you can guess based on pictures and patterns and not really reading.

So the first thing that I changed was starting to explicitly teach phonics, and doing a lot more phonemic awareness activities, and then kind of really slowly just starting from ground zero.

At the time, it was like, "Okay, I guess I'll just do a little bit of phonics here and there." But then I realized, "Oh no, ALL he needs is for me to connect these sound-symbol relationships and to work on phoneme blending and phoneme segmenting, and then once he has those letters mastered, I need to... Basically what we do now for structured literacy, but at the time it just seemed so extreme and so different.

Then I started searching for decodable readers and I was writing decodable sentences because I thought, "Ooh, I know I'm supposed to be doing leveled readers, but he can't read it! He sees a picture of a tortoise, it says "tortoise," but he says turtle." I mean, that makes sense, but it's not really reading and he's just guessing! So I just totally threw those out for him and then with his whole group, and then I just started creating whatever I could find. I started looking for old basal readers that had sort of decodable stuff and that worked.

Really it was just trying to figure out, how do I make this explicit phonics? I didn't really have a word for it, but I knew what phonics was, and that's just the biggest change I made at first, that and phonemic awareness with him and really driving that home and kind of putting aside my strategy bookmark, remember those strategy bookmarks?

Anna: Yes.

Sarah: It had like, "Look at the word, look at the picture," and I was thinking, "Oh, I don't think I'm going to do that."

Anna: I remember I sent those home in reading bags. They were laminated, nice, colorful bookmarks.

Now that you're an interventionist, when you have a new student, what's your plan of attack? How do you start figuring out what they need?

Sarah: Well, I start with DIBELS because that's just a good screener and it gives me a lot of information right away. Let's say I have a new first grader, that's kind of the easiest one. DIBELS has a lot of different measures I can look at so I can see, first of all, do they know the basic letters of the alphabet? That's kind of the first and then the nonsense word fluency helps me to see a couple things.

Number one, I'm looking to see do they have the sound-symbol relationships down, and number two, are they able to blend those sounds together to read the nonsense word? Then there's also the word reading and then the oral reading fluency. So I get a lot of information from that. Often, if I see that they don't do very well on the nonsense word fluency, I might dig deeper and just do a regular CVC word and see if they can read a sentence with real words and just kind of see where I'm at there.

If they are able to do part of the nonsense words, but they're not able to do the oral reading fluency, then I'll do a phonics assessment and see, okay, so maybe they have CVC words down, but do they know vowel teams? Do they know silent E? I try to just really pick apart what the actual issue is and then I go from there.

Anna: So then let's say you find out that they're stuck at CVCE words. Then what kind of things do you do with them in your lesson?

Sarah: I start by reviewing all of those graphemes, just the regular letters of the alphabet and the short vowels. I want to make sure we have those and digraphs solid. Then, to introduce silent E, I usually start by saying reading starts with your ears, that's

another big change I made.

So I would bring up a familiar word. So let's say the word is "game," we want to say "game" or "gate." I would have magnets on the board or sound boxes or something representing the sounds. Then I say, "Let's listen for the sounds in 'game,' /g/ /ā/ /m/." I draw three sound boxes or have three magnets on the board to show and say, "We agree there's three sounds, right? Okay, let's match the letters to the sounds." Then we build G-A-M and I'd say, "Well, now wait a minute! We've learned that this would then say 'gam.'"

Then that's how I introduce the silent e. So then I would say this is a new spelling pattern that we're going to learn that when you see a vowel, and I point to the A, and then a consonant, and I point to the M, and then an E, that's a new pattern where we know that usually, not always, but usually that E can help that A make its long sound A and just sort of explain that way and then do a lot of examples from there. We start at the word level.

I do what I just described to you several more times, but then have them join in with me and tell me what to do. So let's say our next word is "like," I would ask them to spell it for me and then when they get to the E part, am I done yet? Do I need something else? And then again, I just reiterate, why, why does that A say /ā/ and not /ă/ and just sort of keep using that language and pointing out that pattern.

Then we move into doing the opposite, now let's decode. I'm going to build a word with my colored letter tiles, where they can clearly see the pattern, and let's practice our decoding. Remember this, are we going to hear the E's, is the E going to say anything? That kind of thing and then we practice at the word level.

From the word level, we move on to the sentence level. So decoding sentences and then to decodable books, and then spelling independently on their own too.

Anna: Have you found some favorite decodable books that you like to use with your students?

Sarah: I really like the company Phonic Books. I met them at a conference a few years ago. They're wonderful people, they're from England, and they have really good ones because the pictures that they use, they don't look very baby-ish and they're just really good stories and they go all the way up. They have some for younger kids, but they also have some that they call Catch-up Readers. If you have a fourth grader who needs

some decodable readers, they're really interesting and they have a good storyline.

I wrote a few of my own, and I find them... Gosh, I think I just look anywhere for them. Sometimes I go on Amazon and look for old decodables from other series, just anything I can get my hands on really.

Anna: I know at the beginning you said that you had loved balanced literacy, I loved balanced literacy, and it felt like to me this is the only way to teach reading. This is the only right way. If I'd see someone down the hall doing lots of explicit phonics, I thought, "Ugh, they're working too much at the..." I forget what they used to call it, the balanced literacy books I would read, but skills in isolation, when you're reducing it to basic skills, you're taking away meaning.

Those are all things that I believed very strongly. I would've been afraid to go to the structured approach because I was sure that was just going to make it really boring and that they didn't even need me if all I had to do was just follow this curriculum.

Can you speak to that in terms of were there any concerns that you had and how would you speak to someone who has those concerns now and is afraid to try something new?

Sarah: That is such a great question. So I have two different ways of looking at this. First, I realized that so much comprehension is taught through read aloud, and you can still do a shared reading type of experience. It's so rich for those students, and the wonderful thing is your whole class can participate, it's not just the readers.

I think a big shift was when I finally started to understand that you can teach comprehension and you can have that literacy-rich classroom still, it's just two different parts of your lesson. So I'm going to do a phonics lesson or a morphology lesson, but then I'm also going to have my read aloud or whatever I'm going to do to make sure that they are also getting the comprehension, which is the point of reading. We're still connecting to meaning. So that's one thing, that the read aloud is so powerful and is equally as important as the phonics time.

As an interventionalist, I don't do the read aloud so much, but I do work with the teachers to make sure that they're doing that in the classroom. That's the stuff that teachers love to do, there are great discussions and you can model certain things. They are still teaching them from kindergarten, right? That doesn't change.

Another thing I'd say is I have found that you can take a decodable sentence and really dig deep. It sounds so silly, but we kind of determine how boring we want our phonics lesson to be, right? If I'm just reading a sentence and the sentence is, "Sam gets his red cap," and I'm just telling them to sound out that sentence out and move on, that's boring!

S-a-m, S-a-m, that's boring. But if I start to say, "Okay, 'cap,' what does cap mean?"

Let's say, they say, "Oh, cap be a hat."

"Okay, what else can cap be?"

"Cap can be something you put on your glue stick."

"Okay, so there's different meanings of cap. Well, let's find out how can we find out which cap it is? Let's look at the other words that might be on the next page," or something like that. There's vocabulary right there with the multiple meanings of cap.

I'm talking about visualization with them. "What do you picture? Not so fast! We just read that sentence, but we're not done yet! What do you picture is happening? He puts on his red cap. Okay, if it's a glue stick cap, maybe it fell off and he's in school at his desk or maybe he's at a baseball game because a cap could mean you're putting on a baseball cap, maybe it's hot out." So you can really dig deep into a decodable sentence.

One time I was tutoring a student and the word "lap" came up and I had in my head two definitions of lap, but then they thought of another one and I thought, "Wow, gosh, we could really..." There are a lot of definitions of lap and just talking about that!

So that's vocabulary right there. I know it's at a really basic level, but what we're teaching them is to pay attention to text, not just the phonics part of the text or the morphology part. We're really talking about the vocabulary and to pay attention to what's happening and visualize and discuss even if it's a five word sentence.

That's what I would say, is that we can make it as rich as we want it to be just

depending on how we're teaching it.

Anna: I love that. So it's encouraging teachers to keep seeing teaching opportunities, which is something that you'll get better at the more you do structured literacy, the more you practice it.

What would you say to this? I was watching a workshop today called, "Prevention, Not Treatment, is Best for Dyslexia," or something like that. The point was that you can't prevent someone from having dyslexia because it's a brain-based issue, but you can have high quality tier one instruction that for some kids means they won't need extra intervention or at least not a lot of it.

What would you say to someone who's listening and really wants to have that kind of instruction that's going to help meet the needs of everybody? Just some general ideas for what it should look like teaching in K-2?

Sarah: I think just making sure you have a sequence in mind so that you know you're teaching all those graphemes and their spelling patterns. That way you can start the year knowing what you're going to be doing. I didn't have that for a little while and I felt like I was just grasping at things. So you want to make sure that you can get that, your roadmap, so to speak.

You also have a plan for your comprehension piece every day, and you want to make sure that you're going to be doing the actual foundational skills every day and keeping in mind that we want to have some phonemic awareness in there, we want to make sure we're explicitly teaching the phonics patterns or the graphemes, and giving PLENTY of opportunities for them to practice. I think that's what the key is.

I have the most fabulous first grade teacher at the school that I'm working at right now, and we've been working together. Obviously I take some of her students, and she's doing the same type of stuff that I'm doing, but in the classroom with the whole class. She said it's the first year she's done it this way to this extent, because she always was kind of worried that it's going to be boring for the students who are a little bit higher and maybe don't need it.

Keep in mind, you can still pull those higher students and read a book that's appropriate for them, so it's not like they're not going to get that still. But she would take some time during the day to do the lesson that was more with foundational skills, and she's found that she has produced better spellers because, as you know, often a

first grader can read really well, but the spelling piece might not be there. She's finding that it's really filling in other gaps, and she said she was surprised that none of her students seem bored by this instruction.

Anna: That's so interesting.

Sarah: It really surprised her! And I think just giving those opportunities. She's teaching the lesson, and then she's differentiating it. Maybe there's already kids who are readers and they don't need a decodable reader. Great, they're going to go do that. Some other kids are just right on track and they need a decodable reader. Then there's some kids who maybe need a little more support and so they might come with me or she'll work with them a little bit more, but giving them opportunities to practice is key, I think.

The spelling piece is key too. The decodable readers, with making sure that you're doing spelling just as much. That was a piece I was missing and didn't get until a little bit later. I was so focused on decoding that I didn't do that, what we now talk about with the orthographic mapping. I didn't do that spelling piece as much and that is so important.

Anna: Can you tell me a little bit about specific types of things she's doing with her kids, that you're also doing, that build in that review and that practice to help teachers get a picture of the types of things they can be doing.

Sarah: Word sorts I think are really helpful, and you can do the whole group or a small group. Lots of opportunities, even if it is just a worksheet, but sometimes you can turn a worksheet into something that's kind of a little bit more fun, like maybe they're spinning two spinners, or even if it's just spelling words on paper.

I have kind of a whole routine that I do where I start with reviewing the graphemes, and then usually I teach the skill. Depending on the day, if it's a new skill, I'll spend more time, but if it's a review skill, I'll just quickly review. Then I'm a pocket chart fan, I don't know if you've seen me on Instagram, I love pocket charts.

Anna: I have seen that.

Sarah: I do a lot of word and picture sorts on my pocket chart. So here's a picture sort I

might do. Let's say I'm teaching long A, AI versus AY, I'll have the letters, AI and AY and each of them has a column, and then I'll show a picture. If you're doing a whole class, you can show it under a document camera, or you can just say what the word is, you don't actually need the picture.

So let's say the word is "paid." I would talk about where we hear the sound /ā/ in the middle, and we've learned that AI is the one that would represent the /ā/ sound. So where would it go on the pocket chart? We'd do this whole sort where then we'd put it under the AI, and then at their desks, they would have their whiteboards and they would spell the word "paid." It's just a little, slightly more interactive way to do spelling.

That would be one. You could do that with short vowels too, where let's say I've just taught E and I, and they sound so similar, the /ĕ/ and the /ĭ/. You can do that also with sorting. You don't even have to have picture cards, you can just write the word. Have them write it on their whiteboards first.

If I say the word "set" and of course use it in a sentence, so they don't think it's "sit," then they would write it on their whiteboards and I'd say, "Okay, where do I put it?"

They would say, "Under the E." Then I would write it on the board. So that's just a more interactive way. That's an activity that we do a lot. I also have word cards where we would read the word together and sort them.

Anna: All the things you're talking about are making me think about the art of teaching. I think for people that are concerned that structured literacy is going to be boring and is only for the kids who really need it, they should check out Anita Archer's book, "Explicit Instruction," or Anita Archer on YouTube, because she has... She's just a really dynamic teacher, and you just find out that there are little tricks on how to keep students engaged, how to keep them constantly participating, and she shows you things you can do besides just calling on individual kids to keep the lesson moving.

Sarah: Right.

Anna: It can just liven up anything. I think once people start learning about structured literacy and phonics and how the language works, it does get kind of addicting. It's very interesting.

Sarah: It does. Well, and I do these things called sentence scramblers that I think a lot of people do, it's not unique or anything, but I make decodable sentence scramblers and those are a favorite.

Anna: Oh, sure.

Sarah: Because what it does is it makes it so they're decoding the word, but they're also having to put it in order. So it's syntax and you can connect to meaning, you can work on fluency, like how would I read that sentence? I do those almost every day.

Anna: Well, we're going to definitely send people to your website. One thing about your website that stands out to me compared to some other TPT sellers is that you really work to educate people, and you obviously spend a lot of time on your blog posts. They're extremely informative, and I've linked them a few times on my website because they're just so thorough. You have a nice balance of text and visuals, which I really appreciate. They're just easy to read and understand.

Sarah: Oh, thank you.

Anna: Yeah, I know you do a fantastic job, so we'll definitely encourage people to check you out there and also your Instagram.

Can you talk to us a little bit about how you got started on selling or blogging, and maybe about some of your most popular resources or what you're most proud of?

Sarah: 2010 is when I started noticing there were teacher blogs in general, and I thought, "Oh, that's kind of fun. Maybe I'll do it." I had been teaching first grade for a little while, and I just wanted to kind of do something different. So then I started blogging, just whatever. I would just post whatever I did that day, or I don't know.

Then when I was on maternity leave, I just missed teaching and I needed something, so I started doing it a little bit more. Then when I started diving into dyslexia, that's when I really kind of shifted from sharing this is what I'm doing in class, to wanting to share what I was learning.

Part of it is I am a slow learner and I would read these books, like in particular, Sally Shaywitz's book, which is what taught me all about dyslexia, and it took me forever to wrap my head around it. So my blog became my place where I would almost just take notes and try to organize it all, I go back and read my own blog posts! It would take me, honestly, months to write some of those blog posts. It was a way for me to organize all of these thoughts swirling around in my brain that I wanted to understand. I have to read it over and over and over again and draw it out and scribble it and do it again and again. I thought I might not be the only person like this, maybe somebody else could benefit from my cliff notes version, so to speak.

Anna: You do a nice job of breaking down some hard things like syllable types, that was new to me a couple years ago, then syllable division and there's so many other things too that are new to a lot of us from balanced literacy, but they're pretty foundational concepts that you really need to figure out.

What types of resources do you like to share the most? Is it mostly phonics that you're sharing?

Sarah: Yeah, I think the phonics stuff, and I'm really getting into morphology and learning about it, that's a really big piece that I wish I would've talked a little more about. Now that I integrate morphology starting in kindergarten, it makes such a difference starting with the suffixes S, ED, and ING using hand motions and just orally doing it and helping them understand the concept of the suffix. Then when they hear a word, even being able to be like, "Oh, wait, there's a suffix there, that's past tense" or, "I hear, ING," that kind of a thing.

That has been a really big game changer that I do in my classroom and that the teachers at my school now do. It helps with the spelling, but also, like you were saying, the structure of our language, and it sets them up for when they get to be in third and fourth grade and beyond when morphology really becomes more important than phonics actually. It starts to take over and it sets the stage for just understanding the concept of structure of a word. It's not just sounds basically.

Anna: Yeah, that's really good. I'm just starting to learn more about that myself. It's a whole other world.

It's funny because I used to do a lot of literacy and a lot of math and now I'm just like, "I'm just going to do one thing. It's just going to be structured literacy from here on out." I packed up all my professional math books that I don't have time to work with anyway and I said to my husband, "I don't need these because I definitely have enough

material for at least twenty years on structured literacy. There's just so much."

And it's very exciting that you'll never stop learning, they just keep coming out with more things for us to understand and to apply to our classrooms. So maybe sometime I'll have you back to talk about morphology because I bet we could talk for a whole half an hour just about this.

Sarah: We could, and I'll keep studying because I am always learning more.

Anna: Yeah, and well, as you talk about all the learning you've done, I know you mentioned Sally Shaywitz's book. For someone who's just getting started or maybe they're a little bit along, but they want to learn more, are there particular resources you would mention whether those are books or podcasts or blogs?

Sarah: Anything by Louisa Moats in the LETRS training, if you can get access toward that. You mentioned Anita Archer, definitely anything by her, Kilpatrick's book is out there now, people know about that. Another, I think his name is Richard Gentry, he's got some spelling stuff. I'm really bad with remembering names.

Anna: That's his name, yep.

Sarah: Thank you, and if you're interested in dyslexia, there's a couple of books. There's "The Dyslexia Empowerment Plan" by Ben Foss. That was one that I read quite a while ago, and "The Dyslexic Advantage," which I really liked. I like that book because it gets into more than just dyslexia as the disability, and it starts to talk about some potential. It's a disadvantage in school in many ways, but in life there can be advantages and there's certain gifts that often we see go along with it.

Anna: Sometimes things develop because of all that they go through to learn to read, right? Like all the discipline and things that they have to develop to keep up or to learn to read successfully.

Sarah: The place where I learned a lot of Orton-Gillingham stuff and a lot of structured literacy stuff was with the Dyslexia Training Institute, that was way back many, many years ago. They do a lot of online classes, and that one was really good. If you're interested in dyslexia too, there's the local Decoding Dyslexia chapters.

Anna: Awesome! Well thank you so much, Sarah! I think listening to you talk will hopefully help people see that structured literacy is for everybody, not just for the kids who struggle. There's so much potential in terms of making it exciting and meaningful for all your students. We'll be sure to link to all the recommendations that you shared, as well as your website and your Instagram and your TPT store. Thanks so much for joining us today!

Sarah: Thank you. It was fun!

Anna: Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you'll check out the show notes where you can get links to all the things we mentioned, as well as Sarah's amazing website and her TPT store as well as her Instagram. Head to the show notes at reachallreaders.com/episode87. Talk to you next week!