Triple R Teaching

Hello, everyone! You might remember that in the summer of 2022, I had a blog series where I interviewed teachers who had moved from more of a balanced literacy approach to a structured literacy approach. While that series was going on, I received an email from Stephanie, a teacher in Arkansas who asked if she could come on the podcast and share her story. That's what we get to hear today, and we also get to hear how she applies the science of reading to teaching in kindergarten.

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Stephanie! We're so glad to have you here on the podcast.

Stephanie: Hello! I'm so excited to be here, thank you.

Anna: Stephanie reached out to me when I had my series all about moving from balanced to structured literacy in the summer of 2022. She's going to talk to us about how she came to understand that balanced literacy wasn't working for all of her students and how she slowly made the change to more of a structured approach, the science of reading. We're going to talk about that.

Another cool thing is that Stephanie is from Arkansas, which many of you may know has been a leader in switching to more of a research-based approach to teaching reading. So Stephanie, can you talk to us maybe a little bit about what you learned about how to teach reading when you were in college?

Stephanie: Absolutely. It's a short story. I really did not learn a whole lot about how to teach reading in college. I took a reading course and I remember they showed us how to take a running record and I learned a lot of vocabulary that helped me pass my Praxis, but once I got to the classroom and I had to teach kiddos to read, I thought, "Well, okay. I've got to figure this out now," because I didn't have instruction when I was in my college courses on how to do it.

Anna: So you just were kind of figuring it out as you went along, or were you given some resources that you were supposed to work with?

Stephanie: Both. When I first began my special education journey, I did do a fourteen day professional development on balanced literacy, and from there I was given resources and leveled readers and a DRA assessment kit. I even did some LLI small groups and all of those things. I used what I learned from my professional development the very best I could, and I had a co-teacher who had been teaching balanced literacy and she was a great help. She explained to me the cueing system, and she even had the Beanie Babies and we shared those between us, "Okay, is it your turn for the dolphin today? All right, well, I'll take the lion."

For a lot of kiddos, they did okay. In the first grade, they grew. Was it the best method? No, absolutely not, but they grew and we kept doing it for a little while.

But I had some students, as a special education teacher, that it was not effective for at all. It turned into frustration, and it was not fun to pull out those guided readers. They would see me and say, "Here we go. Oh, no! Not again!"

So I thought, "Okay, we've got to try something new." That new thing was just me with a sharpie and some index cards writing decodable words. I didn't know that's what it was back then, that's not what I called it. In fact, I think it was, we started with the "at" word family and some sight words, and we'd read "the cat" and "the rat" and "the cat and the rat," and each week we would expand those sentences.

Then we switched gears a little bit and I started making him books, and then he was reading books and stories. They were rough drafts, I think I still was using my sharpie and some notebook paper then, but even as rough as those books were, they were still better for him than the leveled text because he could read, and he could make progress, and he began to have fun and feel better about what we were doing together.

So that was a turning point for me, for sure. I didn't understand why the decodable text was better at that point, but I did know there was something to it.

Anna: I have a question for you when we're talking about decodables. I had a comment on my Instagram, not too long ago, from somebody, "If you think that these boring books are going to cause a love of reading, you're delusional," so I'd love to know your perspective on what you saw when you were using those with kids? Did they enjoy reading them? Did success breed motivation, like Anita Archer says? What was your experience with that?

Stephanie: Well, I think now there are much better decodables than there used to be. I think a lot of people have experience with some of the early ones. But listen, if a kid is frustrated, they're not having fun. It doesn't matter how pretty the pictures are, or how wonderful the story is, if they're frustrated with it they don't want anything to do with it. But if a kiddo has success, that makes them feel good, and that builds confidence.

From my experience, those decodables were a whole lot more fun than the other books just because of that success and that confidence, that sparkle that I got to see in this little guy's eye because at the end of the week, he read it so much quicker, and more fluently, and he was like, "Oh, I did it!" He didn't dread my homemade decodables like he did some of the guided readers.

Anna: I think, too, don't you think that kids know when they're actually reading and when they're not reading?

Stephanie: Oh, 100%.

Anna: He knew he was pulling the words off, he wasn't just using the picture or helping you get him started, he knew he could actually do it himself, and there's something to be said for that.

Stephanie: 100% yes, I think so, absolutely.

Anna: So this was your first move towards more of the science of reading, which you probably weren't aware of that phrase back then, or structured literacy or anything.

Stephanie: No, no idea. Mm-mm.

Anna: You were just trying something new, and it worked.

Stephanie: Right, mm-hmm. Yep.

Anna: Can you walk us through the timeline then after that?

Stephanie: Sure. That was about two years into my teaching career. After that, I continued to teach special education for a couple of years. Then I was the gen ed first grade teacher for a couple years, and then I went back to special education.

Then, two years ago, Arkansas did a huge movement, the RISE movement. It's called the Reading Initiative for Student Excellence, and every teacher across the state has to demonstrate proficiency in teaching reading, from pre-K on up through high school.

In fact, our district did a fourteen day training with the LETRS book, and we have had so many resources and experiences and opportunities to learn. Even my husband, he teaches third-grade math, had to go through it because he's an Arkansas teacher.

There was resistance, because change is scary, and anytime you completely overhaul what you're doing, there's a lot of stress and frustration in trying to figure out this new thing.

But I think once we began to shift our instruction, we did find that there were some things that we were doing that were actually still pretty good! For instance, part of our balanced literacy before RISE was read-alouds. Well, we still do read-alouds! We do them better and we focus more on vocabulary and background knowledge and things like that. Everything shifted, but some things weren't completely thrown out either.

Anna: Can you walk us through a little bit of what a day would look like in your classroom? We're recording this in September, so I know it's the beginning of the year, and it's going to look different in a few months, but what would be an average day of your literacy in kindergarten?

Stephanie: Yes, ma'am. Kiddos come in and their first step is to grab their familiar reading folder. Some teachers use a basket. I use a folder because I like it to be right there at their desk. Right now, inside a kindergarten familiar reading folder is the alphabet. As time goes on, when I really get into small group instruction and they start reading text with me, I'll give them a copy of that text after we've gone over it for a week. When I know that they can read it with accuracy, then it's going to go inside their familiar reading folder. So their folder will just expand as the year goes on and they'll have lots of different things to choose from and review what I've already taught and worked on with them. That's different for all kids, that's differentiated.

Then from there, we move into our shared reading time. At this point, it's all about concepts about print, but eventually I will start thinking aloud through all reading skills, modeling fluency, and modeling how to apply different comprehension strategies. We love to use big books with that, so the kiddos can see the print, and we talk about punctuation, and all that good stuff. If I don't have a big book, we'll do a poem or something on our SMART Board. I'll project that up.

After that, we move into phonological and phonemic awareness. We use Heggerty for that, whole group.

Then we go into phonics. Right now, we are doing a letters boot camp, just exposure to all the letters of the alphabet. When we get through our letters boot camp, we'll start our phonics program. That phonics lesson is approximately 30 minutes long, and then I have an hour of small group time and centers.

Anna: Can you talk to us about how you form those small groups and what you do in those lessons?

Stephanie: For kindergarten, at the beginning of the year, I group my kiddos based on the letters that they know because the bulk of our small group time is going to be working on letter identification, letter recognition fluency, formation of letters, all of that good stuff.

Eventually, when we start decodable text, I will start grouping more on mastered phonics skill and phonemes. My instruction really starts to be differentiated at that point because I have four groups, typically. That leaves me fifteen minutes for each group. I would love to have six groups and 20 minutes for each group, but logistically, it's not possible.

Then, within my small group, we work on phonological awareness skills and phonemic awareness skills. I use David Kilpatrick's book as a resource first thing, and I do one-minute drills from there. We work on some type of fluency warm-up activity to review previous skills. I pull in phonics instruction when we get there.

I usually have an intervention group where I'm reteaching skills. I usually have about two groups that I call my grade-level groups, and they're pretty close to just being right

there on grade level, and then I have one group that is my enrichment group.

Those groups change every time I do an assessment, or every time a kiddo starts flying through letters, I move them up a group.

Anna: Sure.

Stephanie: After the phonics instruction, we move into a decodable text of some kind. Later in the year, we'll pull those out.

Anna: Tell me about what you do with your enrichment group.

Stephanie: In kindergarten, what that looks like a lot of times is instruction on more advanced phonics skills, and the opportunity to read those skills in context in a book of some kind. Last year at Christmas time, I had a group who had mastered everything in our kindergarten phonics curriculum, we had to brush up on digraphs just a tad, but then they were ready to start on first-grade level skills.

Anna: I know people always ask me what curriculum I recommend, which I don't specifically recommend a curriculum, but I share what I've heard are good curricula. You talked about Heggerty and Kilpatrick. Can you tell us your main program, and then also, are there specific decodable series that you like to use?

Stephanie: Yes, ma'am. Sure thing. We use Phonics First, it's a Brainspring program. It uses Orton-Gillingham methods and I like it a lot. I've seen great success with it. I have started writing decodable books and that's what I use with my kiddos. They match the scope and sequence of our phonics program. I have also used the Flyleaf books. I pick and choose from those because they there's some that work really well.

Anna: It sounds like the way you teach now would be very different than at the beginning of your teaching journey.

Stephanie: 1000%, yeah.

Anna: Can you talk a little bit about the difference you've seen in how kids are progressing, or learning, or maybe also a little bit about their interest in reading, and if you've had any concerns about that? That's a big concern for people who are being told that there's something wrong with leveled books, they're concerned that their kids are just going to be bored. Maybe you could talk about that and how you keep your kids interested during phonics.

Stephanie: We have a lot of fun! I feel like honestly, the structured literacy approach is way more fun for me to teach and for my kids to learn than the balanced literacy approach. We have games, we have songs, we have Play-Doh, and apple sauce. Anytime you can incorporate food into a lesson, kids are going to be excited, so when we are learning the short a says /ă/, we are writing A's in apple sauce on our desk. The kids get excited about it, and I think as a teacher, because I'm so much more excited about it, they catch onto that.

If I'm excited, "Whoo, we're excited! We're going to learn A today, or learn C today!" and the confidence that the students have because they're able to read is a huge driving factor in them wanting to read more and them looking forward to small reading groups and looking forward to getting a brand new book and looking forward to coming to school, and saying, "Oh, I can't wait to do this." Because kids know, kids are smart, and you can't fool them.

My own son, I'll use him as an example, he's a kindergartner this year, and I started him with my decodable texts this summer. He can sound out the words and blend and put them together and he's like, "Mom, look at me! Look at me!" He had to call his grandma and he had to read the book to her and his Auntie Nick and read the book to her.

Whereas then the other night we had just a book off the bookshelf and he "read," with air quotes, "read" me the page, and I was just encouraging him for being in a book, "Good job."

And he turned to me and said, "Mom, I didn't read that. I was just using the picture. I just made that up."

And I was like, "Okay," guilty face, I was like, "Well, you didn't. You're right, you're right."

Kids know and they get excited when they're successful. If you're successful, you feel

good, and if you feel good about something, you want to do it, and you want to do more of it.

Anna: Yes, exactly. You talked a little bit about the decodables you've written. Can you talk to us a little bit about your TPT store and what you've created, what you are most proud of there?

Stephanie: Oh, sure. Yeah, I would love to. My books are kind of the cornerstone of my store. I've got a level for kindergarten, and first grade, and I've just started on what I call level three, which is more later first grade/second grade books, and then I've started developing small group kits to go with my books.

Basically, if you had the book and you needed your lesson plans and your phonemic awareness activities and your words to practice in dictation, you could grab the kit to go along with the book and you're all set up, you're good to go there.

Something I've learned along the way is that reading in small groups is wonderful, but I have learned that kids need more than just that little bit of reading. Anytime that you can sneak it in throughout your day, even if it's just a sentence here or there, it's great.

The familiar reading we've got as part of our literacy block and then within our phonics instruction, add in a sentence that goes along with our phonics pattern, and it builds each day. Anybody could do this up on their whiteboard, or use Google Slides and type it out for Monday. Depending on your pattern, if it's short A and you're working on C and T you read something like, "The cat ran," and then maybe on Tuesday you could say, "The cat ran to the dog," and then the next day, maybe you're going to change it up and say something else. I like to use different punctuation marks, the kids get SO excited about recognizing and getting to use an exclamation point!

Anna: Oh, that's so funny.

Stephanie: They say, "It's an exclamation point right there!" or a question mark.

They get so excited, so we'll say, "The cat ran to the dog?" they inflect the ending, or they'll say, "The cat ran to the dog!" Just goofy stuff, but it gives them opportunities to map those words in and let those words become sight words. They can read them automatically, which we know helps their fluency and their comprehension and all the

things.

The more I can incorporate just simple one minute, two minute, or thirty seconds of, "Let's read this sentence real quick," the better.

Anna: The name of your store is Darling Ideas, is that right?

Stephanie: Yes, it is.

Anna: I will link to that in the show notes so people can find that.

Now, I know a lot of the professional education you've gotten has been provided through your state, but are there books or podcasts or blogs or anything that have been a help to you?

Stephanie: You bet! Well, okay, I love your podcast because every time I listen, I get something that I can take away with me and try the very next day! I think it was a couple of weeks ago, I was listening to your vocabulary podcast about how to incorporate vocabulary, and things like that. So definitely your podcast. I like some of the Facebook groups, "What I Should Have Learned in College" has some good tips. I like to scroll, but I get buried in there sometimes.

Anna: Yes. Yep, you you get sucked in.

Stephanie: Yep, I get sucked in. I also like the podcast "Together in Literacy." That's a good one.

The very beginning of David Kilpatrick's book, his assessments and his drills are amazing, but the very beginning of his book has some really great snippets and take-aways.

Anna: "Equipped for Reading Success" is the book you're talking about. I agree that he is the reason I understood orthographic mapping. It was really hard for me at first. I just

kept watching his videos and then it sounds so basic once you figure it out, but that was a new idea for me. He has a really great way of explaining things.

Stephanie: I love it.

TikTok is a great resource for me. Heidi on TikTok, Heidi, I forget her last name, but she's always sharing great snippets. As a busy teacher and a busy mama, I don't always have time to sit down with a text like I used to, so anything that I can listen to and apply. I try to walk every night, and so that's a good 15 to 30 minutes that I can listen to something.

Anna: Yes! Any tips for teachers who are trying to make this change in their schools on how to go about it in a way that's going to help everybody get on board?

Stephanie: Start small. My mom used to always tell me, "An elephant wasn't eaten in a day," same thing as Rome wasn't built in a day. I would not approach people with, "Hey, we've got to overhaul everything. Let's change to structured literacy," and yada, yada, yada, but a teacher next door is more accepting of, "Hey, yesterday, I tried this and it worked really well. You might give it a try with your kids," or, "Hey, I came up with this resource and tried this idea and my kiddos had a lot of fun with it. Maybe you want to try it, too." Definitely start small.

I set a goal for myself and I feel like it's obtainable to try to do something new each week. Some weeks it's a whole lot more than others. Some weeks it may be, "Okay, I'm going to try to implement this strategy for teaching writing," whereas the next week, my new thing might be these cool pointers that I found in the Target dollar bin, but it's just something to try. It keeps it exciting for me, but also I hope my students as well.

Anna: Well thank you so much for sharing. I know people are going to love, especially, the part where you talked about your day and how that looks, and I know they're going to want to check out your store and see the resources you have for making small groups work.

Stephanie: Thank you.

Anna: We'll provide all that in the show notes. Thanks again for reaching out to me, Stephanie.

Stephanie: Yes, ma'am. Thank you for having me. This was fun! I was a little nervous at first, but you made it so easy, and I had a blast.

Anna: I'm so glad Stephanie could join us today, and you can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode94. Talk to you next time!