



Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here from The Measured Mom, and this week you get to hear from an experienced first grade teacher, Virginia Quinn-Mooney. She's going to talk to us about what structured literacy looks like in her classroom. She talks to us about her phonics lessons, her morning message, her read alouds, her writing time, and her small groups. I know you're going to get a ton out of this.

Listen to the end because we'll give you the link to the show notes, and you'll be able to go to the website to get the links as well as her email address, because she's offered that to anyone who wants to ask her questions. Let's get started!

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Gin!

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Well, thank you! I am quite pleased to be here.

Anna Geiger: So I have heard from you many times, you're very active in the "Science of Reading - What I Should Have Learned in College" Facebook group. Also I really loved seeing a presentation that you gave for one of the Unlocking SOR conferences where you basically took us into your classroom. You showed us how you implement a structured literacy approach with your first graders, and it was amazing. You had those kids just right with you. There was no boredom there. It was so much engagement.

I wanted to talk to you today so you can share with us how to implement the science of reading in a fun way and meet the needs of all your kids.

Tell us about your feelings about balanced literacy and structured literacy. I know before we hit record, you shared that you were never quite on the balanced literacy train, but maybe talk to us about that, because I know that you were in a district that was more balanced literacy. How did you work through that?

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: I always look at it as I was balanced literacy-ish, mostly

because as teachers we are contracted employees. When people say, "Just shut your door," I understand the theory behind that, but at the end of the day, we do need to respect our district and we do need to respect the curricula that we've been handed, whether or not we agree with them. But I did do a lot more of what I thought was right and what I thought they needed.

I stumbled upon a three-ring binder in a classroom that I had acquired many years ago, and I don't even think the font exists from these pages. It was all word work, and I was using smart words, and segmenting and blending, and letter manipulation before I knew that it was actually a thing. I could see the results in the kids, and I could see when they would do their own work, they would always refer back to the word work part of our day.

Reading is a skill, and it has to be taught just like anything else. I always use the metaphor of crocheting, my mom was a big crocheter, and she crocheted in front of me every night. I sat on my mom's lap while she crocheted, sort of like kids sit on parents' lap when they read to them, but my mom never taught me to crochet. I think we know how the story ends. I still can't crochet.

My mom never covered the needle so I could guess what was going on behind it. My mom never said just crochet more and more, because she knew that it would not have worked. Now if I had ever asked my mom to please teach me crochet, we would've done it sequentially and systematically, but she didn't, so I can't crochet.

It's why so many kids can't read. We can't just suggest reading and read around them and think that they'll be able to read.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, I love that analogy.

I know a lot of people are wondering about the science of reading. What does this look like? What's a daily schedule look like? Can you walk us through your day in your first grade classroom?

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: I am a UFLI gal. I love the program of UFLI. It is so user-friendly, and it's so much fun for the kids.

So the morning starts with quick drills with phonemic awareness where it's just sounds,

and the kids will blend, and then they'll segment, but it's all just strictly about the sounds.

Even with that, I really appreciated your kind words about when you saw my teaching. It's sort of like multisensory on steroids. If they can stand, why don't they dance? Right? Or if they can talk, why not sing it? So everything I do, I try to make sure that they are up and moving because they're six and it's just better.

So when they segment, they will either dance it or they can jumping jack it. They'll do the hype, they'll do the humpty, whatever it is, but they are just happy as can be.

So we'll go from the phonemic awareness, and then we'll add in a visual component where they'll correspond their letters and sounds, graphemes and phonemes.

Then there's an auditory component where I will give them the grapheme, and they'll write it down for me. It's a big assessment sweep because I'm seeing everything that every child can do.

From there comes my favorite part of their day, and that's the word work. I always look at that as like kneading bread. It's when we take our words, we manipulate the letters, we pull them apart, we put them back together.

They just absolutely love it because they know that they're learning. They know what they're getting. They know how much smarter they are, and they know that they're going to apply this as soon as they sit down to write, or as soon as they sit down to read. They absolutely know how far they've come from the beginning of the year.

I use puppets a lot. We use blending boards, anything again to get them as multisensory as we can.

So then from the word work, typically, it's new learning, and then they will apply all that new learning to a decodable that aligns with whatever phonics pattern they just learned.

It's fun and it's lively, and it's very much first grade specific.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. You mentioned UFLI, which for people who aren't familiar with that, it's a wonderful affordable phonics program from the University of Florida with Dr. Holly Lane as I think the primary author of that. It's very easy to use. One single spiral bound manual for K-2 phonics, I believe. And then the extra materials you just print from online. It's an extremely affordable program compared to many other programs.

So that's one part of your day. What else are you doing?

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: I have a morning message, it's authored by me, and I can use it for any sort of social emotional learning that I need to tap into or for more reinforcement of whatever phonics patterns we've been going over. That's where also I am an absolute nut for handwriting.

Letter formation, it's got a lot to do with the brain, I didn't make it up. I just happened to have always believed in it in my career. I made up a very goofy handwriting instruction for them, and it works and we sing songs. But their handwriting has to be perfect on the morning message as well, and that's an easy way for me to check them all as well.

Then my read aloud is very much aligned to my writing instruction.

Natalie Wexler is another person who has transformed my teaching strategies and teaching philosophies. So what I've learned from The Knowledge Gap and from The Knowledge Matters Campaign, a podcast that came out this summer, is content, content, content.

In my read aloud, sometimes they're nonfiction fun, but oftentimes we are very involved in a content area, and then that's where their writing goes.

The first time I ever heard Natalie Wexler was on a podcast, and she was saying how if you align reading with content, now you can hit content. That was like another life-changing moment for me.

You know, it's funny, now content is sort of like All About Me units. Well, they know

about themselves, and I like to learn about them so that can be the first week of school, but let's move on and let's get some genuine learning for them. So now it's bats, and it's penguins. I had my kids out at recess playing an echolocation game because now they know all about bats.

And their writing is so connected to what they're learning that I am seeing such improvements.

Anna Geiger: So one thing I've read about is using text sets, like picking a particular topic and then reading a variety of books, maybe fiction and nonfiction about that topic over a period. Do you do anything like that?

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: I do. I do. *Stellaluna* was in there, yeah. Bats is such a great example to do in October, but I had very much both. And during penguins it's *Tacky*. If you don't yet know *Tacky the Penguin*, you're welcome!

Anna Geiger: Yes. So tell us a little bit about how you do your writing, because I get a lot of questions about that. How do you start the year, and then how do you move forward with that?

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Sure. So I start the year keeping it on a word level. They're coming to me right out of kindergarten. They're young, and our kindergarten team is remarkable with what they're doing, so if they can send them to me on the word level, that's a really big plus. Some of them are coming to me on the sentence level, but for the most part, we're on just a one-word level.

And then my goal, truly, is to get them just to a sentence level. I'm not of the write more and more camp. I'm really not. I'm of the write well and write correctly. I want them to have the conventions, have it start with uppercase, have your periods, have your spaces, have your handwriting.

If I am successful with every child on the sentence level, then I feel like I have been successful. One sentence will then move on to other sentences. But for me, it has always been about quality and not quantity.

Anna Geiger: Which is very different from the writing workshop approach, which is what I did for a long, long, long time. I think there's some value in writing workshop.

There are some things there that are research-based, but I think, again, it's a lot of this circling around writing, without actually getting to a lot of the specifics about how to break it down to its smallest parts. It's more like, let's write this big story about something, even though I don't know how to form a sentence, maybe I can't even really speak a complete sentence, but somehow this is going to appear on my paper.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: I agree with you. And also so much of it is experiential. And I've said this before, these kids have only been upright and walking for four years. They're not coming to us with this big bank of experiences.

There's a unit on Small Moments, and I'm always, "Well, don't leave the moment."

But the kids were like, "Well, yeah, but after the birthday party, I went to McDonald's. I really want to tell you about that."

But again, being a contracted employer, and this was my curriculum, I was like, "Yeah. But no, no, let's stay right here. What more can you tell me?"

And they would look up at me and their thought bubble was like, nothing. "I really can't. I swam at my cousin's pool."

Anna Geiger: This is so funny. I know I've experienced that exact same thing, but I thought it was the right thing to do. So I just felt, I don't know, I just had to keep pulling stuff out of them.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Correct. And you know what Anna, I think this is a really important thing to say, and I go back to this a lot as well in the happy hour, we ALL did what we were taught, we did what the manual in front of us said.

I did that with my kids' best interest in mind because I was like, "No, it's a small moment." So for whatever reason, it was important that that would be a small moment. And I worked overtime to keep them in that moment, even though my wheels are spinning up here with something else.

The other distinction that I always made was I never really embraced invented spelling,

because I thought, well, we just spent all morning on r-controlled vowels, and you're not applying an r-controlled vowel. So figure it out. Which one would make sense here?

Anna Geiger: I think invented spelling is a tricky one because I know that there is something to be said for writing something you can read back, but I totally am with you that what you've been taught should absolutely be applied.

How do your kids feel about the writing time and how do you keep them interested?

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: They absolutely love it because they're invested in it. And again, they know what they know. They can feel what language they have acquired. They're teaching other kids in other classes about things.

I had done a penguin unit, and then in the spring we hatched ducklings. I was reading a book to them, and it was so cute! I was reading about how ducklings have down, and I looked up at them and I was like, "Do I need to explain that?"

And they're like, "Nope!" because they knew what down was. So to be six years old, and to just shrug your shoulders like, "Yeah, doesn't everybody know what down is?" But they don't necessarily know what down is, but they did because they were invested in the penguins.

Anna Geiger: So just as a recap for people who are listening, we're talking about structured literacy in first grade. You've got a good phonics part of your day that you use UFLI for, and you start with review and hearing the phonemes, and then getting into the word work, and the decodable book work. You do a read aloud and you teach writing, and those are very connected to whatever content knowledge you're teaching your students for a period of time. Am I missing anything? Oh, and your morning message, which you use as a way to highlight some of the phonics skills that you're teaching and support some other things that they're learning.

Is there anything else that you would include as part of your literacy? I know you talked about handwriting.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Well, small group.

Anna Geiger: Okay. Tell us about that.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: So when I pull the small group, I still love centers. I have been doing centers my entire career, and I still-

Anna Geiger: That's great.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: ... am a huge believer in centers. I use a lot of your stuff, by the way.

Anna Geiger: Oh, great!

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Yes. I always have, ironically.

So I have a word center that, again, is connected to whatever pattern we've been working with. I have a word center, I have a writing center, I have a content center, which is usually a video with whatever content we are working on, and a heart word center so that they can practice with their heart words, and a listening center, and a smart board center.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Yeah, and each center lasts about 15 minutes, and I pull two groups a day.

They are very independent to the point where I have a bulletin board where whatever their center is goes on the board, so they can go see it if they don't remember what their center is, even though it's in the bucket, again, they're six. You have to prepare for everything. But I have a bulletin board with jobs and one of them says, "Ask me." So if you are in the word center and you don't remember what your responsibility is, look up and see who's the kid this week to ask for what the expectation is. So they're just pulling each other, and again, they know that it's theirs and they take ownership in it. They're very proud of how they really stay busy, and they hold each other accountable a lot.

Anna Geiger: So without going into too much detail, because it could probably be a whole other episode, but can you just give us an overall look at how you form those groups and what you're doing with them?

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: I probably go against the current when it comes to differentiation in the world of education. For me, differentiation, it's organic. Whoever needs me the most, gets me the most.

So in the morning when we're doing our whiteboards, I can see who just didn't hit the objective the way that I needed them to. On my center board, I would just throw that name up next to a picture of me, and I pull them. Every student doesn't get the same amount of time with me because they just don't need it.

Usually in my small group, it's the child that needs me the most. It's usually based on whatever UFLI lesson we did that day, or a very big indicator for me is the writing that we did the day before. I look more to their encoding to see who needs my help with decoding. So what I think-

Anna Geiger: So looking at their spelling to figure out who needs help with reading.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Yes. Yeah. So writing is a really important part of it. I need every child to write every day so that I can keep my eyes on their encoding and how they're applying or not applying everything that we've done so far.

Anna Geiger: So have you had any students that were so far behind that that the whole class phonics lesson wasn't really serving them?

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: I haven't, actually.

Anna Geiger: Which is so interesting, because I know my way of doing it in the past has always been this idea of testing everybody to see where they are diagnostically, and then grouping them according to where they are in the scope and sequence and move forward.

Tell me why you're doing it the way you are and why you think you're successful with it.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: There are assessments, certainly. Typically the child who struggled on their screener is the same child who is struggling with their phonics in the morning and their writing in the afternoon. Not always, but I know who my eyes are on. They're on everyone, but I know who to linger on just a little bit longer.

But the reason why I do it that way is because it's an evolution, and I want to make sure that I'm hitting exactly what we did that day, because I want to make sure that they are getting their digraphs, because I know we're coming up to diphthongs.

Since it is systematic, I need to make sure that I'm picking them up and I'm taking them with me, so that they're not falling too far behind. So if I just base it on a universal screener, it's not hitting the daily curriculum and the daily expectations for them.

Anna Geiger: So you teach the grade level skill to everybody, and you notice the kids that it's hard for, and then you pull them and teach it in a more scaffolded way or supported way.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Right.

Anna Geiger: What kind of things are you doing in your small groups?

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Word work. I'll do a lot more application with the word work. I will try to make it even more multisensory. That's when I'll bring in my sand trays and my carpet samples or my sandpaper to just try to get those, as my kids always say, those neurons popping. So I do whatever I can to get their neurons popping.

So I will do more word work, more intensive word work, and now they have my full attention. For me, the most important part of small group is you have my undivided attention, and I can see the second there's a hiccup, and I can try to determine where the hiccup is coming from.

After the additional word work then I will do a decodable book with them, and I try to do a different decodable from whatever passage the class is doing. I'll try to pull a decodable that's using the same pattern, but with different text.

Anna Geiger: Sure. Would you be able to share any resources, like favorite books or people you follow, that you would recommend for people that are trying to learn more and start to do more of what you're doing?

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Well, definitely the Facebook page, "Science of Reading - What I Should Have Learned in College." Aside from being lucky enough to be aligned with it, the learning on there, it's just nonstop. Again, I'm so lucky that I am a moderator because I get to see the cutting-edge stuff the second it's coming out. That is a phenomenal resource.

I know you're going to think I'm blowing smoke, but yourself, your podcast has been huge for me. Anything Emily Hanford, anything Natalie Wexler, you cannot go wrong. There's a new book, "7 Mighty Moves." That's a really good one.

Anna Geiger: Yes, really good.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: "Reading Above the Fray," that's a great one. Twitter. And, like I was told, see who other people that you follow are following, and just start following people, and it will start popping up for you.

You can't walk into a room without getting hit by science of reading now in the world of education, and I am beyond grateful for that because it's time. It's time that we start teaching.

Anna Geiger: And you've been taking kind of a leadership role in getting more teachers talking about it. Can you tell us a little bit about your virtual happy hour?

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Yeah, sure. My pleasure. So I listened to Sold a Story, and it was such a transformational moment for me, and I couldn't sleep. I was laying in bed, and I thought, I have such big, big feels for this. I don't know what to do with it. I was happy that it was out there. I was angry with so many of the things that I learned, and I thought, there's just no way that I'm the only person feeling this way.

I'm far too big for my britches, and I thought it was okay for me to send a direct message to Donna Hejtmanek, who is the leader of the page, the Facebook page, and she's wonderful. She got back to me within a minute, and I told her my idea. I said, "I'd like to host a Zoom where teachers can come on and talk about what this means for them."

We are here because we love children, and we are here because we all want to do the best for kids. Then listening to that podcast, it was very jarring, and it was a big water cooler moment. So I wanted to keep it, if possible, light.

So I said, "Well, what would you think if we did it on a Friday night, and we made it a happy hour?"

She got right back to me, and she said, "My husband loves it!"

I was like, "All right!"

So it went from an insomniac who came up with this crazy idea, and because her husband liked it, now we have this virtual happy hour.

It began with lots of tears and lots of big emotions, very much so. That was probably the first two or three episodes.

But after a few episodes, I thought, okay, we've talked about it. We deserve to talk about it. We've earned to talk about it. We needed to talk about it, but now let's not look in the rearview anymore. Let's look to the road ahead and what are we going to do? What can we do? And that's what I have tried now to morph these happy hours into.

Personally, I love the fact that Emily Hanford's came out first and it was the decoding, because that was actionable. We could all do it. We could jump into that. We have lots of materials to make that happen.

It's the language acquisition and the vocabulary, that is not quite as-

Anna Geiger: Cut and dry.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Yeah. So this podcast, the Knowledge Matters Podcast, this summer was great. And anyway, I'm digressing. They reached out to me and asked if I would be willing to host Natalie Wexler to talk about each podcast.

Anna Geiger: Oh, wow.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: I know, so I thought, "Let me think about it." Ha!

So I did, and now I'm rubbing virtual elbows with Natalie Wexler, and she's amazing and incredible. We did two episodes with Natalie Wexler, and I am better and smarter by far. It's not about me, which it's hard for me to say because I'm the youngest of eight.

Anna Geiger: Everything's about you.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: No. So this is very hard for me, Anna, but it's really not. And I have made it my mission to do whatever I can to move the conversation and to just move the needle for kids. I feel like we're in a really, really good position moving forward. I feel the momentum behind me. I feel it in the schools, I feel it in the big community. It's coming, and I don't see it going away.

Anna Geiger: It's such an exciting time. If someone wants to know, is there a way that people can be notified about when your next virtual happy hour is going to be? Are those publicized, or is it just in the Facebook group that you note those?

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Yep. Thank you for asking. I do put on the Facebook group, and I have a YouTube channel, Virtual Happy Hour. For the most part, every happy hour that I've done is recorded and on the YouTube channel, but definitely, I try to put it on every Facebook page that I can. Again, it's such an incredibly generous community that we all really try to support each other, but yeah.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. Well, that's wonderful. I look forward to watching the replays.

Unfortunately I'm just not in the season of life where I can just sit down on my computer in the evening and watch something and talk with teachers. There's way too much activity go on around here in the evenings, but-

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Well, you're a little busy, my friend, a little busy.

Anna Geiger: But I will definitely enjoy watching those. Thank you so much! I'm sure people are going to hear this and want to know more.

Is there a way that people can reach out to you with questions, like maybe message you on Twitter?

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Sure. Twitter, yeah, please. I don't know my Twitter handle though, but if you want-

Anna Geiger: I'll get it and put in the show notes.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Sure. Or I would even share my personal email. This is really about moving the needle forward. I will do whatever it takes in our community to help people. That's my personal goal, so I'd be happy to share my email.

Anna Geiger: All right, well, I'll put in the show notes, and then if you decide at some point I'm getting too many emails, let me know and we'll take it out. I'll ask for that after we turn this off, and then people can reach out to you because, like I said, I know this is what teachers need. They need the how-to, and you're full of knowledge about that.

So thanks again, it was so nice to meet you and talk with you.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Thank you!

Anna Geiger: Thank you so much for listening. You can find the show notes for this episode at themeasuredmom.com/episode132.

I want to let you know about a new podcast series that starts next week. We're talking to change-makers, so whether that's an individual classroom teacher, a district leader, a state leader, or even someone who operates on the national level. We're going to be talking to a variety of people about how they've brought the science of reading into their arena and how it's made a difference for the students in their care. So look forward to that. We start with it next week. I also know that many of you appreciate the shorter episodes that are more hands-on and specific, so for this series, I'm also going to be releasing Wednesday episodes that are more hands-on for teachers. So look forward to the big-picture episodes on Mondays and the shorter hands-on episodes on Wednesdays. See you then!