



# Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna here, and we are continuing our Balanced to Structured Literacy podcast series.

Today we have the joy of hearing from Christina Winter, who I'm sure you'll be able to tell right away is just a very kind, thoughtful person who really has a heart for helping teachers. She has a beautiful website, Mrs. Winter's Bliss, and a successful online business. Even more than that, she's about helping teachers learn and grow, and she has many resources to help you do that. We'll get started right 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 everybody! I am so excited to welcome Christina Winter to the podcast today. She is an experienced educator, she's been selling online resources for almost a decade, and she is open and honest about her journey from balanced to structured literacy, which is why we're really excited to welcome her to our Balanced to Structured Literacy podcast series. Welcome, Christina!

**Christina Winter:** Thank you so much, Anna, for having me! I feel so honored to be here. I feel like I've learned so much from you, and I'm excited for other teachers to have this opportunity to hear what we're going to share about today.

**Anna:** Yes. And ditto!

One thing that really strikes me about you, especially as a TPT seller, is that you also have a blog - a website - that's really dedicated to teaching teachers. That always sticks out to me because there's many people who sell, but that's all they do, and you make a point to educate people as well, which is fantastic.

I know that you were a first grade teacher for a lot of years, and you've shared with me that during that time, you were a balanced literacy teacher. Could you talk to us a little bit about what someone would've seen if they'd come in your classroom and watched you teaching reading?

**Christina:** Well, they would've seen all the balanced literacy, three-cueing, leveled text, no decodable readers, etc.

I was a teacher for twenty-one years, mostly first grade, and I never had any training on phonics or anything like Scarborough's Rope or the Simple View reading. I mean, it's amazing to me that all of that has been around for decades and I didn't get any training on that. I got training on guided reading, what to do with running records, Daily 5, using the cafe, I mean that's where I come from.

So when I started to learn about the science of reading, I think what caught my attention is that I was kind of doing some of the things that the science says, which we can get into, and that was working in my classroom, but I didn't really have a name for that. And so I feel like now that I've discovered and I'm on my journey with science and reading, I feel at home.

**Anna:** Yeah, I think finally when you start to put together all the science of reading, when it all comes to light, all of a sudden everything fits together in your mind versus to me, balanced literacy was a lot of pieces, and I really struggled to fit them together. They didn't always fit logically. I taught phonics, and I'm sure you did too, it just wasn't very explicit or systematic.

What was your approach to teaching phonics when you were a teacher?

**Christina:** I knew phonics and that we had to teach it because we're teaching first grade. I knew that it was the code to teaching reading, but again, I wasn't provided any type of scope and sequence or anything like that. It was like, "Go teach short vowels and then teach long vowels." We had standards on our report card and then had to make it up.

I think it was with my experience after years of teaching that I knew they needed to progress through short vowels and then blends and then digraphs, and so I kind of created my own scope and sequence. The more I've learned, I learned more about the

systematic progression and exactly how to make it helpful for students, and then the amount of time that's needed for students to practice. I mean, if I took myself now and went back to the classroom, it would definitely look a lot different. There would be a lot more instructional time dedicated to it.

**Anna:** So one thing for me when people started talking about three-cueing and whether it was a problem in leveled books and everything, they would say, "Well, over here, you're teaching phonics, but then here, they're practicing in these books, but they're not getting to apply their phonics." That was hard for me to hear because I really liked my leveled books, but I had to admit that it was true. In your experience, what can you say about the use of leveled books in the early grades like kindergarten and first grade?

**Christina:** Well, so what you said earlier about how you had these pieces but they didn't all really fit together, that is exactly one of the struggles I was feeling. Because here I was doing these whole group phonics lessons, "We're going to learn short vowels," or, "We're going to learn digraphs." Then I was going with my small groups and some of my students would do a little bit of word study, but it was not a lot. Then we were doing more of comprehension and leveled texts, so it wasn't really making sense.

But I think the thing that teachers like about leveled text, and this is something that's hard to get over, is that we FEEL the celebration when our students are reading those very emergent readers, when they're saying, "I like the red balloon. I like the blue balloon," the whole patterned text. We have this celebration like, "They're reading!" I've even seen friends post videos of their kids saying, "My child's reading!"

Now that I know better, I know they're not reading. I mean, if you've ever watched that video on YouTube. Is it the purple project?

**Anna:** The Purple Challenge, yeah.

**Christina:** It's such a good video, but it just really shows an explanation of how the kids AREN'T reading, but we're celebrating it as that! As teachers, we want to feel like we are doing our job, and our kids are getting it, and they're moving from level A to level B. I mean, the kids are saying, "I'm a level C!" It's hard to let go of that.

But the trade-off is that if we can switch and see how what we're explicitly teaching, and our kids are having the opportunity to apply their knowledge and practice, then they are truly feeling successful in themselves. We know that when students feel successful, it propels them to work harder.

**Anna:** Yes, I agree with all of what you said. With all my own kids, I also started teaching them to read using these very predictable books. I could say, "Oh, look, you're reading!" and try to get them all excited because it does sound like they're reading. I think that's the issue, and that's why teachers get excited about it because it looks like they're reading and they're "reading so fluently" and reading fast enough that they can talk about the book, right?

But when you switch to decodable text and you start out with that, it's painful for the teacher at first because they have to sound out EVERY word and it feels like, "Well, now we've totally thrown comprehension out the window because there's no way they can understand it if they're reading this slowly," and you feel like you're sort of going backwards.

When my youngest first started to read a year and a half ago or so, I started teaching him only with decodables after the first day because I had learned about the Science of Reading by then, and I realized they contradicted each other. It just didn't work, so we only did decodables. My husband was walking through the room and he said to me later, "It makes me feel sad to hear him read like that," because it was every word REALLY slow, and that's not what it was like with the other kids.

But pretty soon after, he was starting to read words automatically and it was coming together. Then we'd see him sit on the couch with these little Flyleaf books like the very first Flyleaf decodable book that says, "I am Sam. Sam I am," or something like that. It's just a snake over and over, but he would just read that over and over and over without me asking him to because he knew what he was doing. He knew he was actually pulling the words off the page.

For our listeners, the video that Christina's talking about, which I can link to in the show notes, is called The Purple Challenge. It's a two-part YouTube video by a parent. She's not a teacher, but she's a research scientist, and her daughter came home and "read" this leveled book. It's actually a book I used with my own kids when I was teaching them to read, it's about a little girl who paints everything purple.

But she noticed that her daughter could not read the words outside the book. She could only "read" them by using the context and the pictures. So to the mother, this didn't seem right. Was she really reading? Then she actually gave her daughter an explicit phonics lesson with some of those concepts and then her daughter could apply it and read those words out of the book. I think I'm remembering it right. That is just a really enlightening video to watch, so we'll link to that in the show notes.

Do you remember what it was that finally got you listening or perked up your ears, or helped you realize that maybe some things you'd been doing or teaching had been incorrect?

**Christina:** Like what led me into structured literacy, learning more about the science of reading, and things like that?

**Anna:** Yeah, what got your attention?

**Christina:** Yeah, so like I said before, I had done things like dictation, and I knew phonics was key with my students. Many years ago I taught with Open Court phonics, probably my first few years of teaching, which I know is pretty heavy and very phonics-based. I knew that my students needed scaffolds of support and they needed tools so that when they were working, mostly on writing, so had we used sound cards, the sound-picture cards. It was an Open Court thing and that was actually my first experience with it.

So about two years ago in my Facebook group, a lot of teachers were talking about kids struggling with reading and I was listening to what's happening. I was just thinking and reflecting back on my experiences as a teacher, and I was like, "I think they need a sound wall." I didn't even know that I was going to call it a sound wall, but I knew that they needed those phonics tools that I gave my kids.

I thought, "I feel like I need to create this resource because I think it will be really helpful," and so I just started searching and I ended up watching Dawn Durham's sound wall video. That propelled me into creating my own that replicated what I was already using in my classroom. That's a really popular resource on Teachers Pay Teachers. On my blog, I have a ton of blog posts about how to use a sound wall and the parts of a sound wall and all of that. That is what kind of propelled me into it.

Then I don't know how I got hooked up into the science of reading Facebook group, and there are some very knowledgeable people in there. I just wanted to learn more and more and more. Like I said earlier, it was like I was doing all these little pieces in my own experience and in my own classroom, and all of a sudden I had a name for it. Ironically, I was using decodable readers with my very lowest students because it was working for them. So I'm all in now!

**Anna:** For someone that knows that there are some things they're doing that aren't quite right, that don't align with the research, what would you say are some first steps towards understanding and applying the science of reading and the structured literacy approach?

**Christina:** So it feels overwhelming because it's a lot of new information for a lot of people. Personally, I think a couple of things. One, you're going to choose ONE thing to start with, just one thing. Whether it be implementing a sound wall or starting to change how you teach high frequency words, if you're going to use the heart word method or however you're going to teach kids to really look at and decode, to match the phonemes with the graphemes. Then using that one thing and seeing how your students are responding. We're always using data to drive our instruction, so use that data to say this is working and feel good about doing that one thing.

Then get a buddy on board with you, someone who you can bounce ideas off of or share research with. I mean, I'm always sending articles to my poor friend who lives next door to me, she's a first grade teacher, and I'm always sending her articles to read or watch. So get a buddy who's on board with you and just start there.

Also, I know because I get so many emails and so many messages, teachers feel guilty. We have to let that go because really, I was never taught anything about structured literacy. It was not until I started doing my own research out of the classroom. You have got to let go of that guilt, it's really not fair.

**Anna:** A lot of people in the science of reading structured literacy movement will say, "Know better, do better." To be honest, when people would say that all the time when I was first learning about it, I felt like they were being condescending to other people, and I found it annoying. Then over time, when I started understanding things I didn't understand before and I looked back and I thought of students that I really could have helped if I knew this stuff, I felt really sad about it. And that's what the "Know better, do better" means. It means you "know better" now, so you're going to "do better" now for the students you know and the students you will know. And I agree, you have to let it go so you can move forward.

I think a really good practice for teachers, and I know teachers are so busy, but if you could set up for yourself, maybe thirty minutes a week, and where you just put it on your calendar. Maybe you put all the emails you get from people about the science of reading or whatever, or from blogs that you follow, and you just put them in a folder, and then in that thirty minutes a week, just go through it a little bit. Just take it in small doses. I'm assuming that the more you get into it, the more time you're going to want to spend on it, but at the beginning, small bits is fine.

**Christina:** Yeah, I agree. I think one of the things that has helped me so much is listening to podcasts. I mean, like I already said, I love your podcast. I think what I love about your podcast is you're coming from a teacher's point of view who has been in the classroom, who works with children, and you're always sharing how you're working with your son who's a kindergartner. So you're seeing what you are teaching or what you are sharing is happening in real life, right?

I have found that when you're doing the dishes, when you're folding laundry, or when you're driving your kids to soccer practice, that's a great time to listen to podcasts. I mean, you can listen to music or you can listen to podcasts. It's a great learning opportunity.

**Anna:** Yeah, I agree. I also want to let our readers know that Christina has put together a science of reading toolkit, which is a lot of resources from her website that will get you started. If you just head to her website, [mrs winters bliss.com](http://mrs winters bliss.com), you can find that, but we'll also leave a link to the toolkit as well as where you can find Christina on YouTube and Instagram, and also, of course, her website and her TPT store. Those will all be in the show notes for you.

Is there anything else you want to share with us today, Christina, before we sign off?

**Christina:** I'm excited for teachers to get that toolkit. It really came because teachers were asking questions, which is exciting because now I'm at home working full-time, I'm not in the classroom, so I have the time to research and learn and then share. That's how the toolkit came about. It's, in my opinion, an awesome starting place because you're going to get a scope and sequence, phoneme-grapheme dictionary, some parent letters, and teaching posters. But also, I've got a five-day email series so that you can get a little bit of information each day on a topic.

**Anna:** That is awesome, and I'm glad to be able to send that to them. Thank you for joining us today, and I'm looking forward to the rest of our series with other teachers, so thanks again, Christina. I know that everybody will be excited to visit your website and get to know you.

**Christina:** Thank you so much, Anna.

**Anna:** Thanks so much for joining us for this interview. You can find everything that Christina and I mentioned in the episode in the show notes, which are at

[themeasuredmom.com/episode81](http://themeasuredmom.com/episode81). We'll see you next week!