

The Orton-Gillingham Approach in the Oceanside Central School District

by Maryann Chatfield, Fellow/AOGPE

“Orton-Gillingham” is fast becoming a household word; it is truly sweeping the nation. 1 in 5 special education students is dyslexic; that translates to 20% of our population. Although the Orton-Gillingham Approach was designed for dyslexic individuals, it is highly effective for the general population as well. To that end, the Orton-Gillingham Approach is being used in public schools across the country.

A town noted for exacting academic standards, Greenwich, CT uses the Orton-Gillingham Approach district-wide (K-12) with much success in its public schools.

Last year, Dr. Jill DeRosa, Assistant Superintendent of Oceanside Central School District, NY, felt strongly about the implementation of the Orton-Gillingham Approach in Oceanside even though they already had several teachers trained and using Wilson and/or Reading Recovery.

In this district, Dawn Nieman and I trained a group of teachers last August. As a result of that training, 17 educators began working one-on-one with students there. This is often unheard of in the public school arena. As the year progressed, three more students were approved to be tutored one-on-one.

Maggie, a reading teacher has this to say about the training, “Thank you so very much for this wonderful opportunity to learn the Orton-Gillingham Approach and become a beacon of hope for those students who struggle with reading and writing.”

“After using the Orton-Gillingham Approach for only twenty-one lessons, my student Jack has become a different reader. He is more confident, and he actually enjoys reading. He reads with expression and has become more fluent. He “attacks” an unknown word with determination. He self-corrects. He utilizes strategies that were taught to him during his Orton-Gillingham lessons. In relation to Jack’s reading comprehension skills, he has shown a boost in his ability to understand text. He goes beyond the literal understanding of fiction stories. He makes good connections while he reads. He continues to improve in his ability to infer and predict within a story. He is eager to continue reading the text during our sessions. He continues to apply Orton-Gillingham strategies to his spelling. He uses finger spelling to assist him in spelling difficult words. He has improved in his ability to spell unknown words, and he is proud of his increased spelling abilities. Working with Jack on a one-on-one basis has allowed him to focus on some of his difficulties. Together we are able to pinpoint areas that need to be further developed. He has been able to grow in his decoding and encoding abilities greatly. I look forward to seeing growth in the future with Jack.”

Allison, a reading teacher comments, “Even as a seasoned reading teacher, I benefitted enormously from the training I received in the Orton-Gillingham Approach. The structured, systematic approach of introducing elements of language in a multisensory way has made a significant impact in my students’ reading ability. The positive encouragement and support that my mentors provided me has enabled me to grow as an educator, which in turn has made my practicum year a successful one. During a recent observation by my principal, she noted, “This lesson was an excellent example of when a student is provided with the right program, they can make huge improvements.” His homeroom teacher is thrilled because he is carrying this information over into his classroom. Orton-Gillingham is the right approach for this child, and I am confident with this continued support that he will continue to make great gains.

Oceanside teachers tell me there is no doubt that the Orton-Gillingham Approach is helping; they see improvement in their students’ decoding ability and reading scores. Many of them have commented that they are incorporating more and more O-G techniques into their repertoire.

Renee, a resource room educator, compares Orton-Gillingham to the Wilson Program. “When the Wilson Program and the O-G Approach are compared, I find that Orton-Gillingham is much more flexible. The Orton-Gillingham Approach is structured and sequential, but Wilson is sequential to the point where you can-

not do the reading if you skipped over something. Because Wilson only uses controlled text, you can’t advance to something the children might be exposed to in other lessons because it really has to be done as prescribed in the manual. I use O-G in almost every group every day. My Sidewalks, a program required by the district, gives a limited amount of information each day and doesn’t provide a rule for my student. When I remind him of the Orton-Gillingham rule, he can apply it. The Orton-Gillingham Approach does it in a much more flexible way, and it’s easier to incorporate Orton-Gillingham strategies in the classroom to allow students to make connections.”

Emilie, a reading teacher said, “When I began working with Anthony, he was at a level twelve DRA. After using the Orton-Gillingham Approach for fifty-four lessons, he now reads on a level eighteen.

He has made other tremendous gains in his confidence and his ability to encode and decode words. When we first started working, Anthony could only read basic cvc (consonant vowel consonant) words, and he had to slowly “sound spell” each word aloud. Now, he can read many multisyllabic words with long vowel patterns. He has internalized many of the phonics rules and spelling patterns as part of the O-G Approach and sounds out words internally. He is also reading chapter books and is thrilled! He has greatly benefitted from this approach, and I anticipate he will make further gains as the year continues.”

Another resource room educator, Amy, reports, “Orton-Gillingham is helping my high school student in many ways. She has improved in the areas of decoding, fluency, spelling, and written expression. She is more willing to read aloud in class now. She pays attention to suffixes and prefixes now!”

Betsy, Director of the Oceanside Professional Development Center, said, “Adding Orton-Gillingham to the repertoire of strategies I use with ELL has transformed them. One of my older, male students who is a SIFE (Student with Interrupted Formal Education) has enjoyed remarkable success. He wrote his first paragraph at ten years old. His appetite is insatiable for books on his level. His entire attitude towards school has improved. I too feel as excited and hopeful as I did thirty years ago as a new teacher.”

One principal of an elementary school in Oceanside who just observed an O-G lesson enthusiastically exclaimed, “I can’t believe the improvement I see. I’m looking forward to the Orton-Gillingham Approach being used district-wide next year”.

More importantly, teachers report an increase in their students’ self-esteem. Consider this from Ellyn, “Today Mrs. “R” came to observe my Orton lesson. She was thrilled beyond belief. It was a wonderful experience for me as well as her son. She wanted to learn the terminology used so she could carry through at home. She walked away with so much more. She

told me “Orton” has changed not only the life of her son but the entire family. He loves to read now, and he is so proud of his accomplishments. Once again, I am so proud to be a part of this journey. The training has been beyond my expectations. My mentors are so dedicated to the process. The training provided twenty teachers with a chance to make such a difference not only in their selected student but in numerous other students. I personally have enhanced my ability to teach because of this. What a gift.”

Sue had this to say: “I have been teaching for twenty-three years, and I have seen many approaches and programs come and go during my teaching career. I was a classroom teacher and reading teacher in NYC and am currently a reading teacher. I have come to see that the Orton-Gillingham multi-sensory Approach is a very useful component of the reading process for the dyslexic student. The supervised practicum was a great bonus as well. It ensured the authenticity and fidelity of the approach.” She then added, “My principal really saw an improvement in Lucas and said it was a pleasure to observe! She mentioned she might be interested in having some more people trained.”

Another principal from a nearby school observing a session described the success she saw in one word: “Amazing.” It is simply that.

