

# Teaching Through Student Strengths: Supporting Teachers as They Embrace New Learning

*Diane DeFord, University of South Carolina*

In an article I wrote for the special tribute to Marie Clay published in *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, I related how two central ideas in Clay's elegant well-grounded theories had influenced my professional life (DeFord, 2007). The first was the role of constructive activity in learning for both students and teachers. The second was the importance of close observation as a form of assessment and as the basis of teacher decision making. Through careful observation and descriptions (behaviors, abilities, and processes) and systematic records of what children can do and can almost do, we make better decisions about the possible paths we might follow. We seek to derive, explain, and test the decisions we make based on our observations and analyses so that we increase constructive activity, and thus we optimize and enhance student learning. When these ideas are woven together well, we achieve accelerative learning.

In the last few years, I have begun to talk with Reading Recovery professionals and classroom teachers alike about how the weaving of these ideas also means that we are teaching through student strengths so that every learner can embrace new learning. Focusing on students' strengths while supporting what they can almost do builds the foundations for

a self-extending system. Clay stated it in this way:

Encourage the beginnings of a self-extending system early. The child is learning how to read *because of the effective processing he does when he reads*. Using what he can do well makes a good system stronger. Contrast this with forcing the child to use a confused processing system without offering help. That can only create further confusion! (2005a, p. 41)

The goal, of course, is to encourage and support independent, effective problem solving very early through a series of lessons designed to shift students' processing during reading and writing.

Teachers aim to produce independent readers so that reading and writing improve whenever children read and write. The reader who problem-solves independently has continual access to new learning. Some things become routine and the brain takes over most of the checking and rapidly locates familiar things. The reader is then free to deliberately attend to other things and can, independent of the teacher, extend his own learning. (Clay, 2005a, p. 40)

This is not easy when working with children who have a history of struggling with learning to read. Clay cautions that independence is not taught; rather, it is an outcome of intensive, contingent teaching (Clay, 2001). The procedures designed for Reading Recovery promote this independent action. Teachers are cautioned to never do anything for the child that the child can do for him or herself. Instead they share tasks; make careful observations and selections of materials; and make judicious use of prompts and demonstrations based upon the child's responses. In essence, every child's lessons are different.

In my experience, learning to engage in what Clay calls *contingent teaching* is a very difficult task — especially since teachers new to Reading Recovery and regular classroom teachers have more often encountered “teacher proof,” prefabricated lessons that are supposed to offer a “quick fix” to what is usually presented as a decoding problem or a word-recognition problem. These simplistic solutions have made teachers more dependent on curriculum materials, and less able to independently make skillful decisions. Consequently, the complex decision making that comprises contingent teaching must be taught as teachers work side-by-side with chil-

dren, as well as through other professional development experiences that are crafted for them.

What I hope to do in this article is to describe some key experiences I use that have helped teachers and Reading Recovery professionals learn to observe more closely, to notice and describe what children can do, and what they can almost do. Teachers need to learn how to analyze assessment and observational data to make strategic decisions and orchestrate lessons so they foster constructive, independent action — to teach through student strengths so that children can embrace new learning.

The sections in this article explore three aspects of teacher learning related to the following:

1. making and describing careful, systematic observations (what the child can and can almost do);
2. learning to analyze and explain assessments and make instructional decisions (making maximum use of the child's existing repertoire and increasing constructive activity); and
3. learning to provide interventions that enhance and optimize opportunities for accelerative learning.

## Making and Describing Careful, Systematic Observations

I find that a constructivist theory of learning (Magoon, 1977) is useful in guiding the decisions I make about teachers' learning in my university classes and professional development settings. Simply described, adult learners are rooted in social contexts

in which learning, actions, decisions, theories, and beliefs are constructed, expanded, encouraged, and/or discouraged through interactions with others. This constructivist theory suggests that our past experiences and beliefs influence our interactions and conversations with others, how we learn new ideas, and discard or refine old ones (Steffe & Gale, 1995 in Lyons & Pinnell, 2001).

Our past experiences and beliefs also influence what we see and how we interpret our observations. So, in terms of helping teachers to observe more deeply and make careful, systematic observations of what children can do and what they can almost do, I have to take into account teachers' current theories and background of experiences in working with and teaching children. As Marie Clay once stated in a keynote address, "A teacher with an agenda may not see a surprisingly new response." Consequently, I structure my classes and professional development sessions so that I see teachers work with children as part of class or examine and discuss assessment data collected from children. The dialogue, reflections (written and oral), and analyses teachers make provide a mirror that reflects their beliefs and practices. With this information, I can devise particular experiences to help them consider new possibilities.

Lyons & Pinnell (2001) offer the following principles derived from a constructivist perspective that I utilize to design experiences I build into professional learning sessions.

1. Encourage active participation.
2. Organize small-group discussions around common concerns.

3. Introduce new concepts in context.
4. Create a safe environment.
5. Develop teachers' conceptual knowledge through conversation around shared experiences.
6. Provide opportunities for teachers to use what they know to construct new knowledge.
7. Look for shifts in teachers' understanding over time.
8. Provide additional experiences for teachers who have not yet developed needed conceptual understandings. (p. 4)

My goal is to help teachers see strategic activity more clearly. I want to utilize results from sensitive observation tools with them and examples of children's reading and writing to "stir the waters" of their current beliefs and practices so that they can see children's strategic activity through new eyes, devise new theories, make different decisions, and explore new responses to guide children as readers and writers. Below I describe three tools that I use to expand teachers' ability to observe and describe what they see as they analyze student work and/or assessment samples. Each provides clear examples that illustrate what students can do and can almost do, and scaffolds teachers as they learn to describe and interpret their observations to form tentative hypotheses and set forth possible next steps.

### *Tool #1: Student work, assessment samples, and demonstrations*

I look for telling examples of videotapes of readers and writers, or student work, or running records or

other assessments for analysis and, as I observe teachers' lessons, I draw this work into class discussions as a "demonstration" of ways to observe and describe what students can do and what they can almost do. A critical ingredient here is to help teachers see the "almost right" rather than seeing and talking about what children *cannot* do. Generally, teachers offer weaknesses or negative interpretations of students' actions during reading and writing as their first descriptions of what they observe (e.g., "He can't spell" or "She needs to pay more attention").

I try to give teachers examples of assessment data that demonstrate

the steps they will learn to use for themselves. Group dialogue is critical in learning about each assessment, and more importantly, how to work across different assessments to note patterns in strategies used and attempts made. For example, walking through each step of the process of administering an assessment; writing down observations during the assessment as a group; finding key patterns that lead to possible interpretations or tentative hypotheses; and posing tentative next steps — each of these experiences help teachers move away from negative examples to shift toward attending to positive actions and "half right" responses. In this

way teachers learn to adopt a tentative stance about what they are seeing, what patterns they are noticing, how they are interpreting these observations, and what next steps might follow.

### *Tool #2: Hypothesis testing (HT)*

I use a process described by Stephens and Story (2000) in *Assessment as Inquiry: Learning the Hypothesis-Test Process* as a way to better focus in on key observations, to clearly state observations without judgments, and to interpret what they are seeing. In Figure 1, the teacher is challenged to create multiple interpretations of student reading behavior during a

**Figure 1. Sample from an Annotated Hypothesis Testing Sheet**

Observations	Interpretations	Hypotheses	Curricular Decisions
<p><i>Write the observations that you think are important to explore.</i></p> <p><i>The format is Context + What you saw/heard</i></p> <p>Context: Today while reading a new GR book (L9, <i>The Lion's Tail</i>)</p> <p>Observation: Sam stopped on the word <i>couldn't</i> [But he <i>couldn't</i> find his tail]. She put her head down and said, "I can't remember that word." This has happened several times during guided reading lately.</p>	<p><i>For each observation, write at least 5 possible interpretations.</i></p> <p><i>Start with "Maybe..." or "Could it be that..." (these statements open up possible ideas that you can test out).</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maybe she thinks reading is remembering?</li> <li>• Maybe she doesn't really control other strategies like rereading and trying to use information (M, S, or V)?</li> <li>• Maybe she thinks good readers are able to remember all the words?</li> <li>• Maybe she thinks she is supposed to know a word before she tries?</li> <li>• Maybe she wants to say something else (like <i>can't</i>) but she knows that isn't right and she cannot think of anything else?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Look across your observations and interpretations to see if patterns or themes are emerging. Try to group those that are similar.</i></p> <p><i>Form a hypothesis (a theory that will be the basis of future action) that will best lead you and the child forward (curricular decisions to test your hypothesis or move the child forward).</i></p> <p>Does Sam see reading as remembering words?</p> <p>Perhaps she doesn't value or realize that good readers have to work on unknown words in a variety of ways?</p>	<p><i>Now list possible teaching moves to test your hypothesis.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review recent running records and lesson records to see what she can do when she meets a challenge.</li> <li>• Examine lesson records to see things I may be doing or saying to encourage this behavior (audio or video taping is also helpful).</li> <li>• Demonstrate the actions I want her to use to figure out words.</li> <li>• Prompt her to use what she knows how to do at difficulty.</li> </ul>

SOURCE: J. Young (2006). Adapted from Stephens & Story (2000).

guided reading lesson to identify patterns of behavior which will inform the next teaching moves.

As teachers learn to note key observations and interpret these observations as a means of informing them about steps they can take (leading to other observations they need to make or ways to test out their interpretations), and to set forth possible decisions they might make for instruction, my responses are an important scaffold. I seek to provide feedback to teachers as they learn what to look for in student's reading and or writing, or point them to the child's actions that constitute strategic activities, or help them see what else is important to notice, and offer possibilities about what their children can do or almost do in acts of reading and writing.

### *Tool #3: Lesson records*

Lesson records help teachers focus on close observation and record careful descriptions of information that will help them make instructional decisions after they teach children. I often pair teachers to discuss their observations following a lesson. The learning is in the conversations they have and the comparisons they make as they engage in dialogue about what they have seen and the patterns they are noting. After each teacher pair debriefs a lesson, a larger group of teachers is formed to compare observations prior to a whole-group consolidation period.

I also pair teachers as they learn to conduct assessments and when we work through class demonstrations. The additional perspectives that come from these opportunities to share broaden the analyses of all the teachers and stretch them to consi-

der new possibilities. Teacher leaders might look for opportunities within ongoing professional development sessions for teachers to work together more frequently to push the boundaries of their understanding.

## **Learning to Analyze and Explain Assessments and Make Instructional Decisions**

Case studies based upon several assessment tools you want teachers to learn to use are a critical tool in scaffolding their learning. A case study allows them to see the totality of the process from administering observational assessments, through steps of analysis, and explanations derived from the tools used. I find it works best if I have done the assessment with a child myself as this informs the subsequent analyses, interpretations, and summaries we engage in together, as well as those the teachers will do. The tasks of the Observation Survey provide initial data for learning about students' literacy competencies and the Observation Survey Summary Sheet can serve as the tool for consolidating the data into a concise "report" about strategic activities.

Depending on the amount of time I have, I set up small groups of teachers to analyze the assessments included in the case study. With less time, I assign different assessments to different groups. The final step of drawing out evidence and patterns that emerged from the assessments used is done both in small groups and then as a whole group. Together we consolidate the small-group analyses into a set of tentative possibilities for instruction. With Reading Recovery teachers, you could consolidate the

small-group analyses into an Observation Survey Summary Sheet. The tentative possibilities for instruction would become the predictions of progress (Clay, 2005a).

The following set of questions guide teachers in analyzing a set of assessment tasks.

1. What strategies does the reader/writer use? What problem solving did you notice?
2. What is the pattern of self-correcting or evidence that shows the student is trying to do what you have been teaching? Or what emerging strategies need support, and in what ways?
3. What is the pattern of miscues or evidence that shows you where your teaching will need to go next? (These are important next steps the reader/writer will need to take, but is not yet doing.)

As teachers discuss each assessment tool and the patterns they notice within and across the assessments in the case study, I ask them to itemize and describe key strategies used and note attempts at strategic processing they observed. The final step is to set priorities for instruction.

The example of Dylan (pseudonym) in Figure 2 shows how information from each assessment and patterns across assessment tools are noted and described from the evidence listed, and a set of possible instructional moves are set forth. The final step is helping teachers determine the particular strengths that will help the student embrace new learning within the highest priority for instruction. Then teachers will use the same pro-

**Figure 2. Analysis of Dylan's Reading/Writing Behaviors: Making Instructional Decisions**

<i>What strategies does the reader/writer use? What remarkable solving did you notice?</i>	<i>What is the pattern of self-correcting or evidence that shows the student is trying to do what you have been teaching? Or what emerging strategies need support, and in what ways?</i>	<i>What is the pattern of miscues or evidence that shows you where your teaching will need to go next? (These are important steps the reader/writer will need to take, but is not yet doing.)</i>
<p>Dylan usually reads for meaning and corrects miscues that do not make sense:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tillerton/Tylertown</li><li>• “still/continued to visited/visit her grandparents’ farms each summer”</li><li>• “picking up corn/cotton”</li><li>• “worked hard in the fields”</li><li>• reminds/remembers SC</li><li>• Doesn’t/describes SC</li><li>• Turned/thrust SC</li></ul> <p>He uses background of experiences and knowledge of historical times to understand text written about historical events, drawing inferences and making judgments as a critical reader.</p> <p>He writes well, using conventions of spelling and punctuation and features of composition (focus, etc.).</p>	<p>Dylan is learning how to problem solve more complex words, and needs support to do this more effectively:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sh-shippers/sharecroppers</li><li>• reminds/remembers SC</li><li>• doesn’t/dis-/describes SC</li></ul> <p>In using informational texts, he is often slow at finding things, so would benefit from opportunities to use informational material in guided reading settings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Finding information within a text</li><li>• Locating pictures given text descriptors</li><li>• Locating and using the foreword, table of contents, glossary, headings, etc.</li></ul> <p>He would benefit from learning how to expand text in writing to include more information, and also how to organize what he writes so it is easier for other readers to understand.</p>	<p>1. In comprehension, Dylan is not gathering information that will help him define new and unusual words.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• He missed the question “What does the term ‘sharecroppers’ mean as it is used in this story?” when reading <i>Brave Little Ruby</i>.</li><li>• In the <i>Advanced Show Me Book</i> he missed questions 30 and 31—defining a word from context and using clarifying meaning in the glossary.</li></ul> <p>2. In informational material, he is unable to use graphs, an index, or a glossary to help him deal with new information.</p> <p>3. Headings and how information is organized is unclear to him.</p>

**Priorities for Instruction**

1. Focus on comprehension and gathering information in reading, and in particular, how to use context to define new and unusual words.
2. In guided reading, use informational texts and guide him to find information within the text, how to use multiple information sources, and how to use the different parts of the information book genre to improve understanding. Also talk about how texts are organized
3. In writing, help him provide supporting details and expand his writing — help him understand how to organize information so other readers can understand.



cess with their students and share the analyses and decisions they made with other colleagues in the class. I meet with each teacher team as well, and observe as many different assessment sessions as possible to gauge teachers' developing understandings.

### Learning to Provide Interventions to Enhance and Optimize Opportunities for Accelerative Learning

As teachers plan instruction, they shift from the open-ended stance of reading and writing with children to offering focused interventions to enhance and optimize opportunities for accelerative learning. Clay (2001) described the necessary features of this intensive contingent teaching as follows:

- The teacher would make maximum use of the existing response repertoire of each child, and hence every child's lessons would be different.
- The teacher would support the development of literacy processing by astute selection of tasks, judicious sharing of tasks, and by varying the time, difficulty, content, interest and method of instruction, and type and amount of conversation within the standard lesson activities.
- The teacher would foster and support active constructive problem solving, self-monitoring and self-correction from the first lesson, helping learners to understand that they must take over the expansion of their

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own competencies. To do this, the teacher would focus on process variables (how to get and use information) rather than on mere correctness and habitual responses, and would temporarily value responses that were partially correct for whatever they contributed towards correctness.

- The teacher would set the level of task difficulty to ensure high rates of correct responding plus appropriate challenge so that the active processing system could learn from its own attempts to go beyond current knowledge. (p. 225)

The lesson framework utilized in Reading Recovery is well suited to this form of contingent teaching given the choice that exists within the lesson framework to assure that each lesson is crafted for the individual student (Reading Familiar Texts; Reading Yesterday's New Book; Letter Identification, Breaking Words Apart, and Words in Isolation; Composing and Writing a

Message; Reassembling the Cut-Up Story; Introducing a New Book; and Reading a New Book.) In my work with regular classroom teachers, I suggest a similar framework to guide the tutoring of individual and small groups of children: (a) Easy reading—familiar or very easy material, shared reading, independent reading, etc.; (b) Writing—stories, poems, etc., with a word study component; and (c) New book—introduction and reading of a new text selected specifically to lift student processing.

### Packages and Bundles

One of the quotes that stimulated my thinking about instruction was from Clay (2005a):

Usually when the child has a confusion he is dealing with a package of information bound together — he is not distinguishing seeing print, from hearing words, from order and sequence issues. Teachers often confuse learners when they also work on the 'package' and do not help the child separate out the parts of the 'package' clearly in

their conversations — the look, the sounds of the spoken word, the order of the letters, or the sequence of word. (p. 40)

Clay also discusses how particular strengths or weaknesses in each child's processing systems will move and change and how the teacher needs to lift processing to handle the complexity of the new materials (2001). The teacher needs to support the reader to orchestrate or bring together the different behaviors and strategies so that the reader can monitor and self-correct their own reading and writing.

In a complex model of interacting competencies in reading and writing the reader can potentially draw from all his or her current understanding, and all his or her language competencies, and visual information, and phonological information, and knowledge of printing conventions, in ways which *extend both the searching and linking processes as well as the item knowledge repertoires*. (Clay, 2001, p. 224)

So I took the term 'package' and the definition of 'interacting competencies in reading and writing' and tried to explicate what those interacting competencies might be. For example, if teachers identify that a given reader is having difficulty with some aspect of comprehension, as was the case with Dylan, or some aspect of reading or writing, I developed a list of possible interacting competencies. I call the interacting competencies a *package* and help the teachers identify a target area that needs strengthening in the particular package and what other areas of strength the reader

has that will most augment and support that area of new learning. So the areas of strength within the package will combine with the target area for instruction (new learning) to create an instructional *bundle* that is the emphasis of tutoring.

For example, here is a comprehension package I have used with classroom teachers, derived from the research on what good readers do as they comprehend in reading (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997):

#### Comprehension Package

- Is aware of comprehending—where and when problems arise, takes action when meaning breaks down (self-initiating) in reading, writing, and talking
- Uses detection and correction strategies to monitor and search for meaning in reading, writing, and talking
- Integrates meaning with structural and perceptual information in reading, writing, and talking
- Uses prior knowledge to anticipate and search for likely alternatives to help during reading, writing, and talking
- Asks questions of themselves, the author, and the text they are reading to clarify and maintain meaning, and in writing and speaking
- Creates images—setting, action, character development, sensory information
- Determines meanings of unfamiliar words (synonyms, antonyms, problem-solving words)

- Makes inferences—draws upon experience, gathers information, draws conclusions, and makes judgments
- Relates experience through analogy and metaphor for deeper understanding
- Determines important ideas, remembers, synthesizes and summarizes to retell or report information
- Attends to punctuation to support understanding of ideas, events, and organization of information in text
- Shifts attention as necessary among visual, meaning, and language information to maintain "best fit"

The next step in the process of helping teachers learn to use student strengths to support new learning was for teachers to select the bundle of interactive competencies to emphasize. I will explain how I have done this with classroom teachers, and then I will suggest how it could look for Reading Recovery teachers.

#### *Packages and bundles for classroom teachers*

Four areas were supported by data in the assessments given to Dylan that we set as his instructional bundle to create greater strength in his ability to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words; three areas are related and one is the target:

- Create images—story/text construction (related)
- Determine meanings of unfamiliar words (synonyms and antonyms vocabulary) Target!!

- Make inferences—gather information, If...Then...(related)
- Relate experience—analogy and metaphors (related)

By using strengths that were related to the target area of determining the meanings of unfamiliar words and supporting this area of new learning with aspects of the interconnected competencies he had demonstrated as strengths that were also most strongly related to his target area (making inferences, creating images, and relating personal experiences during reading), the teachers could brainstorm an action plan for tutoring across the reading/writing/reading framework for lessons. A list of instructional engagements gave the teachers a flexible plan for individualizing instruction to improve Dylan's ability to determine meanings of new words in text. For example, the plan included the following:

- Create images—during easy reading and new book introductions and as Dylan reads and talks about text, have him engage in story/text/meaning construction.
- Expand vocabulary across reading and writing during book talks/book introductions/writing.
- Construct stories/use examples from trade books.

As teachers in my classes replicate this process for each of the children they are tutoring, they may find that children have needs in areas of language development, writing, or visual analysis of words in addition to comprehension. So I provide them with packages of interactive competencies

in each of these areas. The teaching teams work through assessing students, determining areas of strength (what the children can do) and areas they can offer support or assistance within (what children can almost do). Within the area for assistance, they establish the highest priority target for instruction and the related strengths the child demonstrates that will provide that child with his or her own personal resources for self-assistance (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978). The teachers support strategic activity and success on appropriate tasks, gauging the level of difficulty to ensure successful responding with teacher support to augment independent, self-initiated strategy use. In this way, “a new way of working is drawn into the well-functioning network, and tentative responding is supported until new strengths become established” (Clay, 2001, p. 222).

#### *Packages and bundles for Reading Recovery teachers*

With Reading Recovery teachers, a similar experience might be based on a “case study” student you have presented or a child whose lesson was observed during teacher training class, professional development, or guided colleague visits. Rather than providing teachers with packages, the teacher leader would help teachers use *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals* (Clay 2005a, 2005b) and other professional texts to construct a list of the interactive competencies related to the identified teaching/learning priority. For example, if the teaching priority called for the student to read in a faster, more phrased manner, teachers might examine *Literacy Lessons Part Two* section 14,

“Phrasing in fast and fluent reading” (p. 150). Rereading this section not only reminds them to consider the student's oral vocabulary, but also prior learning of letter-sounds, words, phrase structures, and a host of additional factors which contribute to (or detract from) fluent reading. Once these factors are considered, appropriate teaching procedures may be selected.

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Using processes such as the ones I've described for teachers more easily helps them take on new learning, complex thinking, and more-difficult professional activities such as assessment processes and contingent teaching moves and decisions.

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Reading Recovery teachers would then be expected to apply this process to the children they teach, consulting Clay's work and seeking colleague input as they design their students' individual lesson series. Updated predictions of progress provide a tentative direction for teaching, while lesson records and analyzed running records offer opportunities for teachers to reflect on the outcomes of their instruction. These processes would also be particularly beneficial if a Reading Recovery teacher is teaching small groups of children for part of the day.



## Conclusion

Each of the instructional processes I have shared in this article will assist teachers in areas of new learning. Each assessment tool; each step provided in the analysis of an assessment tool; each means of documenting and describing observations; each Hypothesis Testing Sheet (Figure 1) and lesson record; or the Analysis of Reading and Writing Behaviors form (Figure 2) that guides instructional decisions; and the process of determining the package where instruction will bring about the greatest shift in processing for the student serves the teacher as a structure for thinking and acting as they learn to teach through children's strengths to embrace new learning. Each of them is a *cognitive structuring* device (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

As a preliminary definition, "cognitive structuring" refers to the provision of a structure for thinking and acting. It may be a structure for beliefs, for mental operations, or for understanding. It is an organizing structure that evaluates, groups, and sequences perception, memory, and action. (p. 63)

Using processes such as the ones I've described for teachers more easily helps them take on new learning, complex thinking, and more-difficult professional activities such as assessment processes and contingent teaching moves and decisions. Tharp and Gallimore (1988) indicate that cognitive structuring devices are the most comprehensive, intuitively obvious, have the greatest utility, and result in learning that is the least likely to "decompose." As a literacy professional who works with and supports other teachers as learners, using a

variety of cognitive structuring devices will revolutionize your teaching and professional development sessions. Helping teachers use them as well in their teaching (Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words, practice pages, book introductions, prompts for using strategies, verbal directions, etc.) will make a big difference in their teaching as well as their children's learning. The most-important thing to revolutionize their teaching, however, is to help them learn to teach through children's strengths so that their children can embrace new learning.

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## About the Author



Instrumental in Reading Recovery since its beginning at The Ohio State University in 1985, Diane DeFord has served in numerous teaching and educational leadership positions for more than 29 years; currently as the Swearingen Literacy Chair at the University of South Carolina. The author or co-author of more than 50 books and journal articles, she conducts workshops around the country, and is a frequent presenter at state and national conferences and universities. Among her books are *Bridges to Literacy: Learning from Reading Recovery* co-edited with Carol Lyons and Gay Su Pinnell. Diane has been involved in numerous research projects during the last quarter century, most recently as co-investigator for a USDE-funded South Carolina Reading Initiative.