Reflecting, Refreshing, and Resolving!

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Which of Marie Clay's guidebooks for Reading Recovery teachers introduced you to your work with children?

> Was it the most recent, *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals* (2005)?
>
> Or was it *Reading Recovery: A Guidebook for Teachers in Training* (1993)?
>
> Or do you go back to *The Early Detection of Reading Difficulties* (1985)?
>
> Or are you among the few who date back to the 1979 procedures: *The Early Detection of Reading Difficulties: A Diagnostic Survey and Reading Recovery Procedures*?

The fact that the teaching procedures have been revised multiple times is testament to Marie Clay's dynamic, scholarly study and research. As she has written, she was always asking questions and searching for the answers and refining our work with children:

> I live in a perpetual state of enquiry, finding new questions to ask, then moving on… . I search for questions which need answers. (Clay, 2001, p. 3)

Marie Clay's scholarly search for new possibilities was an ongoing endeavor that influenced the thinking and teaching of Reading Recovery professionals around the world. Her 2005 publications, *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals Part One* and *Part Two*, are based on her many inquiries and guide us in our daily instruction with children. These texts have challenged us to think about why we do what we do and to renew our understandings of the theories that support our teaching procedures. We have found that the texts have instilled in us a sense of inquiry and a desire for learning. After 3 years, we are taking this opportunity to reflect on the impact of these amazing books.

As we considered the influence of *Literacy Lessons*, we identified many guiding principles, all of which merit attention. We have chosen six of those principles to illustrate added dimensions to our understandings that have influenced our work and refreshed our teaching and our perspectives. As we review these principles, consider the following words of Albert Einstein that capture the essence of Clay's search for answers to important questions:

> To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science.

And, this brings us to a question! We wonder: How many of you who are Reading Recovery veterans experienced at least some anxiety when shifting to Clay's 2005 procedures? We suggest that this is to be expected, and we find a reminder of the essence of learning in the wisdom of Bertrand Russell who stated: "In all affairs it's a healthy thing now and then to hang a question mark on the things you have long taken for granted." Marie Clay cautioned us to be tentative and flexible as we think about our work. So let's reflect on some of the underlying principles of our work, refresh our understandings, and resolve to act on these principles to help our Reading Recovery children.

In the discussion that follows, we explore the six interrelated principles separately. After we review each principle, we suggest an activity for you to apply and discuss with your colleagues. Each *resolution activity* should engage you in clarifying the theoretical principle and in applying it to your teaching practices more successfully. We offer these activities as opportunities to help you extend your learning and construct new connections between theory and practice. And we encourage you to suggest other principles that have influenced your work as you have worked with *Literacy Lessons*.

Guiding Principle #1
Literacy Learning is a Complex Process

In contrast to simplistic theories of literacy learning, Reading Recovery is based on a complex theory of literacy processing. Rather than basing literacy learning on a prepared curriculum with a teacher-scripted sequence, Reading Recovery procedures are guided by this question: "What do proficient readers do as they problem-solve increasingly difficult texts?" (Clay, 2001, p. 43).

The complexity of the literacy processing system is summarized in *Change Over Time in Children's Literacy Development*:

> 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 repertoire*. Learners pull together necessary information from print in simple ways at first … but as opportunities to read and write accumulate over time the learner becomes able to quickly and momentarily construct a somewhat complex operating system which might solve the problem. (Clay, 2001, p. 224)

Therefore, Clay's theory assumes that a child *begins* to read by attending to many different aspects of printed texts (letters, words, pictures, language, messages, stories). As the child gains literacy proficiency, he learns more about each of these areas and about how to work on the interrelationships among these areas (Clay, 2001).

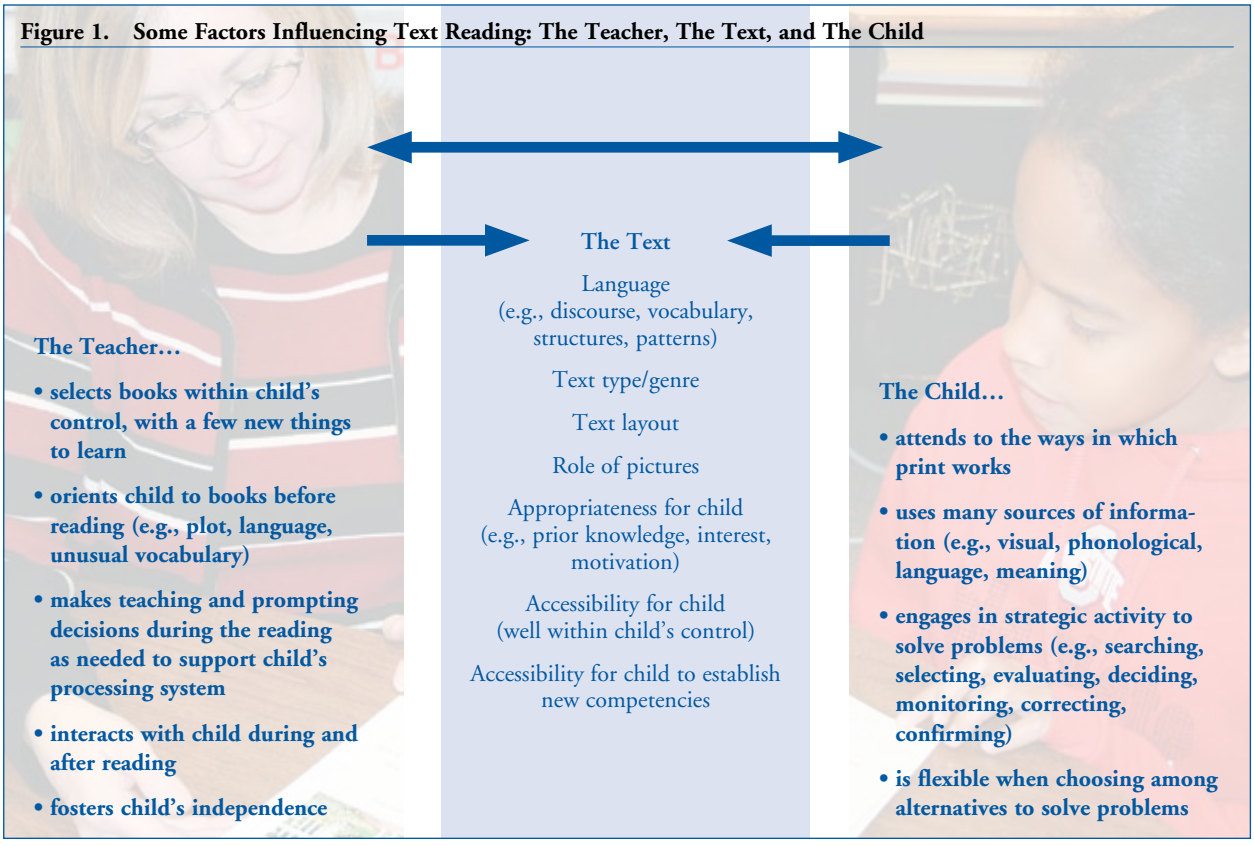
Let's think about the complexity of the reading/writing process by considering some of the factors that influence a child's reading of continuous text. In Figure 1, just a few of the many possible factors are highlighted — emphasizing the overlapping influences of the learner (child), the teacher, and the text.

Figure 1 is just a sampling of the factors involved in the complex process of becoming literate — a far cry from the quick fix or the 'teacher-proof,' scripted curriculum embraced by some educators! Clay reminded us that "…these processes are complex and will not be easy to observe and explain. We therefore need to be tentative and flexible because we could be wrong in our explanations from time to time, or from this pupil to that pupil" (2005a, p. 2).

Resolution Activity #1

Select a recent lesson record for each child with whom you are working. In each column, look for evidence of factors that may be affecting the literacy learning of each child: choices of texts, the child's strategic activities on texts and when writing messages, your teaching interactions and decisions, the child's control of tasks, etc. How can this evidence influence your future work with each child?

Figure 1. Some Factors Influencing Text Reading: The Teacher, The Text, and The Child



Guiding Principle #2
Individuals Actively Construct Their Own Learning

Closely tied to the complex process is our next guiding principle: the individual child as an active and constructive learner. Note the three words that were hallmarks of Marie Clay's work: *individuals*, *active*, and *constructive*. She reminded us that *groups* don't learn — *individuals* do (Clay, 1998) and that they are active constructors of their own learning.

To foster active and constructive learners, we must focus on the individual (see Askew & Simpson, 2004). In Figure 2, consider the partial list of the benefits of individual teaching in Reading Recovery — to the child and to the teacher.

Figure 2. Some Benefits of One-to-One Teaching

For the Child	For the Teacher
• Instruction that considers the child's – level – pace – strengths – challenges – expectations	Ability to …
• Active participation (sustained focus on literacy tasks)	• Closely observe and monitor the child's behaviors
• No time wasted on what is known	• Build on the child's existing knowledge
• Skilled teacher guidance with appropriate feedback	• Select appropriate tasks, texts, and level of teacher support
• Multiple opportunities for language development	• Vary time, difficulty, content, and teaching decisions
• Emotional support that fosters learning	• Foster the child's active problem solving
• Self-esteem and self-efficacy	• Attend to confusions and intervene appropriately
	• Hold the child accountable for what he knows

Although individual lessons are necessary, they are not sufficient. Consider these messages from Clay about accommodating the diversity of individual learners as Reading Recovery teachers deliver their individual lessons:

> Reading Recovery teachers accept all children as potential learners and find each learner's starting point. They observe how children work on easy tasks when everything goes well; they spend extended time responding to children's initiatives and interacting with their thoughtfulness; they observe learners closely as they work on novel things and are always prepared to be surprised by talent they had not predicted. This personalized analysis includes identifying strengths that will provide the "firm ground" on which to build while tentatively challenging learners in weak areas. The activities, the books, the progressions made by the children here are to be allowed to vary with the idiosyncratic progress of a particular child, and the lesson framework was designed to allow for this. Emphases in tomorrow's lesson will arise out of today's observations but will be used in the context of the child's engagement with tomorrow's authentic tasks of reading and writing stories. Teaching interactions will change from one child to another so that all these activities would be realized differently with each of the four to six pupils taught daily. (Clay, 1998, p. 244)

During those lessons, the child must be the active constructor of his or her own learning. We all know that if the learner just sits and waits for the teacher to do something, the child is not constructing his own learning. Only when there is a genuine interaction between the learner and what is to be learned will change, or new learning, occur.

Consider how Clay (2005a, p. 3) described young constructive readers and writers. She explained that they actively

- work at problem-solving sentences and messages;
- choose between alternatives; and
- read and write sentences, work on word after word, with the flexibility to change responses rapidly at any point.

As they attend to several different kinds of knowledge, they are

- searching,
- selecting,
- rejecting,
- self-monitoring, and
- self-correcting.

And children use their brains

- to attend to certain things,
- to work out certain things,
- to find similarities and differences,
- to build complex processing systems,
- to use the language they already speak, and
- to link it to visual squiggles on the paper.

Note all of the *action* verbs. The child is engaging in the learning; the teacher is fostering the conditions for the learning.

As teachers, we must not establish a pattern where the child waits for the teacher to do the work! Instead, we need to establish a pattern early on where the child is expected to

- take the initiative,
- make links, and
- work at the point of difficulty.

Clay challenged us to establish this pattern from the *first* lessons (Clay, 2005b, p. 107).

Let's use self-monitoring as an example of ways that we can foster the development of this active behavior within the child. On page 303 in *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control*, Clay (1991) cited three conditions that facilitate monitoring:

1. *Time to discover that all is not well.*
   Think how often we interrupt a child before there is time for them to make such discoveries!
2. *Permission to work at the problem.*
   Think how important this is. Many children don't always understand that we want *them* to work. They may be very passive — or we may even be teaching them to become passive.
3. *Encouragement to discover something for themselves.*
   Think about how we deprive children of these discoveries — with our interruptions, or our haste to move things forward, or our own agendas that can interfere with their sense of discovery.

We all need to guard against the many ways in which we may be inadvertently monitoring for a child. Even a frown, a hand movement, or a sigh can rob the child of a monitoring opportunity. In addition to time to notice something isn't right, sometimes the child may need an appropriate prompt that calls for him to monitor his reading or writing for himself.

Again, we need to remember that the learner is constructing his or her own learning. Clay (1998) challenged us to develop the constructive mode in children. "For a child to respond to a teacher . . . the child must relate, remember, relearn, monitor, problem-solve, and do all those other powerful mental activities that help humans adapt and create new solutions" (p. 185). Our challenge is to teach in ways that require each child to shift into a constructive way of thinking and to link current tasks with personal knowledge; and we must allow the child to contribute any competence he has to the solution.

Resolution Activity #2
To gain a greater understanding of this guiding principle, look at the running records for two different children on the same text. What evidence do you see of active, constructive behaviors for these two individual children? Talk with a colleague about the implications for you as you teach these two individual learners.

Guiding Principle #3
Language Plays a Crucial Role in Literacy Learning

In *Literacy Lessons*, Marie Clay continued to place emphasis on the role of language in learning to read and write. She cautioned us that "*There are no quick ways to extend language*" (Clay, 2005b, p. 51). Yet she suggested that the best available opportunities lie (a) in the conversations between the teacher and child in and around lessons, and (b) in the books the teacher selects for the child to read. We are all familiar with the conversations prior to the constructing and writing of a message during the lesson. In the procedures, Clay also challenged us to include brief conversations after the first reading of a new book.

As important as the child's language is, in this section we are also focusing on Clay's strong emphasis on the *teacher's* language during Reading Recovery lessons! She provided definitions of two terms we use often, but perhaps fail to consider carefully. Note the significance of the terms as defined below:

> *Prompt*: "A prompt is a call to action to do something within his control… . The prompt should send the child in search of a response in his network of responses." (Clay, 2005a, p. 39)
>
> *Teach*: Teaching is when you supply information that the learner does not have. (Clay, 2005b, p. 94)

Clay reminded us that prompts are more than talk and should give a maximum of information to the child using the *fewest* words. Too much teacher talk interferes with problem solving.

> Conversations in the lesson should be warm and friendly, but when the child must attend to something, or must pull several things together, the prompt should be short, clear and direct. What is the next most helpful thing this child could do? (Clay, 2005b, p. 202)

Clay issued cautions throughout *Literacy Lessons Part Two* to avoid 'wasting' words. On page 95 (Clay, 2005b), she tells us to "eliminate all unnecessary talk," and she provides helpful examples on pages 87 and 202. Take time to read these examples. She further challenged teachers not to overuse comments like "You went back and fixed it up" or "I liked the way you did that."

Finally, she suggested that when you prompt a child to action, think about what your words are directing him to do. Clay drew from a *Reading Teacher* article written by Bob Schwartz to present exemplars of prompts with the related, appropriate purposes indicated (see Clay, 2005b, p. 116). These clarify what various prompts might direct a child to do. We suggest a discussion of the chart with your colleagues.

Resolution Activity #3

Talk with your colleagues about Clay's suggested opportunities for extending a child's language: (a) brief conversations, and (b) book selections. As a second activity, record a lesson with a child (possibly one who is puzzling you). Listen to *your* language. Are you 'talking' too much? Are you asking too many questions? Does your language help the child make the right move? Has your language confused the child? Have you given too little help? (See *Part Two*, p. 95.)

Guiding Principle #4

Reading and Writing are Reciprocal Processes

Perhaps more than anyone in the field of early literacy, Marie Clay recognized the value of writing in the process of becoming literate. She included writing in the Reading Recovery lesson because of its close, reciprocal relationship with reading. Reading and writing processes both pull from the same sources of information — knowledge about letters, sounds, words, language, and meaning.

Clay (2001, p. 32) suggested that some aspects of literacy activities shared by reading and writing include

- how to control serial order in print;
- how to use phonological information;
- how to search, monitor, and self-correct; and
- how to make decisions about words.

Askew and Frasier (1999) demonstrated that opportunities to learn when writing have a relationship to opportunities for learning when reading. They used Clay's 1991 work to describe ways that both reading and writing provide opportunities for children to learn important concepts:

- links between oral and written messages;
- aspects of print that require attention;
- strategies for maintaining fluency, exploring detail, increasing understanding, and correcting errors;
- feedback mechanisms to keep production on track;
- feed-forward mechanisms to promote efficient processing; and
- strategies for relating new information to what is known.

In *Literacy Lessons Part One*, Clay suggested that while a child has limited control in both reading and writing, he can be encouraged to search for information in his own repertoire of reading or writing, establishing a reciprocity between both aspects of literacy learning. But she cautioned us that "… this reciprocity does not occur spontaneously. The teacher must remember to direct the child to use what he knows in reading when he is writing and vice versa" (Clay, 2005a, p. 27).

In Reading Recovery lessons, teachers use both reading tasks and writing tasks to make teaching points. For example, the following lesson excerpts reveal the teacher's attention to initial letters in both reading and in writing.

Reading example—
Child: Along comes Jake . . . like James!
Teacher: It does start like James.
Child: (sounds /b/) (the word is *Ben*)
Teacher: Yes, it starts like your name. His name is *Ben*.

Writing example (child attempting to write the word *my*)
Child: I don't know how to write it.
Teacher: You know how to START it. YOU start it.
Child: (writes *m*)
Teacher: (writes *y*)
Does that look like *my*? (pointing to word)

Child: Yes.
Teacher: Good work. You need to do everything you know how to do when you write. (also encouraging child's initiative and independence)

Resolution Activity #4
Choose a child who has been in lessons for at least 8 weeks. Look at every fifth message in his writing book. Look also at the lesson records for those lessons and the record of writing vocabulary for those weeks. What is the child learning about messages? Hearing and recording sounds? Words? The structures of written language? Talk with a colleague about how this learning may also pay off in the child's reading.

Guiding Principle #5
Fast Processing is Important!

Marie Clay told us that "each of the things the child is learning about—letter knowledge, letter production, letter-sound possibilities, word knowledge, writing vocabulary—is on at least two journeys:" (a) coming to know in detail and regrouping in chunks, and (b) responding to it faster and faster with minimal attention unless the task requires detail work (Clay, 2001, p. 175). All too often we may neglect the second journey, causing slow processing behaviors to become habits for our children.

Throughout *Literacy Lessons*, Clay placed emphasis on fast processing. We have selected a few quotes to illustrate her attention to this principle:

- The progress of a child in early intervention depends on the astute judgment of the teacher about when to slow up and attend to detail and how soon to call for quick responding to letter, words, and print features that are known. What you know must be processed fast. (*Part One*, pp. 43–44)
- Particularly in the early part of a lesson series encourage the child to engage in fast recognition in reading and fast construction of print sequences in writing, when working with things he knows about. Then try to bring new learning to the level of fast responding as quickly as possible. (*Part Two*, p. 154)
- He needs to end up with a fast recognition response. Be careful to arrange your teaching so that it leads to this. (*Part Two*, p. 32)
- We want the child to learn how to solve problems but also to habituate the fast production of the correct solution! There is a delicate balance to be struck between allowing the child the opportunity to (slowly) solve the problem and prompting for speedy production. (*Part Two*, pp. 58–59, relating to extending the child's writing vocabulary)
- *At no time in the Reading Recovery lessons series should the child be a slow reader of the things he knows*. (*Part Two*, p. 151)
- Teachers must not foster slow reading, and they will need to think about the four ways that may slow things down. (*Part Two*, p. 154)
- By the middle of a lesson series the teacher can encourage phrased reading even on new material. (*Part Two*, p. 157)
- When the child's series of lessons ends and he is reading a text of appropriate level, he should be able *to solve a multisyllabic word (one that is new, not yet familiar, or unexpected) within continuous text without slowing up too much…* (*Part Two*, p. 156)

Note the emphasis on fast processing of what the child *knows*. "It takes time to develop fast control of many subparts of a complex whole so that it operates smoothly and fluently. What needs to speed up can differ for different children" (Clay, 2005b, p. 155). *As teachers we must know when to be fast and when to slow down for each child we teach*.

Resolution Activity #5
Go to pages 48–51 in *Literacy Lessons Part One* for a description of changes in children's behaviors on each task in the lesson. Skim the pages to find attention to fast processing, terms like speeded, fluent, faster, and on the run. Discuss the implications for your teaching with colleagues.

Guiding Principle #6
Teachers Must Attend to Change Over Time in Children's Behaviors

We have already alluded to our final guiding principle — that of observing change over time. On pages 48–51 in *Literacy Lessons Part One*, Marie Clay grouped changes in children's behaviors across all parts of the lessons according to three broad phases of a child's lesson series: (I) early; (II) middle; and (III) late. It is important to remem-

ber that the third level of behaviors is not the end — it is where WE finish.

Using the "Writing a story or message" section on page 50, apply the principles of change to one of your students. Look through the child's writing book and your lesson records and record of writing vocabulary for this child. Consider answers to these questions:

- Does the child's message become more complex and varied?
- Does the writing vocabulary expand steadily?
- Does independent monitoring of the task increase over time?
- Across time, does the child become more independent with phonological and orthographic analyses of words?

We have several sources to help us look for evidence of change over time in a child's progress in reading and writing: running records, lesson records, weekly record of writing vocabulary, records of change in text reading level and writing vocabulary, and writing books. As teachers, we must monitor these sources closely to make decisions for each child.

Although we generally focus on change over time in children's behaviors, Clay emphasized the importance of our teaching changing across time as well. "*Each change in the child's control calls for an adjustment in what the teacher does*" (Clay, 2005b, p. 59). In *Part Two* there are many places where Clay clearly demonstrates the need for changes in teaching. We highlight a few here and encourage you to go to your book for more information:

1. Page 59 — Consider how the teacher-child interactions change over time during the writing task.
2. Page 66 (bottom)–67 — Note how the teacher's role changes as the child becomes more adept at writing.
3. Pages 67–68 — Consider the changes in writing a teacher must make to ensure changes within the learner.
4. Pages 83–84 — Think about how working on the cut-up story will change over time.
5. Page 111 — Note how teacher behaviors change over time when fostering searching behaviors in a child. (from in *your first attempts,* to *as children gain greater control,* to *and eventually…*)

Every lesson should reflect changes in a child's processing behaviors. We need to check for those changes daily and take a close look at week's end to decide how to change our teaching to promote the accelerated learning of each child.

Resolution Activity #6

Return to Clay's description of broad changes over time in literacy behaviors within each part of the lesson (*Part Two*, pages 48–51). Decide which records (e.g., running records, lesson records, records of reading and writing vocabulary, record of text reading levels, writing books) you can use to study changes in each lesson activity:

- rereading familiar books
- rereading yesterday's new book
- letter identification and breaking words into parts
- writing a story or message
- hearing and recording sounds in words
- reconstructing the cut-up story
- sharing the introduction to the new book
- attempting the new book

Now choose a child who has been in lessons for at least 10 weeks. For each part of the lesson, use your records to find evidence of this child's change over time and evidence of your teaching moves and how they changed over time.

A Final Word

We encourage all Reading Recovery professionals to revisit these underlying principles—plus others—collaborating with colleagues to reflect and refresh your thinking about teaching in Reading Recovery. There is no prescription for our work with children. Like our students, we must be constructive learners as we place our new thinking alongside our previous learning and experiences. We must be very tentative and flexible about what we think we know! It is a challenge to sort through new ways of thinking across time. Our challenge now is to resolve to continue our learning and resolve to search for the best possibilities for the children with whom we work.

Final Resolution Activity

We have shared only six principles in this article. With your colleagues, brainstorm additional underlying principles consistent with your prior understandings that have influenced your thinking and your work with children. Find references in *Literacy Lessons* to support these principles.

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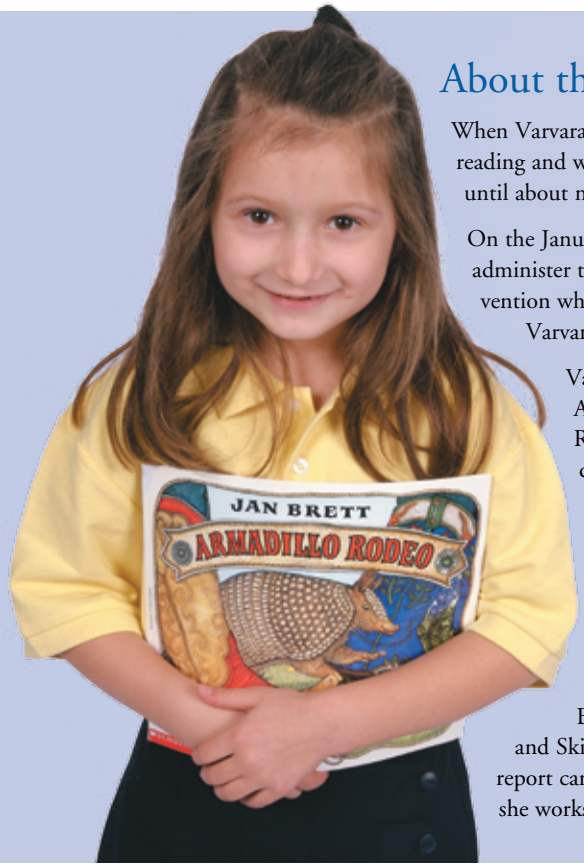

About the Cover

When Varvara Marek entered first grade at Travis Elementary School, she was struggling not only with reading and writing, but with the English language. Born in Russia, Varvara had been home-schooled until about mid-year of first grade.

On the January day her adoptive parents enrolled her at Travis, the family asked Kathy Harrell to administer the Observation Survey. Kathy recalls that due to a student's withdrawal from the intervention when his family moved, she was able to begin working with Varvara soon after her arrival. Varvara was enrolled in English as a second language (ESL) class, which she still attends.

Varvara progressed from Text Reading Level 3 in January to Level 10 in May. Her Concepts About Print score rose from 13 to 21; Written Vocabulary from 19 to 24; and Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words from 30 to 36. Although she is an incomplete program student due to beginning lessons late in the year, her continued reading progress is an indication that with just 48 lessons and good classroom support, she developed strategies that have enabled her to continue to make significant reading progress.

On her standardized test in first grade, Varvara scored above the 50th percentile. Her second-grade teacher, Kathy Matous, said, "Varvara has made tremendous progress in reading this year and I know it is due to the one-to-one support she received last year in Reading Recovery."

By third grade on the total reading portion, she passed the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills on the first try with a score in the low-to-mid 80 range. Varvara continues to maintain report card grades in the mid-80 range. Her fourth-grade teacher at Travis, Jennifer Threet, says that she works hard and is friendly and thoughtful.