Champions For Children

Speech by Clifford I. Johnson, Trainer of Teacher Leaders, to the Reading Recovery Teacher Leader Institute June 7, 2001, in San Diego, California

Someone once asked a little girl how she set about drawing a picture. She replied, “First I have a think and then I put a line around it.” Well, I had a think about the role of the teacher leader, and today I’d like to put a speech around it.

As teacher leaders, you deserve accolades because you are champions—champions for the lowest-performing children. As champions for children, you are also the champions for change. In fact, Clay tells us that teacher leaders are a major part of what Goodlad (1977) has called a redirecting system. This system is needed to bring about innovation and change to schools. And you know lasting change doesn’t happen by decree, but rather by working collaboratively and building authentic understanding of how children learn to read and write. You are our stewards of the knowledge, the understandings, and the practices that will carry forward the future of Reading Recovery for children and teachers around the world. And so, for the next few minutes we’re going to celebrate your role in Reading Recovery and talk about why you and your role are so important to children’s futures.

I believe that by virtue of your training and your ongoing work with teachers and children, you have an opportunity to set the pattern for the country and in fact the world. With your knowledge and experience, you model how we should think about children, how we should treat children, and how the lowest-achieving children should be taught to read and write. Because of your training, you play an important role in changing the lives of children and teachers for the foreseeable future.

While doing my work as a trainer at Georgia State University, and particularly this year while I’ve served as the president of the Reading Recovery Council of North America, I think often of the life ahead for children who need Reading Recovery, but because of adult indifference, and indeed adult decisions, they will not receive it.

Their chances of completing school are no better than one in four. They will likely be stunted in their academic and personal growth. Around the age of 13, they will drop out of school. When they get married, they will be limited in what they can offer their children. Their chances of being the victims of violence or the perpetrators of violence are terrifyingly high. They will be expected to work and pay taxes, but they will be the last hired and the first to be fired. If they are fortunate enough to be hired for a wage, they will earn a fraction of what a literate person can.

As we work together for the next few days, we must keep our vision of a new and better world for children at risk of failure in learning to read and write. I believe, as you do, that all children can be taken from where they are to somewhere else that represents progress in their literacy achievement. But I also believe the answer to our literacy crisis—if indeed there is one—lies both in the heart and in the head. Our hearts give us the courage and the stamina to continue our efforts in the face of difficulty. Our heads encourage us to search further for additional understandings, to know more, to continue our learning, and to never be satisfied that we have all the answers.

There are three key points that I feel are vital to your role as a Reading Recovery teacher leader.

1. You teach children.
2. You teach teachers.
3. You are the local champions for Reading Recovery and its integrity.

These points seem simple, but there’s nothing simple about carrying them out. Let’s look more closely at the first key point: You teach children.

Since 1984, Reading Recovery has served 851,555 children and discontinued nearly half a million children (499,058). That’s about 6 out of 10 of all the children we served. I’m
reminded of the quote in Cunningham and Allington's book, *Classrooms That Work* (1994). They wrote: “When you compare the success rate of Reading Recovery with other programs that keep children for years and never get them reading on grade level, Reading Recovery is a bargain!” (p. 255).

And we have big news! This year, someone in this audience, or perhaps someone taught by a teacher leader in the audience, has taught the one millionth child in Reading Recovery. What a legacy!

Why is this important? Because teaching children is one of the most important tasks that you do as a teacher leader. By teaching children, you not only help the child, you continue to grow as a teacher and a teacher leader. Nothing is more important to your ongoing professional development, your efficacy as a Reading Recovery teacher leader, and your credibility with other teachers. Teaching children causes you to continue your own theory building. It keeps you fresh in your role as a practicing professional teacher-educator. Teaching children keeps all of us in Reading Recovery grounded in practice as well as theory (Lyons, Pinnell, & DeFord, 1993).

Teachers have a profound impact on the lives of children as illustrated by this anonymous poem (cited in Theibert, 1997):

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**The Heart of a Child**

*Whatever you write on the heart of a child*

*No water can wash away*

*The sand may be shifted when the waves are wild*

*And the efforts of time may decay*

*Some stories may perish, some words may be forgotten*

*But this graven record, time changes it not.***

*Whatever you write on the heart of a child*

*A story of gladness or care*

*That heaven has blessed or earth defiled*

*Will linger unchangeable there…*

Let us remind our nation and ourselves that the actions of teachers write on the hearts of children the first faint characters that time deepens into strength so that nothing can erase them.

We were recently in Washington, D.C. at the White House to meet key players in President Bush's reading initiative. Joseph Conaty commented on how much he admired the passion and commitment that Reading Recovery teachers have for what they do. He asked what it was about our training that caused our folks to believe so strongly in what they do. I responded to him that it wasn’t the training; in fact, as all of you know, training is often accompanied by tears and misgivings. The real source of the passion that our teachers feel comes from their success in teaching children because they know that Reading Recovery works. We experience this every time we teach a lesson, and our children experience it too. What they tell us often delights and surprises us. Here are two stories of children’s comments which illustrate why Reading Recovery teachers are passionate about what they do.

Several weeks ago, Sue Duncan and I received this note from Sue Dyess, one of our teacher leaders in Santa Rosa, Florida. One of her teachers had just relayed this story following a school visit:

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*“Hey Sue, I have to tell you a new strategy for getting the b/d confusion straightened out! Trenton (you observed him Friday) was writing away independently today and he came to the word *dog*. As he wrote the d, he prayed aloud, ‘Oh God. Let this be a d.’ Prayer worked. It was correct!”*

At the end of this year, one of our teachers had an Atlanta Reading Recovery child say the following:

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*“When I was in Louisiana, you know, I tried and tried to read and now I came here and I can read. I’m a good reader. I don’t know how that happened.”*

I’m sure it was because he is in Georgia! Let’s turn now to key point number two: You teach teachers.

Without expert, individual instruction, the lowest-performing readers cannot begin to catch up with their classroom peers. This expertise would not be possible without our teacher leaders who work hard to train and support the nearly 19,000 Reading Recovery teachers in the field.

Your role as teacher leaders is to mentor teachers as they learn to test, challenge, revise, and problem-solve the concepts and theories they need.

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to be effective teachers of high-risk children. Because of you, teachers come to understand that acquiring techniques and procedures is not all that is required to teach effectively. What they come to understand with your help is the critical nature of making good teaching decisions for individual children. During behind-the-glass discussions, teachers learn to discuss, question, challenge, and revise their thinking about what is appropriate for struggling readers and writers. Because of you, they learn to make better teaching decisions.

As teacher leaders you work very hard to be that kind of mentor. Not only do you put in long hours at work, but you go home and put in more hours being a mother or father, a husband, wife, or friend. Some people say you work yourselves to exhaustion. Here’s a teacher leader epitaph (adapted from Theibert, 1997) that I know you will understand:

*Here lies a poor teacher leader who always was tired,*
*For she lived in a place where good help wasn't hired.*
*Her last words on earth were,*
*‘Dear Friends, I am going Where leading ain't done, nor teaching, nor scanning.*
*And everything there is exact to my wishes,*
*For there they don't gripe, and there are no behind-the-glasses…* 
*Don't mourn for me now, don't mourn for me never,*
*For I'm going to do nothing forever and ever.*

Yes, teaching children and teaching teachers is demanding work, and so is your role as local champion for Reading Recovery and its integrity, the third key point.

According to Marie Clay the role of teacher leaders is to “act as advocates for whatever cannot be compromised in the interest of effective results” (Clay, 1992, p. 29).

With Reading Recovery you are creating an early intervention and prevention innovation. Marie Clay has told us that innovations like Reading Recovery “cannot move into an education system merely on the merits of what it can do for children” (Clay, 1992, p. 31). To survive, an innovation like Reading Recovery must promote system change at several levels: in children, in teachers, in funding, and in the thinking of authorities who develop and implement policy. The purpose, goals, and benefits of Reading Recovery must be stated and understood by its stakeholders. You as teacher leaders, in cooperation with your site coordinators, play a vital role in each of these areas.

Our success with the lowest-achieving children over the past 16 years provides proof that hundreds of thousands of children require the unique instructional opportunities provided by Reading Recovery if they are to become competent readers and writers. Reading Recovery is the last hope for children who cannot acquire literacy through group instruction. Yet there are many in our society who do not understand this simple fact. They say Reading Recovery costs too much and it does not serve enough children. They say they are confused over the difference between serving children and making a difference in the lives of children.

If our only interest was in serving children, of course we could do it more cheaply with group instruction. But if we want to make a lasting difference in the achievement of children so the path of failure is reversed for them, then we need to provide them with the individual instruction they require.

The lowest-achieving children cannot change the trajectory of failure without the one-to-one assistance provided by trained Reading Recovery professionals. Other programs may improve their lot, but there is no early intervention and prevention program that has demonstrated the success rate of Reading Recovery. The data for last year alone (2000–2001) show that 6 of 10 children served by Reading Recovery learned to read and write at the average of their class with a self-extending system, even if they were in Reading Recovery for only one lesson.

Reading Recovery does not claim to heal vital organs or broken bones, but we can claim, and rightfully so, that with a full program of 12 to 20 weeks, about 8 of 10 Reading Recovery children can learn to read and write well enough to benefit from good group instruction back in the classroom.

No child should be denied Reading Recovery because some grown-up thinks it’s too expensive or that it does not serve enough children or because it does not agree with a favored way to teach literacy. Every school system has the resources required to implement Reading Recovery. What is needed is more advocacy and communication to help...
school decision makers understand the power of Reading Recovery. It works for 6 of 10 children who have even one lesson, and it is much less expensive than retention and long-term remedial programs.

We in Reading Recovery, together with the clear-thinking people in and out of education, are faced with a rare opportunity to shape our future and the future of generations of children as well. To a very large degree, our success in this venture will depend on how we manage our roles as university trainers and teacher leaders in a rapidly changing world, how we cope with the politics of literacy in our respective communities, and how we accomplish the daunting task of both keeping what we have and making it better at the same time. We know what needs to be done and we know how to do it. Therefore, we are faced with four critical choices:

1. Will the teaching of children remain a high priority for us?
2. Will we have the vision to adopt and stick to policies and procedures that will produce optimal results for the long term?
3. Will we have the patience to stay the course when the inevitable setbacks occur in the short run?
4. Will we have the courage to stand resolutely yet graciously against those who would criticize our efforts and undermine our academic freedom to teach with our heads and our hearts—and not with preplanned scripts?

I, for one, am optimistic that the answer to all of these questions is “yes!” I believe that we are committed to a simple cause: Take every child from where they are to somewhere else along the continuum of literacy achievement and towards a better life.

Let us recall the words of Jonathan Kozol in his speech at the 2001 Annual Reading Recovery Conference in February. When Jesus turned to Peter and said, “Feed my sheep,” he didn’t say only those whose parents can buy influence. He didn’t say only those who are bright and live in houses. He didn’t say only those who are easy to teach. He didn’t say only those who are destined for college and the good life. He said simply, “Feed my sheep.” (Kozol, 2001)

But the people in this room cannot do the task alone. We will not be remembered for our organization, our practices, or our procedures. Our effectiveness begins and ends with how well we work together and how well we work with other educators. True champions know that lasting change comes through collaboration and shared effort. The only way we can deliver what we have to offer is by working with others to find ways to ensure that, indeed, no child is left behind.

Our work for the next few days will give us an opportunity to learn more, to understand better, and to be refreshed so we can continue our work as champions for children. Let us reaffirm our commitment to work together, from beginning to end, to realize our mission of ensuring access to Reading Recovery for every child who needs it.

References


