The Invisible Teacher: An Instructional Vanishing Act

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Editor’s Note:
When a former Reading Recovery student met but did not recognize or remember the teacher who helped him learn how to read, it was like the teacher had been turned invisible or had simply disappeared. While the reality of not being remembered was uncomfortable and unsatisfying, it suggested an important component in teacher-student relationships. In this article the author reflects on the notion that effective teaching is essentially a vanishing act. A teacher's voice and presence must gradually disappear throughout the Reading Recovery series of lessons for the student to succeed. The student's path to a truly literate life rests in part on the teacher's willingness to fade into the background. In the end, recognition and remembrances are nice, but independence is essential.

A Chance Meeting
After JP successfully completed his Reading Recovery series of lessons and first grade, he and I headed off in separate directions. JP went to second grade and I took a position as a district literacy coach.

Several years later while I was visiting with a fourth-grade teacher, I looked up and saw JP in the back of the classroom. I asked his teacher how he was doing. She said he was doing typical, grade-level work. Thankfully, JP had continued to develop as a reader and writer. I felt some satisfaction knowing that what we worked to establish had stayed with him — that's enough to make any Reading Recovery teacher smile.

I wanted to say hello and to congratulate JP on his accomplishments, so I began walking toward him. As I walked, I wondered if he might be surprised to see me. I wondered what he might say, what memories he might have of our time in Reading Recovery. When I got to the back of the room, JP looked up. I said, “Hi JP, I’m Mr. Borka. Remember me? I worked with you when you were in first grade.”

JP looked startled. He pulled back a little and did not say anything. The silence soon became uncomfortable.

I continued, “You came to my classroom, and we worked on reading and writing together, remember?”

“No,” said JP blankly.

His tone and demeanor suggested that he was not interested in talking. Our conversation was largely over.

“Well, your teacher says that you’re doing a fine job. Keep up the good work,” I said and shuffled away.

A moment that I had built up in my head as a time for reconnection and celebration became, instead, awkward. JP had not remembered me, or he had chosen not to acknowledge me. I still do not know if his lack of remembering was real or feigned. However, it was clear that in the back of that fourth-grade room, I had become a nonentity to JP. Like a colleague put it when I told her the story, “It’s like you were invisible.”

I was invisible. Ouch. I would be lying if I said JP’s inability or unwillingness to recognize me did not bother me. My pride was bruised when I considered the time, energy, and thought that went into getting JP to read and write. I am still amazed at how deeply one Reading Recovery student could invade my thinking and how I continually thought about and carried that student’s needs around with me. In JP’s case, I considered what he was and was not doing, how he did and did not respond, and what we might try next to bring about some small shift in his reading behaviors. I thought about how I sat beside him and how hard he worked. Then, I thought about how JP made me disappear and how that act was the most positive and productive choice he could have made.

JP and Me
In many ways, JP was not hard to teach. He paid attention and followed directions. He was task oriented, so he usually completed his work within the 30-minute timeframe. Admittedly, he did not spend much time talking about his interests, his school day, or what he did for fun. I don’t think he resented coming to his lessons, but when the timer went off he was ready to leave and return to his classroom. His teachers and peers liked him; his parents loved him and were committed to his success. These singular qualities reflected JP’s unique personality, but they were not the reasons why I was working
JP landed in my Reading Recovery room because he struggled with print. As a first grader, JP knew a handful of letters. He could read a few words, and while he could not write his whole name, he could print J-P. Like many Reading Recovery students, he was confused about how to use what he had learned to learn more. He read and wrote with hesitation, not knowing what to do when he encountered unfamiliar words. He was unsure, unsteady, and unwilling to take risks. JP lacked a strategic approach to text. JP and I began where we all begin — we solidified his small pocket of abilities and worked from what he knew to that which was new.

At first, even when JP read a word correctly he would look at me as if to ask, “Was I right?” Gradually, he built a large reading and writing vocabulary and he was able to use his known words to monitor his reading and writing of increasingly complex text. Occasionally, I used flashcards to solidify his known words.

To extend JP’s understanding of how words work, I had him articulate words slowly in order to hear and record the sounds in the Elkonin boxes I drew on the work page. JP learned how to write words quickly and used them in his stories. Initially, he worked tensely, squeezing the pen and pressing so hard that he nearly etched the letters into the board and paper.

In reading, JP worked to focus his attention on the print. Often when he came to a word he did not know he would stop, look up, and wait for me to tell him the word. I reminded JP, “Looking up isn’t going to help you…The word is not on the ceiling. It’s not on the wall or on my forehead. Look at the word in the book. You can get it started.”

Gradually, JP started untangling the knots. He learned how to look at print more efficiently, recognizing an ever-growing stack of familiar words and reading them one after the next. “Oh my gosh. Look at how many words are in your pile today!”

He wrote more fluidly and with less tension, “Wow, that was easy for you wasn’t it?”

“You hardly had to think about that one. You know that word JP.”

JP was learning how to learn. He was expanding his strategies and increasing his confidence. As JP began reading and writing with greater ease and power, he started thinking aloud. He talked more about how he could or did solve problems on his own. His voice started to precede my prompting. He appealed less often. JP began taking over, becoming a leader during more parts of the lesson. When he did, my teaching presence diminished. His small successes begat energy which begat greater success, and JP’s fluency grew.

JP became more independent as he learned to replace the unproductive behaviors of reading and writing at a halting pace and of constantly appealing for help with the abilities to problem solve and handle print fluidly and flexibly. He was setting aside his former, passive approach to reading and writing and was taking over, becoming a leader during more parts of the lesson. When he did, my teaching presence diminished. His small successes begat energy which begat greater success, and JP’s fluency grew.

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made me vanish. I believe that JP had to make me disappear to become an autonomous and independent reader and writer.

My necessary fading away is the gradual release of responsibility that we talk so much about in Reading Recovery. Before seeing JP in his fourth-grade classroom, I had always viewed this gradual release from a teacher’s perspective. I understood it primarily as me reducing the amount of instructional support that I offered, me trying to work myself out of a job, trying to make my teaching obsolete. It was and is a scaffolded approach that helped move JP from Roaming Around the Known to reading books at level 20 and beyond. There is another aspect to this gradual release that I had not seen before.

Since JP sent me to the shadows, I have begun to consider the gradual release from a student’s standpoint. While I was pulling back and reducing my level of support, JP was pulling away too. He was gradually setting my direct teaching aside and was incrementally letting go of me. Over time, JP learned all of his letters and sounds, understood the concepts about print, and knew that what he read and wrote had to make sense. Knowing what, though, is different from knowing how and when. JP had to go beyond a simple knowledge of discrete reading and writing skills and proceed strategically, flexibly, and independently. He could not continue to appeal and wait, appeal and wait. He had to internalize the prompts and initiate a response. For JP to achieve true independence he had to be in control. He had to find or create a sense of ownership and I, as his teacher, had to get out of the way, to disappear; otherwise we would have simply replaced one set of unproductive behaviors with another. Whether or not we consciously realized it, JP had to make me invisible (and I had to go willingly), so he could read and write on his own.

JP did learn how to work independently. That learning was all that mattered. I would have been delighted if he would have remembered me 3 years later but that recognition was not a necessary outcome of the teaching and learning — independence was. JP looked past me or through me and became literate.

A Look at Teaching

The instructional approach we take in Reading Recovery is different than the traditional practices of delivering a lecture or lesson plan. An up-front, presentational teaching style can be both effective and dramatic. The drama is a source for popular books, movies, and television programs. I am not discounting the work done by the real teachers portrayed in these stories as unimpressive or insignificant. I just never connected to that image of teaching.

During Reading Recovery lessons, my students taught me how to sit, watch, listen, and prompt when necessary. It was quiet teaching, slow, painstaking and even boring sometimes…not exactly made-for-television stuff. Yet, if I am successful with this side-by-side approach to teaching, each time I meet with students they should say and do more while I say and do less.

In this context, I remain present in every meeting from beginning to end. However, starting with the first lesson, I must encourage and prepare for my vanishing act. I wanted JP to understand and believe that he was and could continue to be independent in his reading and writing. Achieving this independence was my goal for JP in first grade, in fourth grade, and it is my hope for him still.

Since our chance meeting in that fourth-grade class I have lost track of JP. My work has taken me from Reading Recovery teaching, to a districtwide position, and on to a college where my current students are undergraduate, pre-service teachers. However, whether working with first-time readers or first-time teachers, I remain grateful to JP for showing me what can take shape when a teacher turns invisible.

About the Author

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