

Teachers Reflect on 20-Year Journey with Reading Recovery

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Editor's Note: This article is written by three Reading Recovery® teachers trained in 1994 for Hauppauge School District on Long Island, NY. After 20 years together in continuing professional development, they reflect on the powerful effect that Reading Recovery has had on their students, their school district, and their work lives. Karen Alexander and Grace Leyhane have also taught at the college level. Nancy Castellano has reached out to spread Reading Recovery to a nearby community. Their journey may seem familiar to many readers.

Getting Started

Grace Leyhane remembers

In February of 1993, 11 days after graduating, I was hired as a reading teacher at Bretton Woods Elementary in Hauppauge, NY. The staff had embraced the whole language approach for teaching reading and writing. I was in awe of the literacy work being done by students and was excited to be part of it. Soon I realized that everything wasn't as it appeared to be. There were over 800 students in Grades K–5, and reading/math support services were provided by seven teaching assistants, a math specialist, and me. Needless to say, I wasn't working with many of

the students myself. Instead I created schedules, planned lessons, evaluated students, supervised teaching assistants, and most of all, wondered how all this was helping struggling students become better readers and writers.

Thanks to the visionary leadership of Dr. Joseph Sanacore, English-language arts department chairman, things were about to change during the 1994–95 school year. The district embarked on a journey that would transform the reading teachers into Reading Recovery teachers and subsequently would empower them to be change agents for literacy instruction. Little did I know that it was the beginning of something that would have a monumental impact on my teaching, my students, and my life.

Our weeklong Observation Survey training took place in August, and the camaraderie of the 10 teachers in training was immediate. Although we didn't know it at the time, several of us would have the opportunity to work together for the next 20 years and develop long-lasting friendships.

As the training year progressed, we poured over Marie Clay's books. We delved into her philosophy while learning about effective teaching responses, Reading Recovery's frame-

work and components, and about emergent readers' books — lots and lots of books! It was a year filled with weekly meetings where we wrote in journals, talked about what we read, watched each other's behind-the-glass lessons, laughed, and sometimes cried. We celebrated our successes and lamented our shortcomings. From the beginning, I was grateful for the opportunity to learn about emergent readers and how to help them.

Change is never easy and not everyone at the school embraced the change to Reading Recovery. Classroom teachers with struggling readers were frustrated that reading teachers were now going to provide individualized student instruction and therefore saw fewer students than previously. In hindsight, I recognize that those teachers were also struggling because they just didn't know how to help their students. Their reading instruction wasn't working and they didn't know what else to do. Slowly but surely the teachers could no longer deny the success of the Reading Recovery students, and the beginning of collaboration between reading and classroom teachers was born. Sharing our new-found knowledge became the vehicle that would eventually bring us together professionally.

Schoolwide Literacy and Administrative Leadership

Karen Alexander remembers

The training was truly system-changing as well as career-changing. Classroom teachers were invited to view lessons where they saw how we began with honoring what the child knew while helping him develop a self-extending system. We also shared with the teachers our growing knowledge of effective teaching prompts and techniques such as the Elkonin boxes and how we encouraged reluctant writers by ‘sharing the pen.’ Teachers began asking us questions about how to judge the level of their instructional books and spent a great deal of time reorganizing their classroom libraries, no longer relying on the levels created by each publisher for their own series.

Eventually we were asked to do some more-organized training. We did some sessions on running records for classroom teachers, and later I offered a workshop on using Reading Recovery techniques in the classroom. I also presented at Literacy and Learning Institutes sponsored by BOCES (a regional educational support center for educators in New York state) and at a symposium offered by the Dowling College’s Literacy Education Department.

We knew from feedback we received from classroom teachers and parents, as well as from the performance of students themselves, that we were having a positive impact on reading instruction in our buildings. But that didn’t mean Reading Recovery was immune to the financial pressures faced by successive boards charged with cutting growing school budgets.

Fortunately, Reading Recovery has survived budget cuts and administration changes because we always had administrators who recognized its value. Today the department chair of English-language arts is Dr. Christopher Michael, a former Reading Recovery teacher and strong supporter in our district.

In Hauppauge School District, Reading Recovery teachers spend the other part of our day working in small groups with students in Grades 1–5. Our training, and the consecu-

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tive 19 years of ongoing professional development sessions, inform our small-group instruction. The observational techniques and use of running records and prompts have become a vital component of our day-to-day teaching of all students. In my 20 years of Reading Recovery teaching, I have worked with approximately 160 Reading Recovery students in daily lessons. In addition, I’ve worked with an additional 400 students in small groups. With two Reading Recovery teachers in our building, that translates to well over 1,000 students in our school alone who have benefited from our training.

Professional Pathways and Outreach to Another District

Nancy Castellano remembers

Once you’re trained as a Reading Recovery teacher, you never know where that will lead you. When Grace Leyhane completed her master’s program, one of her former professors invited her to teach in the graduate program at Dowling College. The full-time professors welcomed the knowledge about teaching emergent readers. Working together with Christopher Michael, both an adjunct professor and fellow Reading Recovery teacher, a framework based on Clay’s philosophy was created for graduate students working with emergent readers. For two summers I worked as a supervisor for graduate reading students completing the reading clinic coursework at Dowling. I was able to experience the addition of the emergent reader component that Grace and Christopher Michael created. Adding this component provided the graduate students with a wealth of knowledge and expertise in emergent literacy. Teaching at the graduate level for 15 years also afforded Grace opportunities to work with many classroom teachers studying to be reading teachers. Her Reading Recovery training has been shared a thousand times over, and I feel it’s a perfect example of ‘paying it forward.’

In 2003, I volunteered to become a member of a language arts committee in the school district where I live, Center Moriches, NY. At that time Center Moriches School District had discontinued Reading Recovery. After many months of research, the committee did a presentation to the board of education and it was recommended



Grace Leyhane, Karen Alexander, and Nancy Castellano (left to right) met this summer on the shore of the Great South Bay of Long Island to plan this article. Each is holding a favorite Reading Recovery book. As they worked, a little boy on the beach asked if he and a friend could read the books. "Of course," Nancy said.

that Reading Recovery be brought back to the district. The district was hiring a new reading teacher so I applied and was hired. In 2004, I resigned from Hauppauge School District in order to work as a Reading Recovery teacher in Center Moriches. My career in Center Moriches began the same year my daughter Kylie entered kindergarten in my building. It was difficult leaving my colleagues from Hauppauge, but it was a wonderful gift to be able to do what I love (Reading Recovery) and to be in the same building as my daughter.

Reading Recovery has made a positive impact on the Center Moriches

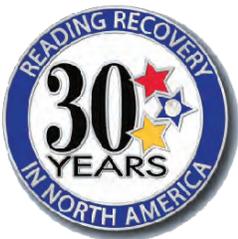
community. My colleagues and I continuously reach out to let people know the importance of maintaining Reading Recovery in our school district. For the last 5 years, Center Moriches School District has been a site for ongoing professional development classes. In 2009, our former superintendent installed the one-way glass in our building and trained a third Reading Recovery teacher so we would be at full implementation in Reading Recovery. Having ongoing professional development sessions in our school provides closer access for the Reading Recovery teachers located in schools in eastern Long Island.

This is important for our continued training because it is much more convenient for parents who live in eastern Long Island to transport their children to our school for behind-the-glass sessions. The Reading Recovery teachers in the building have used the glass to provide observations and training sessions for classroom teachers as well.

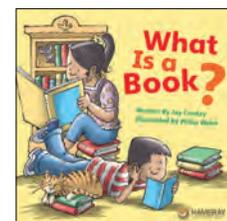
I love being a Reading Recovery teacher and I wouldn't change a thing if I had to do it all again. The prospect of four new students with many new challenges is always very exciting. Last September, I had a student that was the weakest student in first grade at the beginning of the year. William (pseudonym) told me the first day of Roaming Around the Known that he hated books and when he sees books at his house he throws them out. Reading Recovery not only made him a reader, but it made him value books and love reading. By the end of the year, William was reading at Level 16. On the last day of school he brought me a note he had written: "From William to my favorite reading teacher. You always helped me to read. That's what I like about you. Books are my favorite!"

Having completed 20 years as a Reading Recovery teacher, I now hope to be one for 30 years!

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