The Influence of Reading Recovery in a School

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Patricia wriggled in her hard, straight-backed chair, played with her hands, and looked around the room while her Reading Recovery teacher patiently tried to engage her in quick-moving activities. She was assessing Patricia’s strengths, a time called Roaming Around the Known. I marveled as I watched. I tried to see it through my teacher’s eyes. I wondered if I would have the quiet patience and persistence needed to work with Patricia’s low level of skills and evident anxiety.

My passion is reading. This is where I began as a teacher, so hungry to find the answers. Why is reading automatic for some children and agonizing for others? As a principal I spent a lot of time observing in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms—more than twice as much time as I spent in other classrooms. I knew that we had to be vigilant to respond to student needs and, if necessary, intervene quickly before years of resistance, apathy, and discouragement took over some of these young learners.

Fortunately, we had six years of Reading Recovery in our school, and two years of Descubriendo la Lectura. I knew that Reading Recovery/Descubriendo la Lectura was an efficient intervention for students like Patricia in their struggle to learn how to read. Skeptical at first, I observed and questioned students and teachers and eventually came to believe that students like Patricia were not non-readers; rather, each came to the reading experience with specific yet differing strengths. The Reading Recovery teacher determined what those strengths were through observation and comprehensive assessment, and then built on those strengths.

I continued to watch this learning process, trying to outguess the teacher I was observing and was always surprised at what she drew out of Patricia as she stretched her a little further each day. Then one day, Patricia eagerly ran into the room at the beginning of their half-hour session, anxious to begin. She leaned forward, still and watchful as her teacher readied the materials and brought out her familiar books. This program was magic, I thought.

During the first year of Reading Recovery implementation, Susie, the Reading Recovery teacher, and I spent many hours discussing strategies students were learning in Reading Recovery and thinking about how the students were being taught in their regular classrooms. We noted a certain amount of tension between the Reading Recovery teaching and the classroom instruction—instruction that seemed to reflect a fundamental difference in philosophy.

Based on our observations, Susie spent many hours each week explaining and working with other first-grade teachers and the resource specialist to look for children’s strengths and how to scaffold learning for a full range of students. Susie was working with students from all first-grade classrooms, so this was a very good way to be able to approach classroom teachers. The next year Susie worked with second-grade teachers so that strategies the Reading Recovery students had learned would be supported through classroom instruction. Each year, Susie worked with more teachers who consistently asked her for help in their own guided reading sessions.

More and more, I noticed that the teacher-talk in our school became focused on what students are able to do rather than what they cannot do. Slowly over six years, a profound change came over the school, one of respecting all students. I also saw a change in teaching based on student needs rather than adult needs.

Teachers who were initially skeptical questioned Susie relentlessly, pitting their deficit-model philosophy against her constructivist philosophy. They observed her while she was teaching in Reading Recovery and in the classroom. They visited behind the glass...
during Reading Recovery training sessions. They saw the change from passivity to independence that each student exhibited as they gained confidence in their own ability to create meaning from text.

The transformation in teachers’ attitudes moved students much further than any self-esteem program ever could. The by-product of the teachers’ focus on student strengths was unexpectedly profound. Their expectations of performance changed through convincing results and eventually made a paradigm shift in their philosophical beliefs. The students they had so easily dismissed as unteachable were becoming independent readers.

Nothing about our schoolwide self-esteem activities was more powerful than the pervasive change in the learning environment brought about by the one-by-one successes of the Reading Recovery program. Those successes came through hard work, watching, listening, and encouraging children like Patricia to try one more time. Patricia discontinued in 15 weeks, a confident reader now ready to join fully in the same reading tasks as her classmates.

*Note: Now director of special projects in the Whittier City School District, Margie Leon was formerly an elementary school principal for 14 years.*