A couple of years ago, a Reading Recovery teacher told me about an experience that delighted her. A little girl wanted to write the word come.

The teacher said, “I'll show you the word,” and wrote it for her. The little girl looked at the word for moment, put her hand over the e, and said, It's just like dot com!

This child was being invited into literacy by a skillful and caring teacher—invited to notice important aspects of print; invited to make connections among letters, sounds, and words; invited to make connections between literacy and her own life; and invited to find meaning in all of her first experiences with literacy. Our role as Reading Recovery teachers, in partnership with classroom teachers, is to assure that this invitation is extended to every child.

We are facing high stakes as literacy teachers, and we need to keep our goals in mind. In these challenging times, we sometimes have difficulty knowing just what to do. We all want to be good people. We all want to do the right thing. Like Nikolai in the Three Questions—based on a story told by Leo Tolstoy and written and illustrated by Jon J. Muth (2002). In this story, Nikolai sought the answers to three questions: (1) When is the most important time? (2) Who is the most important one? (3) What is the right thing to do? He decided to ask the wise old turtle who lived high in the mountains. He found the old turtle digging a garden and asked his questions, but the turtle didn’t reply. He simply went on digging. After a while, Nikolai saw that the old turtle needed help, and he took over the digging, staying to finish the job. Just as he was leaving, a storm began. Through the thunder and lightening, Nikolai heard a cry for help and found a panda with an injured leg. He carried her to the turtle's house and then rescued her child. The next morning, the sun was shining and Nikolai set off for home. He was glad he had rescued the panda and her child, but sorry he had not received answers to his questions. When he posed the questions again, the turtle replied, “But your questions have already been answered.”

As we think about our own times, we could ask these same questions, and I'd like to build this article around them.

When Is the Most Important Time?

Many of us are feeling the pressure of increased accountability, budget cuts, and mandates. To understand our times, we must realize several important factors. I'm deliberately using the word reading here because writing (even its contribution to reading) is virtually ignored in the current conversation.

Reading is big business. Capturing the reading market means many billions...
of dollars. We are a giant industry. In the past, many schools and districts have turned away from the mass adoptions of commercially produced core programs. Publishers want that market back and they want to expand it. So money plays a large role in educational decisions.

Reading is affected by the economy. Just about every state budget is in crisis. Class size is going up. Programs are being cut. It may be impossible for districts to provide what children need, and the ones who will bear the full brunt of this may be the children we teach.

Reading is a national, state, and local priority. In contrast to the budget cutting, reading is the focus of national, state, and local attention. The message is that reading scores on tests just aren't good enough. Former Department of Education official Susan Neuman had this to say: “The No Child Left Behind Act was never about politics as usual. It was about a fundamental belief in social justice: a belief that high-quality education should be an entitlement for all children, regardless of their life circumstance.” These goals are noble, but will this legislation achieve them?

Reading is highly political. Reconciling budget deficits and demands for higher-quality education is taking place in a highly public and political arena. Politicians and all manner of public figures are getting out in front to fix the schools. The bulk of this attention is focused on literacy.

According to Jennifer Steinhauer of The New York Times, Mayor Bloomberg of New York has staked his record on the education of the city's children. His approach reflects a deeply held belief that these problems, while considered serious and complex, have dramatic and pretty simple-to-apply answers, if only educators will do as they are told. The Mayor's communications director, William T. Cunningham, is quoted as saying, “You are dealing with a bureaucracy that loves fog. Sometimes you need to pierce that fog with words that say, ‘This is what we expect.’”

On the federal level, reading is also highly political. Stiff requirements are attached to the No Child Left Behind legislation, even though the federal government provides less than 8% of funding for education. Under the best of circumstances, integrating the different requirements, target populations, rules, and regulations governing federal education programs is very demanding. Some programs, like Reading First, are highly restricted and available only to districts that qualify through high poverty or low scores.

For example, less than 30 of Ohio's over 600 districts will qualify for Reading First funding. But whether or not you receive resources from the new legislation, it will influence your work through the philosophy on which it is based.

Solutions
It is typical for U.S. educators and politicians to seek quick solutions and easy-to-apply recipes. For example,

1. Eliminate waste—administrators, staff developers, and others.
2. Buy programs and make them comprehensive across systems.
3. Go for scripts and structure.
4. Test, test, and test again with stern consequences.
5. The solution everyone is counting on the most is called scientifically based reading research (SBRR). SBRR is research that applies rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain valid knowledge relevant to reading development, reading instruction, and reading difficulties; it includes research that:
   • employs systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation or experiment;
   • involves rigorous data analyses that are adequate to test the stated hypotheses and justify the general conclusions drawn;
   • relies on measurements or observational methods that provide valid data across evaluators and observers and across multiple measurements and observations; and
   • has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective, and scientific review.
A study of Reading Recovery published in Reading Research Quarterly in 1993 met all of those criteria.

In 1997, the National Reading Panel was convened to address the question: What does SBRR have to say about effective reading instruction? The panel examined a large number of studies and published three reports (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001; NICHD, 2001a, 2001b). It is important to understand that this panel acted very much like a jury. They examined and analyzed only the research that met the above criteria, mostly very tightly controlled experiments. I am not going to critique this methodology, but others have. You may be interested in examining Reading: The Naked Truth: Literacy, Legislation, and Lies by Gerald Coles (2003).

Despite a fairly narrow view of research, the panel provided some valuable information. I’ll briefly visit the five essential elements that the panel identified. These are must-knows because they will influence literacy instruction for the next few years.

Phonemic Awareness Instruction. Phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness referring to the individual phonemes or sounds. The goal of phonemic awareness instruction is to help children notice and manipulate the individual sounds in words. The panel emphasized that “phonological awareness training does not constitute a complete reading program. Rather, it provides children with essential foundational knowledge in the alphabetic system. It is one necessary instructional component within a complete and integrated reading program” (NICHD, 2001a, p. 8). Reading Recovery teachers give explicit attention to phonemic awareness during both reading and writing. In particular, the use of Elkonin boxes to help children learn about sequences of sounds is used extensively, along with personalized alphabet books, making and breaking words, and taking words apart in reading.

Phonics Instruction. Phonics refers to teaching children the relationships between sounds and letters, as well as how to use that information to solve words in reading. According to the panel, teachers must understand that systematic phonics instruction is only one component—albeit a necessary component of a total reading program; systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction in phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension strategies to create a complete reading program (NICHD, 2001a, p. 11).

They caution that phonics should not be allowed to become the dominant component of a reading program.

Fluency Instruction. The panel said that “fluent readers are able to read orally with speed, accuracy, and proper expression. Fluency is one of several critical factors necessary for reading comprehension” (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p. 23). The panel specifically recommends guided oral rereading of texts to support fluency. Reading Recovery teachers teach explicitly for fluency while children are reading new and familiar material. In addition, carefully matching books to individual readers assures that children are reading fluently most of the time.

Vocabulary. Vocabulary instruction involves both direct and indirect ways of rapidly expanding the words that children know orally and also can read and write. While introducing and discussing books, Reading Recovery teachers help children notice and learn new words. Also, rereading texts assures that they encounter words several times.

Comprehension Instruction. The panel defined comprehension as the following:

Using their experiences and knowledge of the world, their knowledge of vocabulary and language structure, and their knowledge of reading strategies (or plans), good readers make sense of the text and know how to get the most out of it. They know when they have problems with understanding and how to...
resolve these problems as they occur (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p. 48).

In Reading Recovery, we never abandon the meaning; all other skills are taught with the goal of reading with understanding. It is obvious that all five essential elements are explicitly addressed in Reading Recovery lessons, although some interpretations of the panel's report may lean more towards commercially produced programs, and that brings us to the question of delivery of research-based practice.

**Systematic Instruction**
A disturbing aspect of the current conversation is the virtual ignoring of the teacher's ability and responsibility to make instructional decisions.

Programs of phonics instruction that are not systematic do not teach consonant and vowel letter-sound relationships in a prescribed sequence. Rather, they encourage informal phonics instruction based on the teacher’s perceptions of what students need to learn and when they need to learn it (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p. 16).

They go on to say that some of the phonics programs that were found to have large effects are scripted in a way that almost eliminates all teacher decision making.

The implication here is that a program can not be systematic and involve teachers’ making decisions about their students. In my view, a program can not be systematic unless teachers do observe and consider their students. Systematic means understanding the domain of knowledge (what there is to learn and a continuum of development) and then designing superbly sequenced lessons that take a child from where he is to where he needs to go next. The training, professional development, and ongoing support in Reading Recovery makes this skilled and systematic teaching possible.

Louis Gerstner, former chairman and CEO of IBM, has recently commented on the profession of teaching. He said that

The No Child Left Behind Act... calls for 'highly qualified' teachers in every classroom within five years and mandates that the poorest schools hire only highly qualified teachers, starting immediately. I find myself asking whether we will once again fall into the trap of believing that setting high goals, in and of itself, leads to progress. Teaching is a profession so we have to get serious about treating it like one... It means we recruit the best talent—and keep it. We [need to] provide our teachers with assets taken for granted in other professions: high-quality teaching materials, tools, and professional development.

Effective professional development focuses on the way teachers play out instructional techniques, tailoring and adapting in very sensitive ways to individual children. In Reading Recovery we understand and highly value professional development. We work constantly on our teaching to make it more effective for each child and we have our colleagues’ support in doing so.

When is the most important time? In answer to Nikolai’s first question, the old turtle said that the most important time is now—right now—what you do today and for most days, that is, teaching each child daily and learning from teaching.

Who Is the Most Important One?
To Nikolai’s second question, the old turtle pointed out that when the boy was helping him dig, then the turtle was the most important one. When Nikolai heard the cry for help, the panda and her child were the most important ones. The most important one, then, is the person who is standing beside you.

We are in the midst of many power struggles. Publishers, researchers, politicians, administrators, and vendors of programs are struggling for the particular body of knowledge, the points of view, and the materials that will prevail. If we rely solely on the purchase of programs, then this school reform effort will fail like others have. In Reading Recovery we can incorporate what the National Reading Panel has found, but we will not stop there.

And we are very clear about who is the most important one. Our goals
In Reading Recovery, we do not claim to have the whole answer, but we can be an important and necessary part of the answer. Reaching educational solutions is not a matter of setting standards higher, testing more, and giving teachers better scripts. Good teaching is needed for all children, especially those most at risk in the educational system.

What Is the Right Thing to Do?

In Reading Recovery, we do not claim to have the whole answer, but we can be an important and necessary part of the answer. Reaching educational solutions is not a matter of setting standards higher, testing more, and giving teachers better scripts. Good teaching is needed for all children, especially those most at risk in the educational system. We are all aware that an achievement gap exists in literacy. Children of minority and poor populations systematically score lower than other children. The lowest-achieving students in first grade have an 88% chance of still being the lowest-achieving students in fourth grade. Average students in first grade have a 12% chance of being low-achieving students in fourth grade (Juel, 1988).

But we know that intervening early spoils predictions of failure. Emily Rodgers and Francisco Gómez-Bellengé have recently completed an analysis of over 7,000 first graders in Ohio and are in the process of analyzing national data since the government now requires disaggregation of data by race (see Rodgers & Gómez-Bellengé, this issue). They found that students who received the full Reading Recovery series of lessons, as well as those who discontinued successfully, reduced or closed the gap, as measured by stanines, on every one of the six measures of the Observation Survey. African-American children served by Reading Recovery reduced or closed the gap on every measure relative to the White random sample children. Children receiving free lunch and served by Reading Recovery reduced or closed the gap on every measure relative to the random sample children who received regular-priced lunch.

Scores are valuable in informing policy, but as teachers we also know that every number stands for an individual reader. Here is an eloquent statement from the father of Bobby, a Reading Recovery student:

Something beautiful started to happen recently. As if someone had found a switch, the light of learning has been turned on for our son. What used to be a chore is now fun. Books, magazines, and menus are now fodder for his curiosity, and he enjoys reading whatever he can get his hands on. The transformation has been amazing—beyond anything we could have ever hoped for.

Ayni Nur, another student, writes about her experience in Reading Recovery:

Reading Recovery helps you be a better reader because you learn. Before I was in Reading Recovery I didn't know how to read. I liked when we played with the pennies. I liked to sound out words. I loved when we used the boxes to sound out the words. When I came from Africa I didn't know what some of the words are. Ms. W. told me how to read and write. I felt great at the end of the year because I learned how to read and write and sound out words. I knew how to do the syllables. Ms. W. is a wonderful reading teacher. I had a great day.

William writes this: “And I feel warm inside me because I can read.”

Minnie Marie Harris, from Patrick Henry Elementary School in Heidelberg, Germany, is now in fifth grade, is in the Gifted and Talented Program, has written a book that was chosen as a winner in the Young Authors contest, and scored at the 99% level on the reading portion of the Terra Nova.

Jakob's mother writes that “the program has been a miracle to us. We went from hopeless to looking forward to greater things for Jakob. He is
excited about reading. It is night and
day around here.”

Elizabeth, another former Reading
Recovery student, is in college, study-
ing to be a teacher. Think how many
students she will influence!

What us the right thing to do? In
answer to his third question, the old
turtle told Nikolai this:

Remember then that there is
only one important time, and
that time is now. The most
important one is always the one
you are with. And the most
important thing is to do good
for the one who is standing at
your side. For these, my dear
boy, are the answers to what is
most important in this world.
And that is why we are here.

One of my favorite writers, Anna
Quindlin, has said in an interview on
Book TV, “Reading has always been
my sustenance, my great joy.” With
your teaching, you bring this joy to
your students, and they will bring it
to others. There may be disagreements
on many issues, but we can agree that
the right thing to do is to open the
world of literacy to children. That is
why we are here.

Editors Note: This article is based
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