Change and Opportunities for Learning

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My reflections for this article are the result of my preparations for working with Reading Recovery teachers when given the title, "Achieving change in reading: maximising opportunities for learning." So I began by breaking the topic into two main issues: change and opportunities for learning. What must change if children are to make accelerated progress in Reading Recovery? We think a lot about the ways in which children's reading and writing behaviours must change but what about us, as their teachers? How must we change? What must we do differently? And what about the opportunities for learning that we provide in our teaching? How can we make sure that they change to keep pace with the needs of the child?

Change

What do we mean by change? What changes are we looking for in children as they progress in Reading Recovery? A lot depends upon how we understand reading acquisition. In *Change Over Time in Children's Literacy Development*, Marie Clay describes two models of progress in reading. She labels one an additive model which she likens to "credit in a bank account or scores for words known" (Clay, 2001, p. 48), and the second she refers to as a transformation model which she characterises as "changes in the complexity of the processing system" (Clay, 2001, p. 48). She suggests that the way we view reading acquisition will shape the kind of progress we look for. In an additive model, progress will be

reported as quantitative counts or scores as the reader accumulates more known things, words, letters, phrases, and books. In a transformational model, we look for the reader being able to do more things with what he knows, described by Clay as:

- mobilising several resources needed for a specific task, or

- integrating different kinds of information, or

- demonstrating alternative ways of using information (Clay, 2001, p. 48).

Clay is careful to stress that she is not suggesting we abandon one model for the other—both are useful—but that we need to be aware that the way we think about reading will influence what we attend to when assessing change. In the present climate there is considerable pressure to measure change in an additive way through gain scores, word counts, even book levels, perhaps because these things are easily measured and tested. But we must not lose track of transformations in children's learning as processing becomes more complex. Change does not mean changing from no processing to processing, as in: "OK Jamie, now that we've reached level 11 it's time to start teaching you how to put the darn thing together!" Rather, from the very first lessons we need to teach the child to use what little he has in place to engage in simple processing. The change needs to be from simple processing to more complex processing.

What are those changes leading towards? What is the goal? Clay's description of successful readers at about 8 years of age might help us articulate our goal. (See Clay, 2001, p. 85.) We need to remember that this is not a description of our Reading Recovery children, but of what Reading Recovery children should be heading towards at the end of their programme. They may not have reached that point yet, but their developing self extending systems need to be capable of getting them there. Consider Clay's descriptors, which are in Table 1, and think about what they mean to you. In the column on the right of Table 1, I have shared my personal responses. You may have additional, or different, ideas.

So these are some of the changes in the processing system that our children need to be working towards. How can we help to get them there? What are the opportunities for learning that we must offer during our Reading Recovery lessons?

Opportunities for Learning

Let's go back to Clay and *Change Over Time*. In chapter 3, Assembling Working Systems, Clay describes three ways in which the teacher contributes to changes in the way children are able to process texts. Again, Clay's suggestions are presented in table form (Table 2) with my reflections in the right column. What does this make you think about your own teaching?

If part of the teacher's job is altering the opportunities for learning, what opportunities should we be looking for? One way to think about this is through the gradient of difficulty in text reading. It is all too easy to think about a gradient of difficulty as longer stretches of text, more words, or longer words, and this takes us back to the additive model. What other demands are made as children move through the gradient of diffi-culty? When selecting books, we need to shift our thinking from, "This book is harder" or "I've used level 7, so now I'll use level 8," to "This book provides opportunities to learn some-thing new that this child needs right now." But, however useful the gradient of difficulty, it won't teach the child! So the next question is "How must the teaching change to enable children to meet these new challenges?"

Have you ever noticed that running records stay constant right through the child's programme? Every other component of the lesson changes quite dramatically. Book introduc-tions change as the child begins to gain control at a level of text, with less input from the teacher and more from the child. Letter work changes from learning to distinguish letters one from another, to fast responding, to "fading" and automatic respond-

Table 1. Clay Describes Successful Readers at About Eight Years, (2001, p. 85).

Any of the following in any order or combination

Clay suggests	It makes me think
Partially silent processing.	They should be beginning to read silently, and they should be able to sort out puzzles in their head, on the run, without slowing down the pace.
Accurate reading of larger chunks of information on harder texts.	They should be able to assimilate quite a lot of information and they should have moved beyond simple messages in text.
Knows how to add words to own repertoire.	They should have learned how to learn and know when to commit something to memory because they will need it another time.
Marked shifts in rate of acquiring new words in reading and writing.	They should be building the reading vocabulary (and writing vocabulary) they will need, and learning more from all their encounters with texts.
Problem solves new words, miscued familiar words, and strings of words with self-corrections which occur close to the point of challenge.	They should be solving words on the run, at point of error, maintaining meaning, structure, and the flow of the text.
Errors are close to the text words on syntactic, visual, phonological, and semantic information.	They should no longer be suggesting alternatives that don't look right, or don't make sense; errors occur in the fine detail.
Has reduced or refined most subsystems to eliminate unnecessary work.	For example, the child should not sound out words he knows; the easy stuff is automatic.
Can alter the weighting of attention to different knowledge sources, that is, can give more attention to sub-word information with hardly noticeable effects on pace.	They should be able to achieve quick gear changes without having to lose the momentum of the reading.
Has constructed complex structures of processing skills.	Their responses should be flexible, and they should be able to deal with many different situations and different kinds of problems.
Increased speed coming in part from efficiency in the processing system which does not have to work slowly through earlier processing links.	They are reading messages, attending to meaning not just words, and increased speed may mean small inconsequential errors that are not worth attending to!

ing. Writing changes from a very simple text of just a few words, to one or two complex sentences, and hearing and recording sounds in words begins in absence of letters, through learning the task, to sound boxes, and then letter boxes. But what changes in the running records that we do every day?

The books change and the text changes, so the length and the content of the running record changes, but that is more a reflection of book choices than of the record itself. What changes about the way we assess children's reading day in, day out, or is it just the same old, same old? Is the running record giving you fresh new insights into the child's processing, or are you doing them because you know you should? If we think about what we are looking for and what we are paying attention to when we take running records, perhaps it could help us begin to analyse more carefully changes in the way the child is working on texts. I have found the following five questions helped me to think about the analysis of change in running records.

1. How is the child working on problems? What kinds of words does he have to work on? If he is still working out high frequency words, what am I doing about teaching him how to commit these words to memory? Does the child have ways of tackling longer and more complex words, e.g., multi-syllable words? Does he have ways of tackling irregular words? Does he know when he has tried everything and needs to ask for help or he can can ignore the troublesome word?

2. How does the child use self-correction? Clay suggests the following description of changes in the way a

Table 2. The Teacher Contributes to Shifts in the Processing Which Children Are Able to Carry Out, by (Clay, 2001, p. 98):

Clay suggests	It makes me think
altering learning opportunities	Although we talk about following the child, it is the teacher's role to engineer learning situations which meet the changing needs of this child at this point in time.
prompting to influence the choices made by the constructive learner	Isn't this a useful way to think about the way we use prompts, and why we call them "prompts" and not instructions or questions? Clay returns several times in this chapter to the idea of teaching the child to be a decision maker.
altering the interactions between teacher and learner	Although we talk about following the child, sometimes it is keeping up with the child that is the problem! The teacher needs to know when the child has made the important change and what to do next. Or, if the child hasn't made the shift, the teacher should reflect on why the teaching has not worked.

reader self-corrects that indicates growing control.

"Self correction changes… from a return to the beginning of the line (or sentence), to a return along several words, to a return along the word being processed, to articulating only the first sound of a word, before it disappears altogether…..The response system no longer has to make a fresh start, but makes a targeted, momentary adjustment, and continues. The processing is very 'together'; re-running is not extended back along the line but has become restricted to solving parts of words. It looks like the local parsing that is common in speech as we choose our words carefully." (Clay, 2001, p.133)

As teachers analyse the self corrections recorded on the running records over a series of lessons, are these changes in self-correction evident?

3. Is the child's reading steadily becoming more fluent and well phrased? I have found that the rubric suggested by Fountas and Pinnell (1996) helped me to evaluate a reader's fluency. It includes the following:

1. Very little fluency; all word-by-word reading with some long pauses between words; almost no recognition of syntax or phrasing (expressive interpretation); very little evidence of awareness of punctuation; perhaps a couple of two-word phrases but generally disfluent; some word groupings awkward.

2. Mostly word-by-word reading but with some two-word phrasing and even a couple of three- or four-word phrases (expressive interpretation); evidence of syntactic awareness of syntax and punctuation, although not consis-

tently so; rereading for problem solving may be present.

3. A mixture of word-by-word reading and fluent, phrased reading (expressive interpretation); there is evidence of attention to punctuation and syntax; rereading for problem solving may be present.

4. Reads primarily in larger meaningful phrases; fluent, phrased reading with a few word-by-word slow downs for problem solving; expressive interpretation is evident at places throughout the reading; attention to punctuation and syntax; rereading for problem solving may be present but is generally fluent.
(Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 81).

Could this be a useful starting point for reflecting on change in the child's ability to read increasingly complex texts in a phrased and fluent way? What evidence do we need to capture

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in our running records to enable us to assess change in fluent reading?

4. Does the child cope with tricky language structures? Is the child making the transition from language which closely reflects his spoken language to more varied, less predictable and more complex structures, e.g., literary language? How can we be alert to linguistic challenges as they arise, so that the fact that the child successfully coped with something really tricky doesn't get lost in a sea of tricks? How can we be alert to the possibility that language was the cause of a problem and not be overlooked in the rush to focus on visual information?

5. Does the child engage in the story? Does he comment on the events and understand increasingly subtle meanings? In a U. K. government-sponsored review of literacy interventions (Brooks, 2003), The National Foundation for Educational Research made it clear that we cannot rely on accuracy as a guide to comprehension. How can we tell whether the child is thinking about the texts he is reading and ensure that he is reading himself a story, rather than de-coding a page of words?

Preparing for Change
How can we prepare our teaching to ensure that changes in learning take place? In preparing the Reading Recovery lesson, we need to think about what the child needs to be able to do next and what needs to change in the way he is reading and writing currently. Lesson records and running records should inform our decisions. It is also helpful to revisit predictions of progress and determine appropriate priorities. I suggest that we must write down the learning priorities, either in new predictions on the lesson record sheet, or on post-its so

that they are in front of us when we start the next lesson with the child. This is not about setting an agenda. There must be a balance that allows us to be open and responsive in order to follow the child. But it helps no one to follow the child down a blind alley. On the other hand, if we know what opportunities are going to have the biggest payoff for this child at this time, we are more likely to be alert to them when they crop up. It also helps us to make decisions about what to let go; doesn't Clay call that impulse to teach everything a teacher's hang-up?

If we have fewer, clearer teaching goals, we can be more precise in our teaching and more effective. If we are to achieve the rapid change necessary for Reading Recovery to be effective, maximising opportunities for learning does not mean just more opportunities. It means more of the right opportunities. Powerful opportunities for learning over time in a child's series of lessons arise from the teacher's careful reflection and ability to change the teaching as the child's needs change. The questions and reflections shared in this article offer considerations for Reading Recovery teachers to apply to their own thinking as they analyse students and support development of successful readers.

References

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