

Improving Communication Between Reading Recovery and Classroom Teachers

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As she walked into the classroom, Mrs. Reed thought, “I should let Mrs. Wells know how well Brian is doing.” So before taking Brian to Reading Recovery, she detoured to where Mrs. Wells was looking at a student’s work. Mrs. Reed smiled broadly and said, “Brian is doing so well in Reading Recovery. I am moving him up another level today. I think he will discontinue in about 2 more weeks.” She was not prepared for the answer Mrs. Smith gave in a voice the whole class could hear. “Well, Brian doesn’t do anything in here. He never finishes his work, is always off task and is still in the lowest group. It’s no wonder he works for you. You only have one student.”

This conversation was productive for neither teacher. The failure of the two teachers to communicate illustrates their widely different perceptions of this student. The classroom teacher and the Reading Recovery teacher together hold joint responsibility for providing poorer performers with effective opportunities to learn (Clay, 1991). The Reading Recovery teacher and the classroom teacher must communicate effectively in order to teach the student for whom they share responsibility. If two teachers perceive a student differently and fail to communicate, strong student progress will be extremely difficult to accomplish. This article describes the specific changes one Reading

Recovery site undertook in order to improve outcomes for children by improving communication between teachers. The goal of the project was to plan specifically and explicitly for increased communication between Reading Recovery and classroom teachers in order to work to positively affect the classroom teacher’s perceptions of the progress of individual Reading Recovery students.

To impact student learning, “the essence of successful teaching is to know where the frontier of learning is for any one pupil” (Clay, 1991, p. 65). Both the Reading Recovery teacher and the classroom teacher must accurately locate and teach within the student’s zone of proximal development if teaching moves are to be maximized. Tharp and Gallimore (1988) define Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance” (p. 30). If students are being taught in their zone of proximal development, they are able to utilize adult guidance to extend their independent learning. A problem arises if the instructional task is at too low or too high a level for that student.

In the first case, the task is too easy and there is nothing for the child to

learn. In the second case, the task is too difficult and the child is unable to learn even with adult guidance. The teacher must select a level of instruction that is within the child’s zone of proximal development in order to maximize student learning. When teachers perceive a student’s potential ability in a certain way it influences how they perceive the zone of proximal development for that student. This can lead teachers to select less challenging levels of instructional material. “The success of Reading Recovery for any child depends on the teacher’s ability to select and use examples” (Lyons, Pinnell, & DeFord, 1993, p. 38) and to instruct within the student’s zone of proximal development. Successful classroom instruction requires the same match of instruction to development. When two teachers are working with the same child they must communicate clearly and effectively in order to identify that child’s frontier of learning. Thus, successful communication will be needed to help build collegiality between the Reading Recovery teacher and the classroom teacher.

Lyons and Pinnell (2001) suggest that one of the main causes of unsuccessful teamwork is the lack of time dedicated to coming to common ground. For teachers to “reflect on and discuss their experiences [and] listen to the experiences of others”

requires extra time (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001, p. 7). However, these actions lead to the development of partnerships and clear goals. For teamwork to be successful both partners must come together to meet and share their knowledge. The insights both teachers bring from prior experiences are an important aspect of this shared communication. “Sharing occurs both formally, at our weekly communication meetings, and informally, during incidental conversations with colleagues” (Churchwood, Marshall, & Wood, 2000, p. 8). However, incidental communication, although important, cannot be the only means of communication.

Reading Recovery teachers can extend communication with classroom teachers by engaging in conversations which are learning-focused (Lipton & Wellman, 2001). Among the skills of learning-focused conversations suggested by Lipton & Wellman are attending fully, pausing, paraphrasing, inquiring, connecting, probing, and supporting. Lyons and Pinnell (2001) provide a template of specific language for coaching conversations including prompts or sentence starters designed to improve communication between colleagues. Clay (1998) has also noted

If we become observers of our own conversations—noting when they go well, when they get into difficulties, how we negotiate over our difficulties, and when and why communication fails—this may help us understand a little better how children learn. (p.15)

Finally, realizing that “conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says” (Cowan & Ewell,

1995, para. 44) are also important ideas in the context of teacher communication.

Putting Theory into Action

The Reading Recovery teacher leaders in the Washoe County School District identified communication between the Reading Recovery teacher and classroom teacher as a potential problem. More information was needed to clarify the extent of the problem and to identify workable solutions. Informal discussions with both trained Reading Recovery teachers and teachers in training indicated they were interested in improving communication with classroom teachers.

The Washoe County Reading Recovery site serves three school districts in California and Nevada. During this project, the Carson City School District and the Plumas Unified School District each had three active Reading Recovery schools, while the Washoe County School District had 11 active Reading Recovery schools. All of the Reading Recovery schools were invited to take part in this project.

The first step was to determine the perceptions of classroom teachers regarding communication from Reading Recovery teachers through interviews. Classroom teachers at six different Reading Recovery schools were interviewed to gather information about current communication practices. Participation was voluntary both for the schools and for the individual classroom teachers. Some of the principals requested group interviews while others helped to arrange individual interviews. Whether the interview was conducted as a group or individually, the participants were asked the same questions.

- How many Reading Recovery students do you have in your room at this time and would you complete a literacy rating scale for each student over a period of time?
- What types of information do you get from the Reading Recovery teacher about your students? How often do you receive information?
- What types of information do you give to the Reading Recovery teacher about your students? How often do you give information?
- At the beginning of Reading Recovery, do you receive information on the Observation Survey assessments completed by the Reading Recovery teacher? If yes, how is that helpful? If not, what would be helpful?
- Do you receive information during the weeks your student goes to the Reading Recovery teacher? If yes, what information is helpful? If not, what would be helpful?
- Do you receive information at the time your students are exiting Reading Recovery? If yes, what information is helpful? If not, what would be helpful?
- Will you share what type of reading assessment you do in the classroom for your Reading Recovery students?
- Do you have all the information that you need about the theories and teaching practices in Reading Recovery?
- Would you like to add anything to our discussion?

The interviews suggested most communication between Reading Recovery and the classroom was verbal, not planned, and one way (from the Reading Recovery teacher to classroom teacher). In the interviews most classroom teachers stated they wanted more information

about students in their classroom and wanted to be an instructional leader for their classroom, and they asked for more information about Reading Recovery theory that they could apply within their own teaching.

Using the information gained from these interviews, a Student Literacy

Rating Scale (Table 1) was developed. The ratings are written in neutral language that addresses five literacy skills—interaction with text, verbalization about text reading, text reading level, reading behavior, and fluency. This rating scale was designed to be completed for an

Table 1. Student Literacy Rating Scale

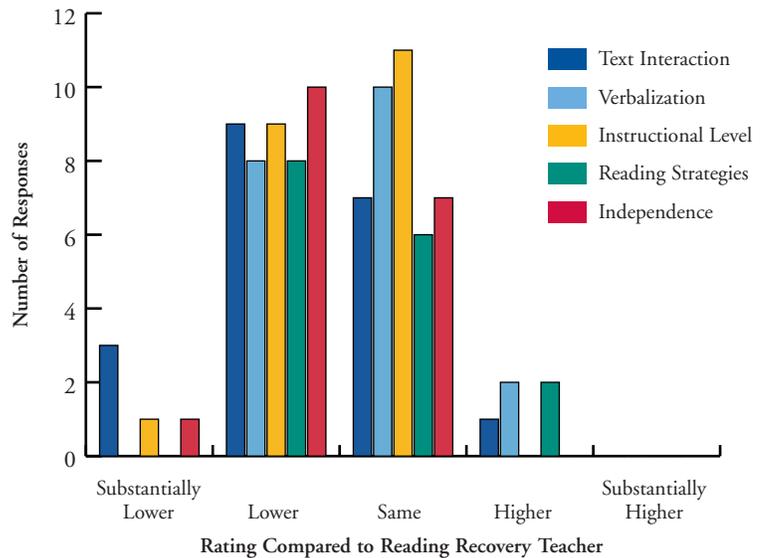
Literacy Skills	Basic 1	2	Developing 3	4	Fluent 5
Interaction with text	Avoids text at independent or instructional level even when asked by teacher	Reads text at independent or instructional level only when asked by teacher	Occasionally independently reads independent text and reads instructional texts at teacher request	Independently reads both independent and instructional texts; seeks out new books; reads instructional texts at teacher request	Seeks new texts to read at easy through instructional level; reads independently for pleasure in spare time
Verbalization about text reading	May say <i>I can't</i> and talk about reading skills in a negative way	Doesn't verbalize on ease or difficulty of reading	Talks about reading in a positive tone	Talks about own reading positively and helps others when asked	Offers help to other students with less skill in reading
Text reading level	Instructional level lowest in class and not improving	Instructional level improving but still in lowest group	Instructional level improving so the student is moved to higher reading group	Instructional level approaching average of the class; in middle reading group	Instructional level increases without instruction; highest reading group
Reading behavior	Reading is accomplished on patterned texts which are memorized; visual cues are neglected	Reading is accomplished with early behaviors (1:1 match, directionality, locating known and unknown words) and monitoring, or self-correcting and rereading strategies in place	Reading is accomplished with strategies of monitoring meaning structure and visual cues; searching, self-correcting and cross-checking sometimes independently and sometimes with teacher intervention	Reading is accomplished with all strategies in place; integrated use of all cueing systems on independent texts, but requires some teacher intervention on instructional texts	Reading is accomplished with all strategies firmly integrated with all cueing systems, where student can problem solve independently on instructional texts and teacher can teach higher level skills
Fluency	Reading is memorized without regard to print; may be fast or slow; may contain inventions	Reading is word by word as student matches 1:1; may be confused by multi-syllabic words and oral language matching print	Reading is becoming phrased as the student begins to use punctuation and meaning in combination with words	Reading becomes more phrased and fluent; self-correcting may begin to be a silent in-the-head process	Reading on independent texts may become silent and oral reading may surface again on more difficult instructional texts

individual student by the classroom teacher and the Reading Recovery teacher simultaneously and without discussion. The first completion of the literacy rating scale was conducted in spring 2003. This information was used as a baseline. The second rating was at the beginning of the school year in fall 2003, with the final rating completed in December 2003. The results reported here include only rating scales where both the Reading Recovery teacher and classroom teacher participated at the same time for the same student. A total of 70 rating scales were completed by both classroom and Reading Recovery teachers. A comparison of the responses of the classroom and Reading Recovery teachers who participated in this project (Figure 1) found the classroom teacher frequently rated the student *lower* (one level of difference on a scale of 1–5) on all five traits. The comparison also shows that a number of classroom teachers rated the Reading Recovery students *substantially lower* (two levels of difference on a scale of 1–5) than did the Reading Recovery teacher. This initial rating shows in many cases Reading Recovery teachers and classroom teachers had different perceptions about the literacy skills of the same student.

Improving Communication

The next step in the action research process was to develop two continuing contact agendas and behind-the-glass discussions for fall 2003. The two sessions were based on Vygotsky’s learning theory and the suggestions for communication discussed earlier. Additionally, the Student Literacy Rating Scale and a set of quotes (Figure 2) were selected to guide discussion.

Figure 1. Spring 2003 Comparison of Classroom Teachers’ Perceptions of Reading Recovery Students With the Perceptions of the Reading Recovery Teacher



The goals of these meetings were to provide the Reading Recovery teachers with time to develop their own communication style and to make a specific plan for communication with classroom teachers. Activities that took place during the continuing contact sessions included

- study and discussion of the characteristics of productive conversations,
- work in groups of three to identify ways to build better communication with a classroom teacher,

Figure 2. Quotes Utilized for Discussion During Continuing Contact Sessions

- “Consultation will be necessary—with the class teacher...” (Clay, 1993, p. 58)
- “As the next step in discontinuing prepare the child and his class teacher for this...” (Clay, 1993, p. 59)
- “Effective [communicators] make specific, direct, and concrete suggestions; they make those suggestions as a respectful and reassuring colleague.” (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001, p. 7)
- “During the initial goal-setting conversation, it is important to take some time to clarify the roles and responsibilities and options available...” (Lipton & Wellman, 2001, p. 36)
- “The first verbal element in the invitation to think, is the use of an approachable voice for framing our own language in a non-threatening manner.” (Lipton & Wellman, 2001, p. 44)
- “Purposeful use of paraphrase signals our full attention.” (Lipton & Wellman, 2001)

- discussion of key quotations, and role-play to identify where conversations were going wrong and to practice good conversation skills, and
- discussion of ways to communicate in writing, by using available Reading Recovery reports (Table 2) and by creating written communication formats.

The behind-the-glass discussions in continuing contact sessions focused on how to communicate the student's specific areas of growth to a classroom teacher. While observing the lessons the teachers addressed three topics—the student's strengths, the strengths of the classroom teacher, and how to share this student's strengths with the classroom teacher. Focusing on the strengths of both the teacher and the student helped the Reading Recovery teachers develop a clear, concise, and meaningful description of the student's reading behaviors for better meeting the needs of the classroom teacher.

The Reading Recovery teachers were then asked to use the information and new skills which they had discussed and practiced to plan for and implement a biweekly conversation with one classroom teacher. Using the format shown in Table 3 at the end of this article, the Reading Recovery teachers applied their newly constructed knowledge. The communication plan was designed to encourage conversations which would shift over time as the two teachers established communication and understanding. The form also provided a framework for the

Table 2. Written Communication Using Reading Recovery Reports

Observation Survey

Report on and provide a copy of any or all of the six tasks of the survey to the classroom teacher. Initial report might be done face-to-face so that assessments can be interpreted by the Reading Recovery teacher.

Observation Survey Summary

List the child's strengths from page 2 so the classroom teacher begins to perceive that even the lowest-achieving children have strengths.

Data Sheet/Data Card

Highlight what the child can do. Share initial skills on concepts about print, letter identification, ability to hear sounds and to write letters from spoken words, as well as reading and writing vocabulary. During Roaming Around the Known, add additional skills demonstrated by highlighting them in a different color—making early progress easily visible.

Running Records

These provide a platform for discussion about what the student can do in reading. Using records that have been thoroughly analyzed will provide a model for the classroom teacher. Comparison of running record results from Reading Recovery lessons and classroom assessment also stimulate discussion points.

Record of Book Level

Plot this in black and then ask the classroom teacher to plot the student's classroom reading level in a second color. This provides a vivid visual of the student's progress in both settings.

Weekly Record of Writing Vocabulary

Give the classroom teacher a copy of the student's writing vocabulary each week. Ask the teacher to add words the student has learned in the classroom in a second color and return the page. Discuss any discrepancies, such as a student who writes words in Reading Recovery but not in the classroom.

Predictions of Progress

Use this as a discussion starter with the classroom teacher, noting the student's strengths in reading and writing and what the teaching focus will be in the next 1 or 2 weeks. Ask the classroom teacher to look for evidence that the student is transferring his learning into the classroom.

Reading Recovery teachers to continue planned communication. The goal was the elimination of conversations like that at the beginning of this article, through careful

planning and implementation of learning-focused conversations. The Reading Recovery teachers were now aiming at a conversation like that on the following page.

	Interaction	Purpose
RR teacher:	Hi, Irene. I was hoping that you had a couple of minutes, so I could ask you about Brian's progress in reading. Would this be a good time?	<i>respectfully asking the classroom teacher to share her expertise, questioning</i>
Classroom teacher:	Yes.	
RR teacher:	Brian seems to be making more corrections when he is reading. He seems to be noticing when he makes a mistake. Have you noticed this in the classroom?	<i>tentative (not authoritative) informing, and inviting shared response through a question, probing</i>
Classroom teacher:	I don't do as many running records as you, but in guided reading, he seems a bit more fluent.	
RR teacher:	I know you have a difficult job with so many children to assess. If you would like, I could share some of the running records I do with Brian so you can have that information.	<i>attending fully, paraphrasing, respectful, supporting by offering to share resources</i>
Classroom teacher:	That would be great.	
RR teacher:	Back to how Brian is self-correcting his reading... the fluency you noticed might be related. Could I ask you to help me out and watch for Brian to correct his errors? If we are both noticing, maybe we can work together to get him to self-correct a bit more quickly.	<i>staying focused on plan, connecting, inviting participation and collegiality</i>
Classroom teacher:	I can do that with Brian, and maybe I should be looking at some other students like that too.	
RR teacher:	Thanks so much. I will copy and bring you Brian's running record on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, or is that too much?	<i>extending the conversation into the future</i>
Classroom teacher:	Just Monday and Friday would be good. I don't have time on Wednesday to look at them. Thanks.	
RR Teacher:	Thank you for your help. We'll talk again on Friday.	

Practical Application Yields Results

After 2 months of planned conversation, the Reading Recovery teachers

again asked the classroom teachers to complete the Student Literacy Rating Scale. The results (Figure 3) show a visible shift in the classroom teachers'

ratings as compared to the Reading Recovery teachers' ratings. After only 2 months, not a single classroom teacher rated the student substantially

lower than did the Reading Recovery teacher. Even the ratings which were in the lower group had been reduced in four of the five literacy skills.

The results of this project strongly suggest that perceptions of classroom teachers about Reading Recovery students can be changed when communication improves. When the two teachers share similar perspectives of the student's ability, instructional consistency for the Reading Recovery student is likely to increase. While an intervention like Reading Recovery can accelerate literacy learning, promoting classroom "instruction that is responsive to higher achievement...for the promise of the intervention to be realized" (Askew, et al., 2002, p. 61) is also necessary. Simply stated, both teachers must be able to find and teach to the student's "frontier of learning" (Clay, 1991,

p. 65) in order to teach effective Reading Recovery lessons.

The following reflections from the Reading Recovery teachers who participated in this project provide compelling testimony of the effectiveness of planned and thoughtful communication:

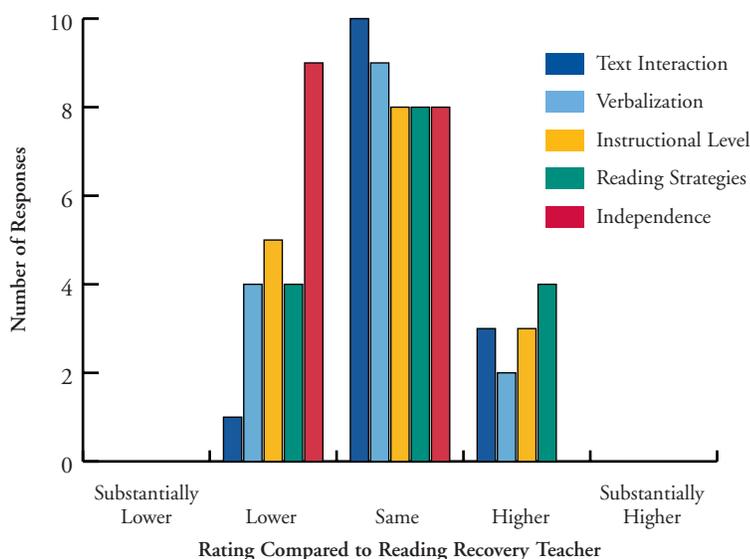
- Communicating with the classroom teacher provided an opportunity to provoke discussions...to empathize, to agree or disagree, and to share new ideas or strategies.
- I learned to *listen* to the teacher and value what she has to say about the child's classroom reading, rather than just feeding the teacher my information.
- This experience has opened communication. The teacher and I feel free to engage in conversation about

the student and the relationship we each have with him.

- I discovered that we were using very different criteria to evaluate the child's progress. Comparing notes helped get us more in sync.
- The partnership between the classroom teacher and myself has helped our student make accelerated progress.
- I will definitely continue the communication process with Mrs. E. I know she uses the feedback in deciding a reading level for Brian.
- I thought it was very positive to do the rating scales with my first-grade teacher. She was thrilled with the opportunity and even asked me to make copies of the rating scale for her to use with each student in her class.
- It is important to communicate with the classroom teacher in order to provide continuous positive growth possibilities for the teachers and the student.
- The most important aspect of communicating with the classroom teacher has been to be an advocate for the child.

This selection of teachers' comments demonstrates an increase in open discussion about the students as well as the ability to focus on the students' strengths and acceleration, and the development of meaningful relationships with the classroom teachers. Through the process of developing a clear plan for more effective communication, Reading Recovery teachers and classroom teachers working together can more effectively teach their students to read.

Figure 3. December 2003 Comparison of Classroom Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Recovery Students With the Perceptions of the Reading Recovery Teacher After 2 Months of Planned Communication





Reading Recovery teacher Kacey Edgington identifies the strengths of her Reading Recovery students and of the classroom teachers with whom she works. This information was used to plan specific learning-focused communication.

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Table 3. Communication Plan (adapted from Lyons & Pinnell, 2001, p. 145)

Plan for twice-weekly communication with the classroom teacher.

1. Pick a student.
2. Pick a teacher.
3. Answer the questions.
4. Select a time and place for communication.
5. Carry out your plan.

What are the teacher's strengths?

What are the student's strengths?

What do I want to convey to the teacher?

What specific language will convey my message in a way that validates the teacher's strengths?

Will my specific language with the teacher change over time? When and how?

About the Author



Lynn Jasmine trained in Reading Recovery 9 years ago in Reno, NV, and has been a teacher leader at the Washoe County Reading Recovery site since 1999. She is also certified in equine assisted therapy and consults at the Center of Hope of the Sierras for women with eating disorders. She can be reached at jazz11780@aol.com.