She Always Told Me That I Could Read — And So I Can!

Sharon Gilbert, Reading Recovery Teacher Leader, Marion City Schools, Marion, Ohio

A former classroom teacher, Sharon Gilbert trained in the first U.S. teacher leader class at The Ohio State University. She has served continuously as a teacher leader in Marion City Schools and north central Ohio since 1985–86.

One morning in September, I listened as a child stopped in the hallway outside my Reading Recovery teaching space. She was explaining to a new friend about this tiny room and what had happened to her there “way back” when she was in first grade. Courtney, now a confident, freckle-faced “average” third grader, had been one of my Reading Recovery students. As one of the lowest-achieving first graders in the school, Courtney had come to Reading Recovery with failing grades and a giant chip on her shoulder. She had been mad at the world that had created books that were too hard, directions that were too difficult to read, and frequent tests that were impossible to pass. Day by day, one lesson at a time, Reading Recovery changed all that.

Now, unseen by Courtney, I listened as she described Reading Recovery to her classmate: “She always told me that I could read — and so I can!”

Oh, if it had only been that simple! Courtney knew only that her tomorrow rows had all been changed because she had become a successful reader. She knew nothing of the efforts of so many who had worked collaboratively with her teacher and her school to change her future.

Courtney could not have known that many years earlier, a New Zealand psychologist named Dr. Marie Clay had studied the literacy behaviors of young children to determine how best to prevent reading difficulties. She could not have known that two professors from The Ohio State University had traveled to New Zealand and returned to Columbus to prepare to implement Dr. Clay’s research-proven intervention, Reading Recovery. Courtney had no awareness that in unprecedented collaboration, the Ohio Legislature, The Ohio Department of Education, and The Ohio State University prepared to train and support Reading Recovery teacher leaders to train Reading Recovery teachers in school districts throughout Ohio. She could not have known

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that her school district’s superintendent, Dr. Stephen Stuart, embraced Reading Recovery as a way to reduce the numbers of children who were having extreme difficulty learning to read. She could not have known of the university training and ongoing professional development that had guided the learning of her Reading Recovery teacher for 25 years. She didn’t know about the many Reading Recovery professionals and teacher leader colleagues from Ohio and other states who had stretched her teacher to learn more about teaching and learning.

Courtney’s simple appraisal of what had happened in that tiny Reading Recovery room did not give credit to the many high-quality professional development experiences at The Ohio State University, Teacher Leader Institute, and the National Reading Recovery Conference that had supported my learning. She did not know of the many wonderful Reading Recovery teachers whose behind-the-glass lessons I had observed, adding to my knowledge of how children learn. She did not know of the many Reading Recovery students I had taught over the years, and how my observations in those teaching sessions had enriched my understandings of accelerated progress. She did not know that her classroom teacher was a former Reading Recovery teacher who used the knowledge garnered in Reading Recovery training to support Courtney in the classroom. And, Courtney could never have known about the contributions of the International Data Evaluation Center or the Reading Recovery Council of North America or the Ohio Reading Recovery Council.

And so, while literacy success, according to Courtney, seemed to come quite magically, I am humbled by the knowledge of the dedication and contribution of so many whose tireless efforts made her progress possible. In a world that at times has forgotten what its children need, the Reading Recovery community is a collaborative commitment to their future. Congratulations to each of us — and thank you from a grateful teacher leader and a joyful third grader!