

Widening the Lens:

How Seeing and Understanding Develop Together

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All children's names are pseudonyms.

Introduction

Observation plays a critical part of any educational intervention, and skilled Reading Recovery teachers are probably some of the very best observers of children during the period of literacy acquisition. Although many classroom teachers become very good at observing and understanding young learners, Reading Recovery teachers enjoy unparalleled opportunities that other teachers lack. They work with children one-to-one in daily intense 30-minute sessions for a period that may last as long as 20 weeks. They complete a yearlong professional development course through which they learn to observe children's strengths and partial or emerging knowledge and potentials for learning. Reading Recovery teachers observe each child continuously during learning activities, and they use daily structured observation by taking a running record of text reading which allows them an objective judgment of the child's progress.

For most people, learning to become a skillful Reading Recovery teacher requires more than 1 year. One factor that determines the effectiveness of a Reading Recovery teacher is her ability to observe children before, during, and beyond their teaching interactions. The opportunity to observe children in daily individual lessons is not enough to make a teacher a skilled observer; continuing study and thinking about theory,

about literacy development, and about teaching procedures are also needed. Observation is never perfect. Although the skillful teacher is very good in both noticing behaviors and performance, she also realizes that her observations may be incomplete or incorrect and she is willing to look further, rethink, and revise her conclusions (O'Leary, 2009).

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For this article I chose to use the metaphor of a lens as a way to think about observation. A lens is a tool for examining visually, but it is never perfect. The size of the lens limits the scope of observation; the lens can capture images for a moment or for a more extended time and for a restricted range; and the quality of the lens might allow a clear picture or a blurred or somewhat distorted picture. The human mind and eyes

are also limited in ability to observe the world. The range of a person's sight is limited by directionality, by human physiology and the physics of sight and light (which we will not explore here), and by limits of time and physical location and context. A person's vision is also affected by the focus, expectations, and distortions controlled by the concepts and ideas in the observer's mind.

Teaching Through a Narrow Lens

Reading Recovery teachers start their training with a rather limited lens and gradually expand their ability to observe and understand learners. When I entered training to become a Reading Recovery teacher/trainer, I had considerable graduate study (including a masters and a Ph.D.) and more than 30 years of experience in education, including 7 years working as a reading specialist. I was reasonably certain that I was already an excellent observer of young literacy learners. During the training year I read and studied Clay's writing and many other relevant sources, and I accepted Clay's ideas and felt they were consistent with my ideas and beliefs. But when I started teaching, it was clear that I had a long way to go in order to learn and use Clay's ideas and procedures in my sessions with children in Reading Recovery lessons. What I didn't realize at the start was that I was observing—and as a result making my teaching decisions—through a narrow lens.

The children with whom I worked during my training year in Reading Recovery taught me a great deal; certainly not enough, but they did start the process of widening my lens as a teacher and as an observer. I still remember how surprised I was 22 years ago when Daniel was reading *The Merry-Go-Round*. In the first part of that book the animals get on the merry-go-round one by one, and in the second part they get off one-by-one after the crocodile gets on. I was watching closely as Daniel was reading fluently and rapidly, and thinking about how he was using concepts of print and noticing miscues on some names of animals, when he came to the page where "...the tiger got off." Suddenly he said, "Ain't no tiger scared of no crocodile!" And I thought, "Oh my word, is that what that story is all about!?" I missed the whole point of this Level 4 book and this 'struggling reader' not only understood what it was about, but he was criticizing the story. I was so focused on how the kid was decoding the print into oral language that I was not paying much attention to meaning.

Another example that my focus was still narrow occurred 2 years later when I taught behind-the-glass for my teacher leaders. They noticed that I was sometimes forming the words with my mouth as the child was reading. I was absorbed with my personal mental reading process. I still observed the child's performance, but I was paying less attention to how the child was working on the task. This realization helped me to widen my lens to include more attention on the child's strategic activity rather than judging his reading against the text. I would have sworn that I was not overly concerned about accuracy,

but by allowing my highly habituated personal reading process to run as usual, I was less open to thoughts about how the child was operating as a reader and about how I might support his development.

An observers' lens might be considered narrow or limited if it is consistently trained on certain aspects of performance and misses other behaviors that could explain the difficulties a child might be having. A well-known experiment illustrates the psychological effects of focused attention. Kahneman (2011) summarizes the experience designed by Chabris and Simons (2010).

They constructed a short film of two teams passing basketballs, one team wearing white shirts, the other wearing black. The viewers of the film are instructed to count the number of passes made by the white (shirted) team, ignoring the black (shirted) players. This task is difficult and completely absorbing. Half through the video, a woman wearing a gorilla suit appears, crosses the court, thumps her chest, and moves on. The gorilla is in view for 9 seconds. Many thousands of people have seen the video, and about half of them do not notice anything unusual. It is the counting task...that causes the blindness. No one who watches without that task would miss the gorilla. ...Indeed the viewers who fail to see the gorilla are initially sure that it was not there. ...The gorilla study illustrates two important facts about our minds: we can be blind to the obvious, and we are also blind to our blindness. (Kahneman, pp. 23–24)

Note: The reader can observe this experimental situation by searching "Invisible Gorilla" on YouTube.

An intense focus is useful when pursuing particular objectives; however, a tendency to emphasize accuracy and overbalance her teaching toward visual information might tend to lead a teacher to attack every situation in the same way. Clay cautions teachers that "...when the teacher becomes too involved in teaching for detail the principle of acceleration can be seriously threatened" (Clay, 2005a, p. 25).

Widening the Lens to Include Emphasis on Meaning

My narrow focus was made apparent to me in my training year after a colleague observed one of my lessons. She had coded my prompts and teaching interventions, and the Vs (visual information) far outnumbered the M (meaning) or S (structure) totals. I worked to expand my range as an observer/teacher during my Reading Recovery training year and I continued to work to improve throughout my work as a trainer of teacher leaders and teachers, but I can identify three influences that were particularly helpful in widening my lens to include an emphasis on meaning. During my field year in North Carolina my class observed an Australian tutor (teacher leader) teaching a lesson behind-the-glass. The pace of the lesson and the enjoyment shared by the teacher and the child during the lesson differed from many of the lessons I was observing of the people I was teaching and from my own lessons as well. Her teaching and its implications were topics of discussion several times in our classes that year.

A second widening influence came from teaching a young boy named Samuel until he moved away from the school. He had very low Observation Survey scores and he was coping with learning struggles through problematic behavior. But when he was introduced to books within his range, he really wanted to read them—not just to say the words and sentences—but to follow the story and see how it came out. His drive, his forward momentum, his impetuosity as it were, compared to other students I had observed were

reading, epitomized by this terse quote “I choose to define reading as a message-getting, problem-solving activity,” (Clay, 2005a, p. 3), started me thinking about reading in comparison to a train. Using the metaphor of a streamlined train, meaning is the engine and pulls forward all the cars of the train. Meaning generates the purpose and the movement forward. Meaning also leads and motivates monitoring and problem solving. Meaning affects every aspect of reading, including identification of letters and words on the page.

of meaning, structure, and visual information. If the child keeps meaning in mind (or more easily accessible) problem solving becomes easier. Expectations of meaning and structure help the child not only to generate responses (try out appropriate words) but they also help the child to verify his attempts (to cross-check responses). Even though anticipation may not result in a specific word for the text, it narrows down the choices and makes it easier to accept or reject the word the child first brought to mind. People who insist on discouraging beginning readers to use meaning to identify words might misunderstand the role that meaning plays. Reading Recovery does not avoid learning phonics. Using meaning and structural expectations and cross-checking possible responses against visual and other information powers the child’s progress in learning about the visual code and even contributes to his overall literacy development. The child’s experiences in reading are also supplemented by brief but focused word learning and word manipulation activities and in daily writing activity.

Paying attention to meaning in Reading Recovery lessons implies much more than good book introductions and meaning prompts. The teacher needs to assure that each child

- develops interest and curiosity in stories,
- maintains commitment and purpose in reading and writing activities,
- thinks about meaning during and after reading stories, and
- builds a sense of connection across books and across activities.

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very instructive to me, and I learned to value his energy, his persistence, and his adherence to the meaning of the text. He certainly generated miscues and other error behavior and he definitely had much to learn as a reader and a writer, but I noticed several effects of his commitment to meaning: He seldom asked me to tell him unfamiliar words; he almost always attempted such words and his responses were usually reasonable; if I chose teaching points judiciously, he was easy to teach; he made rapid progress. And I was gratified to see that lessons with him could be finished in under 35 minutes!

A third influence that helped widen my understanding was reading and rereading articles and texts written by Marie Clay. Her definition of

By contrast, a traditional definition of reading engenders a metaphor of an old-fashioned train powered by decoding and sounding sequences of letters. The power of this train weakly supports purposes for reading, and comprehension may be found at the end of the train — in the caboose.

Experiences such as those I have described and others served to widen my lens as an observer and teacher to give higher attention and priority to meaning. It did not reduce my belief in the importance of visual information in the reading process, but it helped to situate my attention—and thus the attention of the child—within the frame of meaning and therefore enhanced the child’s problem-solving power through a flexible and resourceful combination

Some children enter Reading Recovery with these attitudes, but many more do not. Some (like Samuel) enter with energy and effervescence but have never before hitched this energy to literacy activities or communication. Some enter with a paucity of experience and interest in schooling and literacy. And some enter Reading Recovery very withdrawn and apathetic about school experiences. It is very important for the Reading Recovery teacher to draw out all children, especially those who are withdrawn, to these experiences with and through literacy.

It is difficult to engender changes in children's attitude and interest in a 30-minute session of intense activity; however, a Reading Recovery teacher can pay attention to meaning through several ways without changing the agenda of the sessions or adding to the activities of the lesson. Roaming Around the Known is of course a prime opportunity to begin building the commitment to literacy activities, to build the child's confidence in what he knows, to establish the secure context in which he can try new things, and to establish the trusting relationship with the teacher. Thoughtful listening and brief conversation are often possible when the child enters or as he is leaving lessons. Sharing interest and enjoyment while the child rereads familiar books can be done with little talk. Summary comments after the reading of familiar books, after the running record, and after the new book keep attention on the meanings of books. Conversations to initiate writing and during writing experiences help keep the child focused on purposes and messages of writing.

The new book should be chosen by thoughtful consideration of meaning and interest along with other factors (Clay, 2005b), and anticipation about today's new book can be sparked by subtle hints or clues about the content or topic (e.g., like leaving today's book partially in view).

The orientation to the new book is critical in assuring that the child reads the book with interest and a sense of the story, as well as introducing unfamiliar concepts or language structures and other preparation for successful problem solving during reading. The child's reading should be interrupted only to keep his processing going. But the teacher may communicate interest and appreciation through facial expression and body posture as the child reads. With some children and at certain times it may be useful to make brief, judicious comments and prompts during the reading of the book to make sure that the child is keeping meaning in mind or to foster anticipation of meaning. For example, if the child does not seem to think ahead well, the teacher may make short comments such as, "Let's see who he meets next," "Do you think they'll catch Ratty-Tatty?" or "Where could they find some honey?"

Throughout all these suggestions, the key is not more teacher talk but empathetic listening, sincere enthusiasm, and teacher prompts or comments keyed to the child's (presumed) thinking. This kind of communication contrasts with traditional modes of interaction that are often dominated by directions and questions (Johnston, 2012). A shift to a different style of communication is

challenging but worthwhile. We also have to listen to children and respect their messages. In the following example, I think Jacob and I both showed consideration of each other's suggestions.

Jacob was shy and had speech immaturities and language delay, but he had a very independent mind. I respected his language and speech although sometimes we had to negotiate a word he was trying to say. One day I tried for the first time to suggest a change of his syntax. He had started writing his sentence and this exchange ensued:

Jacob (while writing):

We went *at* Toys'R'Us.

Me (gently):

Jacob, could you say 'We went *to* Toys'R'Us?'

Jacob: No. We went *at* Toys'R'Us.

Me: Sometimes grown-ups will say, 'We went *to* Toys'R'Us.'

Jacob: Look! Dis is my book and dis is my stowy and I want to write 'We went *at* Toys'R'Us.'

But as I was writing the cut-up sentence he said softly, You know, I could say 'We went *to* Toys'R'Us.'

A Wider Focus, or a Shift of Focus?

Giving priority to meaning does not mean abandoning concerns about learning to solve the visual code of language. It does not mean an abrupt shift from one lens to another. The Reading Recovery teacher must focus

on a number of different things within each Reading Recovery lesson, and sometimes in combination. As the child attends at various times on different tasks—such as creating a message, controlling letter formation, manipulating words and word parts, hearing sounds in words, rereading books, reading the new book, etc.—the teacher will need to observe intently each of those processes. Using the metaphor of a lens suggests that the range of the teacher’s view at any moment will always be limited and will always need to be refocused for different reasons and times within a lesson.

The caution of a narrow focus is a warning about an overconcern with one kind of information—as for example an imbalance to visual prompts—rather than a broader set of concerns and the ability to be flexible. An observer’s focus needs to be very narrow and intense at some times, at other times flexible, and always subject to refocus and redirection. What controls this is the mind of the teacher — her priorities, her understanding of theory, her knowledge of this child, her sense of what seems to be most important for this child at this time. The observation window (the lens) will always be somewhat limited. But the teacher’s brain acts as a cameraperson or film director, shifting and changing focus from moment to moment throughout the lesson. The Reading Recovery teacher gradually develops an understanding that includes knowledge and criteria that help her guide her observations and evaluations and decisions. This understanding is what makes her an award-winning director and an excellent cameraperson.



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A Focus on Problem Solving

In addition to a high priority on meaning in observing and guiding a child’s development, the Reading Recovery teacher needs to give great importance to problem solving through strategic activity. Clay tells us that “Reading Recovery teachers have to change passive poor readers into readers who search actively for information in print” (Clay, 2005b, p. 102), and she incorporates strategic activity in her definition of reading as a meaning-getting, problem-solving activity (Clay, 2001; 2005a).

In the following discussion, three different camera angles for observing problem solving will be presented. First, I discuss an important focus

of observation during lessons — children’s use of strategic activity. Second, I offer comments about the importance of observation of children’s growth over time. Third, I remind readers to engage in observation and reflection of oneself as a teacher so that you can adjust and improve your support for each child’s progress.

Strategic activity: the engine for acceleration

Understanding what the child knows is the basis for a teacher’s instructional decisions supporting the child to become an active learner who begins to solve problems as a reader and a writer. Information from the Observation Survey (Clay, 2002) is the starting point for the teacher, but she must continue to observe and record

as the child changes over time. She needs to learn what the child knows—and what he knows partially—about print and its relation to oral language and also how the child applies that knowledge during both reading and writing. She also needs to understand the child's patterns of language or dialect, and she needs to find out as much as she can about his interests and concerns.

Strategic activity, or fast brainwork, (Clay, 2005b) begins to appear differently for different children. For many children it starts with their first notice of known elements of print and the mismatch between what he sees and what he says (i.e., his oral rendition of the story). The child needs to develop the habit of 'noticing' these mismatches and trying to adjust his reading to fix these. This is *monitoring* (Schwartz, 1997), a critical step in strategic activity throughout the literacy processing. (Even college professors have to monitor their reading and writing activities.) A second critical strategic activity is *searching* for information either from the print or from the reader's mind to try out a response. A third critical strategic activity involves *checking* or *cross-checking* to confirm or reject that the word you tried sounds right and looks right (i.e., fits the letters, the meaning, and the language of the story).

The Reading Recovery teacher needs to observe the child's use of strategic activity in reading familiar books, in reading independently (on the running record), in writing, in re-assembling the cut-up story, and in reading the new book. After she has coded the errors and self-corrections on the running record (by coding M, S, and V), she also needs to notice

whether the child is using (or not using) meaning, structure, and/or visual information for strategic activity. For example, a child might be monitoring his use of initial letters but ignoring errors on final letters of words; or the child is monitoring on the basis of visual information, but waiting to get the teacher to tell him the word (not using that information to search). During the child's assembly of the cut-up sentence and during the new book, the teacher needs to observe her prompts and teaching decisions to judge her support for his processing and problem solving.

Acceleration is not something that the teacher or the curriculum does to the child; it is an increase in the child's learning because of changes within himself.

As children progress in their knowledge about print and become more proficient in solving words in reading and in writing, children begin to make accelerated progress. Clay tells us that acceleration does not appear immediately in a series of lessons (2005a, p. 22–24). Acceleration is not something that the teacher or the curriculum does to the child; it is an increase in the child's learning because of changes within himself. The possibility of acceleration is greatly enhanced by the teacher's thoughtful observation, understanding, and support of strategic activity allowing her to choose the "clearest, easiest, more memorable examples" (Clay, 2005a, p. 22).

Observing the child's learning over time

The Reading Recovery teacher learns to refocus and redirect her observation over time through careful recording and reviewing of records and forms in order to plan and adjust her teaching (Gibson, 2010). Keeping careful records of the child's performance and of my teaching was not the preferred aspect of my Reading Recovery teaching year. I dutifully completed all assignments and perhaps I used these records to analyze children's growth. I even audiotaped some lessons, but I got little value from these tapes because I didn't understand how to judge my own teaching. During the year following my training I began to see more value in this recordkeeping. I reviewed a series of running records and lesson records to understand Katie's progress and I noticed very few self-corrections. By encouraging self-correction, Katie's behavior began to change. Still concerned, I looked more closely at my records and discovered that Katie was not solving any new words on her own. She relied on my help to learn new words. If the word was not presented during book introduction, she would get a 'told' during the first reading of the book and sometimes another 'told' during the running record. With adjustments in my instruction, she began to attempt and solve new words and discontinued her lessons. My periodic examination of records was a factor in shifting my teaching and probably a factor in her accelerated progress.

Among the very useful forms and procedures for recording children's progress through a series of Reading Recovery lessons, the Daily Lesson Record Sheet presents perhaps the

most daunting challenge, but also the most value to support your teaching and therefore for the child. One challenge is to develop an effective way to record informative notes about your teaching decisions and also notes about the child's performance during the different parts of the lesson. A second challenge is to review this information some time after the lesson to inform the next day's planning. Another challenge is to review all charts, plans, and records for each child periodically to assess his performance over time and to think about particular difficulties that need to be addressed. This kind of extended observation over time is invaluable in addressing the needs of children who have had great difficulties beginning to learn to read and write.

Observation of learners can also be extended to other contexts and times such as the classroom, the home, and the playground. Behaviors noted in these contexts may be useful in understanding and even changing behaviors within the Reading Recovery lesson. I recall listening to Mary Fried tell about one little girl who was shy and timid in her Reading Recovery sessions and in her classroom; so Mary observed her on the playground and found that she was just as loud and vocally active as any other child. Mary didn't let her get away with this shy persona after that.

Reading Recovery teachers should capitalize on the limited time and opportunity to observe children in other contexts and they should seek and value occasional talks with the classroom teacher about the child's performance in the classroom and other settings. Remember that the lens through which the Reading Recovery teacher observes this

child is constricted by the time and context of those 30 minutes. It is interesting to think about the view that the child might have about you, too. One day Mac and I were asked to find another room to teach in, so we set up in a room that was used for volunteers. Mac grabbed a big ID button and said, "Here, put this on. Pretend you're a teacher."

Learning to observe and guide children's literacy development is difficult; that's why becoming an effective Reading Recovery teacher is so hard. Learning to observe *oneself* is even more difficult.

But my real 'come-uppance' came from Antonio who told me I had better find another way to get back to the college after our lesson because, "I'm too old to drive."

Observing your scaffolding and prompts

Learning to observe and guide children's literacy development is difficult; that's why becoming an effective Reading Recovery teacher is so hard. Learning to observe *oneself* is even more difficult. Marie Clay's genius included her awareness of this difficulty, and she devised support for teacher continuous development. Teachers are supported by teacher leaders who trained them within a class context, in ongoing professional development sessions every year, and through school visits, and they are encouraged to attend a regional

or national conference annually. Teachers are also supported by their fellow Reading Recovery teachers within those group situations and also by visits in their school (if they are fortunate to have another teacher at the school). But it is still necessary—critically important—for each teacher to observe and analyze herself as a teacher. Here are four aspects that might need attention:

1. teacher talk
2. body posture and nonverbal communication
3. prompts and timing
4. comments to acknowledge confirmation

Teachers are often unjustly accused of being too wordy; after all, classroom organization and action is often managed through teachers' vocalizations. Throughout *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals*, Marie Clay includes several comments about keeping teacher talk to a minimum. This text also includes an appendix listing clear, succinct examples of prompts that teachers can use. Clay advises teachers to be brief and to the point: "Too much teacher talk interferes with solving a problem," and "Be clear" (Clay, 2005b, pp. 202–206). If you are unsure about your verbal teaching habits, review Clay's recommendations and also enlist help from your teacher leader or from a colleague, or videotape some lessons and view them alone or with another person. Another source on the topic of teacher talk are texts by Peter Johnston (2004, 2012).

Body posture or other nonverbal behaviors can also communicate unintended messages to young learners (Lose, 2008). For example, you might be nodding to indicate that

the child is right when actually you want him to make an independent decision. In the previous section, I mention “empathetic listening” and nonverbal signals to support meaning. The caution about such things is to do it to support the child’s maintenance of meaning and purpose, not to impose your personality into the mix.

What we see can modify what we think, and what we think can change what we observe.

Probably several things made it difficult for me to learn to use Clay’s prompts. I wrestled with brevity and clarity—the things I discussed above—but I also had to learn how to observe what the child was doing or needing to do so I could find appropriate words for the prompt. I would listen to Mary Fried teach and those wonderful prompts would just roll out of her mouth. Then I tried it and they would get stuck in my brain. I still remember teaching Angel during my training year. My prompts or teaching points were evidently not very helpful. She would shrug impatiently to let me know, “There he goes again!”

Another thing that reduces the teacher’s effectiveness is a tendency to explain things or tell things before students are ready to accept them. This is problem of teaching at any level, but it is especially problematic with young struggling readers. I found a note I wrote on a lesson record from 22 years ago. Daniel had started his writing with an invitation to his mother, “Come on ...” and

I had prompted him to start with a capital letter *C*. He did that, and then he made the *O* big also, so evidently I started to explain about capital letters. He erased everything and he said, “I’m makin’ ‘em all small ‘cause you’re bossin’ me too much.” Children are great teachers!

Observing the timing and level of your prompts is another dimension of improvement as a Reading Recovery teacher. If the teacher waits too long, the child loses meaning and struggles. If she gives support too quickly or at the same level, the child will not make progress. There is no rubric to guide teachers in these decisions, so self observation and reflection are particularly important. Children will tell you by their actions and sometimes by their words whether your timing is helpful or not helpful. I remember Owen’s reaction when he was reading *Big and Little*. He appealed (with a look at me) but he turned back to keep trying. I waited another 4 seconds, and then I told him the word (*bulldozer*). Disgustedly, he shut the book and crossed his arms and said, “Now I’ve got to wait until I forget what you said!”

Determining the level of support that is appropriate for each child at particular times is a challenging issue that requires more exploration than possible in this article. However, I suggest that teachers observe and study their interactions with children after they have made a substitution or solved a word correctly. Once again, there are no rules for guidance, but please reflect about these interchanges in terms of possibilities such as these:

- Is the child making independent decisions about whether

his response fits, or is he taking his cues from you through direct or indirect clues?

- Is the child quite convinced that his solution is right so that you don’t need to make any comment, or are you making an unnecessary comment?
- Are you withholding support or confirmation such that the child begins to struggle?

These kinds of judgments need to be done continually, even though they may be difficult. Your observations of yourself and of the child’s behavior will help you decide. Many teachers rely on valuable collaboration with colleagues and on feedback and advice from their teacher leader, but in the final assessment, it is your judgments and decisions that matter.

Concluding Remarks

The use of a lens as a metaphor to explore the role of observation of teaching and learning may be productive, but it also has limitations. The range and scope and clarity of a lens are variable, and its duration to ‘see’ can be adjusted from nanoseconds to hour-long periods of operation, but the lens is a mechanical tool. Its adjustments are made by the designer or the cameraperson — by persons. A lens manipulated by a cameraperson may perhaps be an apt metaphor to signify the role of the teacher’s mind as it widens or narrows observation, intensity, or attention at different certain times for various purposes.

There is one way, however, in which a lens is not adequate to capture the role of observation in teaching. Images go through an inanimate lens in a one-way direction. The relationship between observation

and teaching has the possibility of being reciprocal. What we see can modify what we think, and what we think can change what we observe. A prime example is the work of Marie Clay. She began with a set of questions and assumptions and planned a long, intense period of observation of young children learning to read and write. Thus began a period of theory development, which in turn

sparked the development of tools and procedures for systematic observation of literacy learning. Further observations revised her theory and led to more observation and additional observation tools, and further elaboration of theory, and so forth.

The Reading Recovery teacher uses observation in relation to her teaching in rather the same way that a researcher does, but on a more lim-

ited scale. The challenge and the opportunity to learn through observation and to grow in her ability to observe are continuous as long as she is able to teach. She needs continuously to consider some overall criteria to guide her: Is the child becoming an active learner? Is he concerned with meaning? Is he growing in terms of knowledge and use of print conventions and in solving words? Is he working faster at noticing things in print and calling up his knowledge? Is he beginning to orchestrate his meaning, print knowledge, language, and anticipations of stories? Is he reading more-difficult texts? Is he writing longer and more-complex messages?

All these evaluation questions involve a one-way direction of observation. They involve assessing the child against the criteria that you have developed through your study and training. There is nothing wrong with that. But consider also how teaching and observation may have changed your views on children as learners. The Reading Recovery experience has certainly changed my perspectives. Many years ago I probably thought of learning to read as a skill that you acquired much in the way that you learn to play the piano or learn how to play Canasta. Most parents and many teachers still think of learning to read as a prerequisite skill for 'real' learning — that learning to read should consist of learning to sound out words and memorize 'sight' words and serious comprehension, and the rest of the curriculum are postponed until later.

I now think that literacy is much more than interpreting the printed word, and the roots of literacy begin before entrance into school. Children differ widely in opportunities



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to develop as thinkers and communicators early in their lives, but all children start that process to some degree. Entrance into school should promote children's opportunity as thinkers through a variety of experiences to explore, to reason, to wonder, and to learn. Learning to read and write magnifies by many times the opportunities to learn and participate in society. The time for learning to read and write can introduce children to those possibilities to learn right from the start, rather than postpone these enriching experiences.

As a Reading Recovery teacher I was surprised to observe a 6-year-old "struggling reader" changing from one dialect to another (code-switching) and from confidential to direct speech. I saw him substitute and play with word parts while in Roaming, but I waited until far along in his lesson series before introducing these kinds of manipulations. I saw him enthralled with the characters of books ("Oh, I wish I could be the lion or the boy," or his writing after *The Three Little Pigs*, "I like the part when Noel and I met the big bad wolf.") I saw evidence of critical thinking about what he read and what he thought about books. This child had never received a written communication and didn't know how to interpret a message even if it was a simple sentence written with words that he was now able to read and write independently. Yet he used his writing lesson one day to write an invitation to his mother to come to a school function ("Come on..." he wrote, the day that I was bossin' him too much!)

A Reading Recovery teacher is perhaps limited in her ability to influence the overall literacy and language capabilities of the Reading Recovery children she teaches. However, if the teacher perceives the child as a novice within a world in which literacy plays an intrinsic role, perhaps she may think more about the purpose of writing experiences and perhaps be observant of subtleties of the child's language and his reactions to books and stories and people and events. And as a part of the education establishment, she may influence others educators to think in a similar way.

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About the Author



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