

Bringing Our “A” Game: Acceleration and Getting to Higher Levels of Text

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The teacher in early intervention must help her students to gain the same competencies as the successful children in the school and to achieve at the same level, so she needs to know how the successful children in her school work on the literacy tasks of their classrooms. Sensitive observation of the children making slow progress must take into account what is being learned by the children making satisfactory progress in classrooms. (Clay, 2005a, p. 29)

Since the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, numerous districts and Reading Recovery® professionals have been asking about increased expectations for Grade 1 students and about whether Reading Recovery should push for increased mid-year and year-end exit text levels. Reluctant to fall into conversations about an inflexible or arbitrary level, my fall-back answer always went something like this: Because we have no such thing as an “American educational system” where one level would constitute competency for all settings and because children come and go at different times of the year, our goal in Reading Recovery cannot be about a universal exit level for everyone. Instead, districts should look at local data, alongside their teacher leader, to set district guidelines to ensure that students demonstrate effective, strategic processing in reading and writing and not just focus on setting a particular exit level.

I am not saying my answer was especially solid, but it generally worked in helping to guide the answering of these questions back to a more-local context. But the recent volume of these inquiries about exit level pushed me to reexamine the concept of exit levels and acceleration within my own district and site settings. Are classroom expectations on the rise? If so, how should Reading Recovery respond? Was my thinking sound about not having a set exit level for all students?

These questions led me to study and reflect on this issue, both alone and with colleagues, and ultimately to write. In this article, I briefly explore shifts in expectations within local school districts and examine what Marie Clay wrote about expectations within Reading Recovery. The article then examines teaching for acceleration and develops the importance of being “deliberate and dexterous” (May, Sirinides, Gray, & Goldsworthy, 2016), simultaneously building the case that we aim not for particular text levels but for producing independent learners who improve their reading and writing every time they read and write (Clay, 2005a, 2005b, 2015a, 2015b). Although the focus, discussions, and examples presented pertain exclusively to reading, an article of equal length and depth would be warranted for the important and reciprocal role that writing also plays in acceleration.



The daily time spent on familiar reading may not be commonly recognized as contributing to acceleration or developing a self-extending system, but it does so immensely. Because the material is familiar, the child is most likely to be fully in control and in self-tutorial mode.

Examining Expectations: Outside and Within Reading Recovery

Because of the questions I was being asked about how changes in classroom expectations would or should influence Reading Recovery, I first pondered this: What may be causing such changes in classrooms? Perhaps the increase in expectations was due to implementation of new state or federal standards. Or was it that legislated policy changes, reflected by the fact that 36 states now have high-penalty third-grade reading laws in place (Loewenberg, 2015, p. 5), have placed more emphasis on primary classrooms? Perhaps children are doing better in general because of classroom teachers' increased use of evidence-based early literacy teaching and assessment practices. More likely, it is due to a combination of these factors. Marie Clay aptly advised about this possibility:

It is important to think clearly about today's school improvement programs which aim to raise the general level of achievement. Lifting the average scores in schools will increase rather than decrease the need for early intervention. School improvement programs designed for success will unquestionably create larger gaps between those who can easily meet the challenges and those who have several counts against them when it comes to school learning. Higher general levels of achievement will create larger gaps between the average and the lowest achievers in literacy acquisition unless special measures are put in place. (2015b, p. 216)

This statement led me to reexamine Clay's writings about discontinuing decisions in *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals Part One*, where I read, "The child should be working at or above Level 16 of an approved list of text levels that has been field-tested" (Clay, 2005a, p. 53), with some countries setting higher exit levels. Reading on, Clay added, "...children who exit at low levels face a high risk of not maintaining average progress. If a child's program is discontinued at or below Level 12 *one cannot be confident about his subsequent progress* [emphasis added]" (p. 53). To my vexation, nowhere did Clay qualify her statements in regard to whether these text levels applied to children exiting mid-year or year-end, which left me tentative. On the surface, one could read this to mean exit testing levels but we have often interpreted this otherwise because there is a difference between "working at" and "testing at." In essence, perhaps Clay was calling us

to work with students above Level 12 in order to better ensure they would develop a self-extending system.

Intrigued by Clay's specificity in naming these two levels, I further analyzed the relative differences between Level 12 and Level 16 narrative texts using books in my Reading Recovery collection. Figure 1 illustrates my findings. Reading Recovery-trained teachers have long been accustomed to using a gradient of text, each level representing shifts in complexity, to help us move students steadily upward in their abilities to process texts efficiently and effectively. Generally though, we are more aware of the subtle shifts between consecutive levels and rarely think about the larger shifts that exist between larger jumps. The relative differences in complexity between Levels 12 and 16 are substantial when viewed side-by-side and may help to qualify Clay's thinking. For students to read higher-level texts they must have a variety of well-developed and flexible working systems. Readers encounter longer, more-complex sentences using structures that differ from the way they speak. They deal with unfamiliar vocabulary, more multisyllabic words that must be solved on-the-run, and with content that might be far from their realm of experience. In short, the reader able to process Level 16 or higher texts would thus be more equipped to be our express target — that of developing a self-extending system.

The questions about increasing expectations were contextualized for me now, and a clearer understanding emerged from this analysis of the two levels. For me, the way a Reading Recovery teacher should respond to classroom shifts is probably not about increasing or setting exit levels. Our goal is to ensure the beginnings of a self-extending system are in place so that we can confidently predict students will continue to learn from their own efforts alongside their classmates after the lesson series has ended. Rather than our destination being a specific level, Clay describes our target as a destination about the reader:

Once a reader is using a set of strategies which enable him to monitor his own reading and check one source of information with other sources in a sequential solving process then engaging in these activities serves to extend the potential of the reader to engage in more difficult activities and he assumes the major responsibility for learning to read by reading ... (2015a, p. 317)

Figure 1. Brief Analysis of Level 12 and Level 16 Narrative Texts

	Level 12	Level 16
Text Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> narratives with simple, often repetitive, sequence of events moving forward through time characters that do not change mostly familiar settings realistic fiction, traditional literature and animal fantasy genre mostly one or two paragraphs per page 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> narratives with more elaborate episodes, moving forward through time characters more developed that begin to show traits and change settings sometimes unfamiliar realistic fiction, traditional literature and animal fantasy genre multiple paragraphs per page
Sentence Complexity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> more compound sentences and some complex sentences with phrases embedded phrases often marked by layout in addition to commas introduction of dialogue variety (tags in multiple places, or splitting dialogue) full range of punctuation including periods, question marks, exclamation marks, quotation marks and some ellipses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> mostly compound and complex sentences, many longer than two lines, with embedded phrases phrases, marked only by commas rather than layout variety of dialogue structures including some untagged dialogue where speaker is unidentified full range of punctuation: periods, question, exclamation and quotation marks, including ellipses and dashes
Idea Complexity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> simple concepts supported directly by illustrations beginning to move away from typical family, playground or school-based problems easy to understand ideas or themes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> some abstract ideas supported by text and illustrations many texts beyond typical family, playground, or school-based problems ideas or themes that may be new to children
Words and Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> vocabulary closely matches the way many children talk some traditional literary language (once upon a time...) increased use of pronouns to replace character names variety of words to tag dialogue (cried, shouted, asked vs. said) mostly one or two syllable words, high-frequency words and range of inflectional endings simple plurals (boxes), contractions (wasn't) and possessives (Mom's) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> vocabulary matches book language more than the ways children talk more traditional literary language (once again, suddenly) pronouns routinely used to replace character names variety of words tagging dialogue with addition of adverbs (quietly) mostly two/three syllable words with useful parts, and full range of inflectional endings complex plurals (deer), contractions (would've) and possessives
Illustrations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> simple illustrations that support understanding illustrations show action(s) in detail illustrations closely match concepts in text illustrations generally on every page 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> complex illustrations not necessary to meaning illustrations cannot convey all action(s) illustrations do not depict many concepts longer stretches between illustrations

As further support that these levels were meant as examples or guidance, Clay iterated a clarifying statement about exit levels:

There can be no hard and fast criteria because the aim will be to have a child work with a class group in which he can continue to make progress, and this will differ from child to child and from school to school. (2005a, p. 56)

Clay always maintained that we must be aware of and adjust our own expectations keeping in mind classroom expectations within our sites, school districts, and individual schools. In the opening quote of this article, Clay promised that Reading Recovery would be well positioned for such adjustments when she said, “Higher general levels of achievement will create larger gaps between the average and the lowest achievers in literacy acquisition *unless special measures are put in place*” [emphasis added]. Clay was

saying that even if expectations change over time (which we should expect), Reading Recovery is the collective set of “special measures” that needs to be put in place. The purpose of the next section is to investigate acceleration as it pertains to helping students develop a self-extending system that will equip them to deal successfully with shifts in classroom expectations.

Reflective Questions: Classroom Expectations

How have classroom expectations changed in your school/site?

What do “average” classroom students need to be able to do in reading and writing, mid-year and at the end of the year?

What implications do these changes have for your teaching?

Anticipate and Teach *for* Acceleration

In *Literacy Lessons Part One*, Clay described the necessary components of early intervention. Chief among the foundational elements of Reading Recovery is the concept of acceleration. Both the amount of attention given to acceleration and its placement so early in her books set teachers on-course for expecting and teaching for acceleration from the start.

As with most of Clay’s writings, every paragraph in this section is packed with conceptual importance giving the reader several things to consider. One paragraph particularly caught my attention:

With problem readers it is not enough for the teacher to have rapport, to generate interesting tasks and generally be a good teacher. The teacher must be able to design a superbly sequenced series of lessons determined by the child’s competencies, and make highly skilled decisions moment by moment during the lesson. The child must never engage in unnecessary activities because that wastes learning time. If the teacher judges that a child can make a small leap forward, she must watch the effects of this decision and take immediate supportive action if necessary. An expert teacher will help the child leap appropriately; she will not walk the child through a preconceived sequence of learning step by step. (2005a, p. 23)

This paragraph represents an underlying premise of teaching for acceleration and contains a challenge about how to support students’ acceleration — it is not enough to be a nice teacher who makes learning interesting or just “delivers” lessons. The recently released Consortium for Policy Research in Education’s report described many facets of the success of Reading Recovery and devoted an entire chapter to instructional strengths. Their conclusions supports this difference between delivering lessons and highly skilled teaching, saying, “Reading Recovery teachers’ instructional strength ultimately rose above all other findings of the implementation study as the most important issue in the effectiveness of lessons...” (May et al., 2016, p. 90). Beyond close adherence to lesson structure and procedures, other factors were important:

We find that those Reading Recovery teachers whom practitioners regard as strongest, and those whose lessons stood out to our researchers as particularly effective, demonstrate both deliberateness and instructional dexterity. In our conceptualization of instructional strength in Reading Recovery, deliberateness is understood as an encompassing commitment to thoughtful practice; instructional dexterity is defined as the flexible application of deep skill. These two components of instructional strength are complementary and interrelated, but manifest in different ways and at different times. For instance, deliberateness is manifested primarily before and after one-to-one lessons, whereas dexterity is evident within the lesson itself. (May et al., 2016, p. 91)

What these researchers termed as “deliberate and dexterity” is precisely what Clay called us to do — be deliberate about how to design lessons based upon individual student strengths and needs and then to be dexterous in making moment-by-moment decisions in response to what children are doing. Clay’s vision called us to design superb lessons. Not so-so lessons. Superb. To do this, we must bring all that we know to the table to design lessons that cause meaningful shifts for the learner. She called for a “series of lessons,” challenging that we cannot have the occasional superb lesson, but must do so consistently, working constantly from the child’s competencies. To this end, we must then be diligent in analyzing our lesson records and running records to avoid the unwanted wasting of time. And, on top of all that, Clay prompted us to remain flexible and tentative enough to make highly skilled decisions in the moment as well. In short, she

told us to “bring our ‘A’ game.” Every lesson. Every child. Every day. Being deliberate and dexterous sets the conditions necessary for acceleration, the conditions for developing learners who will be primed to continue their own learning at any level expected in the classroom.

Teaching Considerations: Being Deliberate

Enumerating a complete menu of specific teaching procedures, text choices, or prompts needed to help achieve acceleration is not practical or possible. Instead, I will attempt to illuminate some specific considerations for sites, schools, or individuals to ponder and explore.

One key to acceleration is something we do deliberately as children read both familiar and new texts. More than just a structural element, Clay reminded us that familiar reading is built into the lesson framework purposefully to address acceleration. While some may interpret teaching for acceleration as a call to spend more time working on new text, Clay (2005a) clearly did not intend this, saying instead:

Two kinds of learning must be kept in balance: on the one hand performing with success on familiar material strengthens the decision-making processes of the reader, and on the other hand independent problem-solving on new and interesting texts with supportive teaching extends the ability to problem-solve ... Working with both familiar and new material contributes to acceleration. (p. 23)

The daily time spent on familiar reading may not be commonly recognized as contributing to acceleration or developing a self-extending system, but it does so immensely. Because the material is familiar, the child is most likely to be fully in control and in self-tutorial mode, noticing new elements about words or letters, how sentences or whole texts are constructed, all the while confirming or discounting responses fluidly, solidifying existing and new knowledge effortlessly. “Integration, independence and flexibility are possible when children have wide-ranging chances to read texts that are well within their competency, in addition to working on unfamiliar texts at the edge of their working knowledge” (Clay, 2015b, p. 135).

Reflective Questions: Familiar Reading

How much time am I allotting for daily familiar reading?

Am I thoughtful about selecting and changing out familiar texts to assist in growing a child’s competency?

Are the familiar texts used **too challenging** so that fluent orchestration is not possible?

Are the familiar texts used **too familiar**, offering no opportunities for the child to monitor or extend his ways of working?

Teaching Considerations: Being Dexterous

Another factor critical to acceleration involves the concept of integration — in one sense on a design level and in another sense as a necessary strategic action from readers. As stated previously, a Reading Recovery teacher is challenged to design lessons that do not waste time to ensure that children close the gaps between them and their peers on all sorts of literacy knowledge in less than 20 weeks. Designing such lessons requires a great deal of coordination and thoughtful pursuit of creating what Clay termed “...echoes from one part of the lesson to another part” (2005b, p. 40). Making these echoes entails that the teacher is dexterous — being observant to notice various productive and unproductive behaviors and trials and then to judiciously choose a few things to bring into teaching or demonstration. One example of an echo stemmed from the writing portion of a lesson. The child had composed the sentence: “I like to roll smaller snow balls into big snow balls.” While working out the word smaller on the practice page, the teacher made a link to the known word *her* to assist the child’s use of parts of known words. Knowing that this was not enough, later in the lesson during the reading of the new book, the teacher made a point to have the child take note of words like faster and better in order to “... help settle what is new amongst what is old” (Clay, 2005b, p. 139).

Of course, linking from one part of the lesson to another is happening serendipitously on the run, which can be taxing for the teacher to think quickly for such links.

Devising a system of note taking helps and is one reason we are required to notate lessons. Lesson forms used in Reading Recovery are intentionally open-ended to allow for individual teachers to develop ways of both capturing and indicating important information to return to later for teaching or analysis. Any teacher demonstrations around particular words or word parts and how they work may be referred to later in the lesson or in subsequent lessons, following Clay's advice about acceleration:

In addition, whenever possible the child will read and write text. He will not be diverted from printed texts...but will be taught what he needs to learn in the context of continuous text...Any new letter or high-frequency word or a spelling pattern attended to in isolation is also used in the same lesson in text reading and text writing... (2005a, p. 22)

Reflective Questions: Creating Echoes

What methods do I have for recording what might be important to attend to later in the lesson or in subsequent lessons?

How do colleagues take notes for teaching and analysis?

Besides word work, what other echoes can be created?

How deliberately do I link up the child's reading and writing knowledge?

Echoes should be purposeful—how can I analyze lesson records and the child's needs to narrow the scope?

Beyond creating echoes across lesson components, another form of integration critical to acceleration involves how students process text at difficulty. Descriptions across Clay's writings of what successful readers and writers look like towards the end of a series of lessons invariably include reference to integration and the child's ability to use multiple sources of information to solve at difficulty (Figure 2.)

Each column of Figure 2 contains direct statements which indicate the child's integration of several sources of information is a critical marker of proficient readers—thinking that is supported by another recent research study on early reading behaviors. A remarkably thorough and detailed 2015 study (McGee, Hwewon, Nelson, & Fried) examined nearly 6,000 actions from first graders' running records to classify and analyze behaviors. Then, in a second layer of analysis, student actions were further examined at similar points in time and analyzed in terms of students who went on to become proficient end-of-year level readers and those who did not. Among several interesting and important findings, one seems particularly relevant to this article: "Additional results of the current study showed that students who become first-grade-level readers also had a superior ability to coordinate the use of both graphic and contextual information in the same error episode" (p. 289).

Furthermore, the authors of this study went on to recommend, "Thus, teachers should focus on teaching students to monitor both the print and the context and, when a problem is detected, to employ multiple actions drawing on what is known about print using letter sounds, word parts, and context" (p. 289). In effect their research confirmed that children who are proficient end-of-year readers in first grade do take multiple actions and integrate multiple sources of information. Furthermore, McGee's research suggests that by Level 12, the presence (or lack) of multiple actions using multiple sources of information is indicative of end-of-year proficiency, so learning to recognize these characteristics may be imperative to Reading Recovery teachers. In other words, teaching children to do these things all along and being especially watchful near Level 12 is highly important. As Reading Recovery professionals, we recognize integration as entirely aligned to the procedures outlined in *Literacy Lessons Part Two* in general but we may not yet be fully cognizant of the important role it may play in acceleration and building self-extending systems.

What might it look like when we are teaching students to use multiple sources of information and to take multiple actions? Consider the examples, beginning on page 12, from the same teacher and child over time:

Figure 2. Selected Clay References About Proficient Readers’ Behaviors and Expectations for Readers at the End of Their Lesson Series

<p>Clay, 2015b, pp. 84–85 <i>Hypotheses about possible progressions in acts of processing occurring in early reading and writing for tentative and flexible discussion</i></p>	<p>Clay, 2005a, pp. 57–58 <i>Observable behaviors to look for when withdrawing individual lessons</i></p>	<p>Clay, 2005a, p. 53 <i>The decision to end individual support</i></p>
<p>5. Fast processing with accuracy on more advanced texts Any of the following in any order or combination</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes ownership for solving new words. • Problem-solving new and difficult words, and correcting many errors. • Integrates information from different knowledge sources: visual, phonological, meaning and structure information. • Uses any information sources effectively on well-chosen texts but easily thrown by a challenging text. • What is read is processed quickly and is mostly correct. • Effective processing deals with chunks of information. • Has reached high scores on knowledge sources (or the Observation Survey). • Controls links between visual/aural, left/right, first/last, semantic/syntactic, and picture/story information. <p><i>Combining some of these may lift processing out of this group.</i></p>	<p>If the child is ready for the lesson series to end he will be able to control these things:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directional movement: The child will have control over this without lapses, or he will be aware of his tendency to lapse and will be able to check on his own behavior. • One-to-one matching: The child can adopt a controlled one-to-one matching of spoken to written words (and sequence of sounds in words) for checking purposes. • Strategic actions: He can demonstrate a flexible control of strategic activity on new instructional texts at higher levels of difficulty. He will try to solve new words and new language structures in new texts. • Self-monitoring: The child checks on himself (often unprompted). This can be seen when an error is noticed whether or not it is corrected. It is also observed as the child assembles a cut-up story. • Cross-checking: The child notices discrepancies in his own responses by cross-checking one kind of information (say, visual) with a different kind of information (such as meaning). This is seen less often during later lessons. • Use of multiple sources of information: Check self-corrections. It is sometimes clear that the child finds it easy to combine meaning, and structure, and letter-sound cues, and a sense of how words are spelled, and tries to achieve a match across all kinds of information. • Self-correction: Effective self-correction follows from using self-monitoring, searching for solutions in flexible ways, and cross-checking information. However, even unsuccessful attempts at self-correction are indicators that the child is aware these activities can be helpful. In good readers self-correction may occur without much evidence that you can observe and record! 	<p>If the student is nearing the end of his lesson series he should be able to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • monitor his own reading and writing, • anticipate a possible syntactic structure, • search for different kinds of information in word sequences, in meaning and in sound-letter sequences, • discover new things for himself, • cross-check one source of information with another, • repeat as if to confirm his reading or writing so far, • use several sources of information together on the first attempt, • self-correct taking the initiative for making decisions or getting words right in every respect, • solve new words by these means.

Example 1—Text Level 12
The Clever Penguins

(Randell, 1996)

- Text: Two baby chicks!” said Mother Penguin.
- Student: Two baby... (pausing at the word *chicks* and says ch— ch— i— ck? indicating he wasn’t sure.)
- Teacher: You tried looking at the parts. Now think about rereading to check.
- Student: Rereads...Two baby chick. Nope. It has to be chicks! Two baby chicks! (teacher says nothing and lets student continue to end of the book)
- Teacher: You knew chick wasn’t right. What happened when you reread?
- Student: It didn’t sound right so I knew it had to be *chicks*.
- Teacher: Good. Now check to see if it looks right. (child locates word and quickly sees the /s/ ending.) And look at the picture ... are there two baby chicks?
- Student: Yep!
- Teacher: You had to look at the word, reread, and then check to see if you were right.

Example 2—Text Level 15
The Hungry Giant’s Shoe

(Cowley, 2009)

- Text: The people looked in every street. They looked in every shop.
- Child: The people looked in every ... (pauses) Store. No. St—r—cet. *Street*.
- Teacher: Are you right?
- Child: Rereads and seems satisfied and continues. They looked in every sh-op. Shop. (pauses)
- Teacher: You were checking something. What is it?
- Child: This is *shop* (pointing to the word *shop*) and they wouldn’t say store and *shop* so that word (pointing to street) *is* street.

The questions surrounding acceleration are complex and will not be answered simply. Reflective conversation with colleagues is warranted, conversations that include classroom teachers and examples of what is considered average.

Teacher: You looked at the word and also thought about how stories work to check yourself.

Child: And there’s two ees in *street*.

Teacher: Good checking!

In Example 1, the child tried a visual analysis of the word *chicks* and monitored that his response came up short and appealed for help. The teacher prompted the student to reread, confirming what the child tried but not the outcome. Instead, she nudged him to draw upon another source of information by calling for rereading. At this point the structure helped the child to confirm, but the teacher did not leave it at that. After letting the child successfully finish the book, the teacher went back to the corrected error to connect to yet another source, meaning, by prompting him to check the picture as another means of confirming. This subtle exchange prompted the reader to take multiple actions at difficulty and to use multiple sources of information to solve and to check. Dexterity in selecting examples to attend to as well as which things let go are also critical to acceleration. “Acceleration depends upon how well the teacher selects the clearest, easiest, most memorable examples with which to establish a new response, skill, principle or procedure...” (Clay, 2005a, p. 23).

Similarly, in Example 2, the child attempted the use of visual information and again monitored. This time the teacher simply asked, “Are you right?” which left the child more independence in selecting what action to take to check. This interaction is different than in Example 1 from earlier in the child’s lesson series. “Acceleration is achieved if the child takes over the learning process and works independently ... therefore what the teacher attends to and how she interacts with the child changes notice-

ably across the lesson series” (Clay, 2005a, p. 23). The child reread to search for more information but probably was not quite certain because the phrase “looking in every street” was not a usual structure to him. However, he continued reading and then, when solving the word *shop* in the next sentence, he paused, as if confirming that decision (or something else). The teacher, who is a careful observer and who had been working hard to foster multiple action/multiple source interactions since the Level 12 exchange, probed by asking what the child was checking. With quickness the child replied that the previous word had to be *street* (which confirms that he was not yet sure!) and then used a more-sophisticated analysis of story knowledge to infer that the text probably wouldn’t use two similar terms, in this case, *shop* and *store* in proximity to one another. Finally, as the proverbial icing on the cake, when the teacher restated what the child did with using meaning and structural information, the child looked again at visual information to confirm on his own with yet another information source.

As we know, teaching children to take multiple actions and use multiple sources of information begins early and continues throughout a series of lessons, but there may be other hidden considerations to getting children into higher levels of text. Clay cautioned: “Towards the end of the lesson series [the teacher] will be under pressure to have the child reading the same texts as those used by his average classroom peers with a high degree of independence. During this time there is a risk that the child may not be given sufficient time to consolidate new learning” (2005a, p. 53). In the recent book, *Visible Learning for Literacy: Implementing the Practices that Work Best to Accelerate Student Learning* (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016), considerable attention is devoted to the concept of *consolidation* as it pertains to learning theory and in its role in shifting from surface to deep learning. The authors report that surface and deep learning are constructs internal to individual learners that are highly influenced by teachers and contexts. Surface learners rely on memory and are more concerned about correctness while deep learners are risk-takers who grow from interactions with content and ideas. The express goal of deep learning is self-regulation.

The pedagogical goal...is for students to assimilate knowledge, especially through integration with existing knowledge. This isn’t merely an additive process. It’s also subtractive, in the sense that new understanding may not jibe with previously held positions. The

cognitive dissonance that results from being confronted by two contradictory ideas can be uncomfortable, and in that search for meaning, the learner has to make some decisions about how he or she will restore consistency. There’s a higher degree of self-regulation that needs to take place, as students need to wrestle with ideas and concepts. (Fisher et al., 2016, p. 77)

Teaching children to take multiple actions and use multiple sources of information begins early and continues throughout a series of lessons, but there may be another consideration to getting children into higher levels of text earlier that have nothing to do with rising classroom expectations but are more about allowing ample opportunity to consolidate for deep and self-regulated learning. “The child must have enough practice on texts at each higher level to consolidate new learning, and yet the teacher will be lifting the difficulty level of the texts she is selecting for him to read” (Clay, 2005a, p. 53). Having time to develop and consolidate learning needed to build a self-extending system is probably not possible if we are just approaching Level 12 at the end of a series of lessons; we may not be able to create enough experiences within these complex contexts to teach for and give feedback about taking multiple actions and using multiple sources of information. It would be important, then, to plan deliberately and to remain dexterous so that children make gains in lower levels of text early, so that there is sufficient time to work and consolidate within the complexities of higher texts.

Reflective Questions: Multiple Sources/Actions

What evidence can I see that children are taking multiple actions at difficulty?

Beyond the analysis of the sources of information used and neglected, how else might I analyze the integration of all sources of information to describe the literacy processing?

How vigilant am I to prompt towards helping students use more than one source of information to solve and check?

What unique qualities do text Levels 12–16 seem to have that make them rich contexts for helping children consolidate strategic action?

Final Thoughts

While opportunities for developing a self-extending system exist at all text levels, the combination of McGee's research findings, Clay's thoughts on being unsure about future success if students do not make it beyond Level 12, combined with understandings about deep learning and the gradient of text in general, may suggest that there are unique opportunities in these higher levels of text that help with consolidation. Achieving acceleration is not easy and we cannot produce or induce it directly (Clay, 2005a). Instructional strength in Reading Recovery may be defined as the extent to which a teacher instructs for maximum learning in every lesson (May et al., 2016, p. 83). Being both deliberate and dexterous, Reading Recovery professionals create the conditions under which acceleration is possible—a balance of familiar and new text experiences, using data to make teaching decisions that do not waste time on things already known, providing echoes and links, and simultaneously lifting the level of challenge over time—all in the service of supporting learners to develop a self-extending system. The questions surrounding acceleration in general, and specifically concerning text level, are complex and will not be answered simply. Reflective conversation with colleagues is warranted, conversations that include classroom teachers and examples of what is considered average.

Author's note

For additional resources about teaching and working at higher text levels, see “Keeping it Easy to Learn at Higher Levels of Text Reading” by Kelly and Neal in the spring 2009 issue of *The Journal of Reading Recovery*.

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