

## Where Are They Now?

# Remembering One Special Student

by Patricia R. Kelly

Drake Kelly begins his junior year at the University of California Santa Barbara in September 2017. As I reflect on my Reading Recovery® work with him, I appreciate how much the design of Reading Recovery fostered his success and the success of the children who are confused by the world of print. Let me explain.

As a preschooler, Drake enjoyed being read to and he always chose a pile of books to make story reading time last. He had exceptional language skills, was imaginative, inquisitive, very active, and he had a big personality. He had many friends and he welcomed everyone into his circle.

Drake entered kindergarten when he was 5 years 2 months old. He was small for his age, but what he lacked in size he made up in personality. He fit in well socially and was a leader on the playground among his peers. His brother, who was 5 years older, had learned to read very easily, so it was a shock to his family when they found out that when it came to literacy, Drake was one of the lowest-performing students in his kindergarten class. His teacher wanted to retain him, but his parents did not like that option. Reading Recovery was a better option.

The Observation Survey revealed many of Drake's understandings about print as well as his confusions and unknowns. His Text Reading Level was 1. He had emerging understandings about books and print. His use of meaning and language on text reading was good. He caught on how

to use patterns and pictures in reading but did not know how to use print. He knew 35/54 letters by letter name. He could read no words on the Ohio Word Test. The Concepts About Print tasks (score 13) revealed that he understood a lot about how books work, but he did not know how to match one-to-one or how to visually scan print. His writing was labored and letter formation was difficult. He wrote six words: *Drake, mom, DAD, no, A, i*. He identified 10 sounds (mostly beginning and ending consonants) on the Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words task. He was cooperative, but paying attention was difficult for him.

Drake reminded me of Clay's (2005) description of the child who has difficulty going from scanning his environment to learning to apply rules to the order in which we scan print. "Some children find this learning difficult or tedious. Others are carried along by their speech and pay as little visual attention to the detail of print as they can get away with" (p. 3). This was Drake. As I worked with him, it was apparent that learning details of print was very hard for him, as was writing letters. It took a long time to build letter and word knowledge. On the other hand, he understood stories very well, could generate complex sentences of his own, and above all, he loved reading the new book. Each day, the first thing he would ask at the beginning of lessons was, "What is the new book today?"

Drake made slow but steady progress. He gradually became more flexible in problem solving new words using meaning and structure, and gradually he learned how to use more and more visual information. Simultaneously, Drake took charge of his writing. He wrote many words independently and generated complex sentences. By the end of his Reading Recovery intervention, he performed at or above grade level on each task of the Observation Survey and was reading independently at Text Level 18.

I continued to follow Drake's progress in school. He attended the same elementary school from kindergarten through fifth grade, which was unusual for the child of a military officer. He did well academically and continued to develop literacy skills. One of his favorite pastimes was drawing. At the end of third grade he gave me a book that he wrote and illustrated — including speech bubbles: *Detective Jack and the Stolen Money*. It was evident that both his imagination and his literacy skills were expanding.

Drake's family moved to northern California at the beginning of Grade 6, the first of several moves. His middle school years were spent in three different schools in Monterey, CA, and Stafford, VA. He channeled his high energy into becoming an excellent soccer player — named Most Valuable Player twice and team captain of his traveling team. As he moved on to high school in Virginia (Grades 9 and 10) and California



*Learning how to focus has been key to Drake's success in both sports and in academics. From struggling with reading and writing to graduating from high school with a 3.5 GPA, Drake continues to use the systems that have helped him build confidence.*

(Grades 11 and 12), he expanded his sports interests to include soccer, wrestling, lacrosse, basketball, and track and field. He received letters in three sports while maintaining good grades. And he became interested in economics and investing due to encouragement from his AP economics teacher, an interest he still maintains.

Drake graduated from high school in 2015 and entered San Francisco State University that September. He chose economics as his major. However, as his interests expanded to include psychology and neuroscience, he applied to and was accepted at University of California Santa Barbara.

I recently spoke with Drake about school. He remembered reading with me, but he did not remember much about Reading Recovery lessons. I asked him about why he thought it was hard for him to learn to read. He was clear: "I had a hard time focusing." When he got to college, he wanted to improve his ability to focus

on academics and began investigating how to do it. Consequently, he made changes to his lifestyle. He paid more attention to his health, eating a healthier diet, and concentrating on fitness. He eliminated sugar and fast foods and added more healthy foods. He became more disciplined about exercising. Drake credits his improved ability to focus academically (he had a 3.9 GPA) on these lifestyle changes along with developing study skills that worked for him. He knows it may always be a challenge for him to focus his attention, but he has confidence in the systems he has developed.

While figuring out how to be successful academically, Drake also participated in a rich social life. The fraternity he joined had a philanthropic mission that allowed him to work with various organizations in the Bay Area. When he came home for Christmas, he took on his own mission of filling bags with necessities and food and giving them to home-

less people. He believes that, "There is no success no matter how great without sharing with those who have less."

When I asked Drake what he sees himself doing after he finishes his undergraduate work, he was unsure but was thinking about graduate school or medical school.

#### *A note about the Reading Recovery teacher*

Drake taught me as much as I taught him. As a Reading Recovery trainer, I studied Drake's running records and lesson records for my work with teacher leaders and teachers. I used his running records at conference sessions because his developing strategic abilities were so well illustrated by his running records. I was able to follow Drake's progress closely after Reading Recovery and will continue to do so because Drake is my grandson. While I do not recommend that Reading Recovery professionals work with their children or grandchildren, I am happy that I was available to help Drake at the beginning when it counted so much.

*Patricia Kelly, a Reading Recovery trainer emerita, retired from San Diego State University. She enjoys cooking, traveling, gardening, making quilts, and volunteer tutoring.*



Clay, M. M. (2005). *Literacy lessons designed for individuals part one: Why? when? and how?* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.