The progress of my Reading Recovery student Ben had stalled. After the summer holidays, he continued his lessons series as a carryover student in Grade 2, but something had changed. He seemed reluctant to leave his classroom, and I was struggling to reengage his interest. At the end of a school day, I dropped by Ben’s classroom to talk about my concerns with his teacher, Mia. She generously put aside what she was doing and actively listened to my somewhat rambling report. Mia picked up on some of my descriptions of Ben’s reading and writing behavior; she had observed similarities in the classroom. Together we created a richer profile of Ben’s responses than either of us would have come up with individually. Then, we decided on a coordinated plan of action. When Ben encountered reading work in Reading Recovery, his first action was to ask for help. Mia observed that his first response to reading work in classroom guided reading lessons was to ask a classmate for help. Our plan was to support him in trying something first before asking for help — leading him to take self-monitoring action and experience the satisfaction of solving challenges by himself.

Mia and I continued to check in with each other on Ben’s literacy development. Sometimes those conversations were brief but always powerful. One day as I passed Mia’s class on the way to the gym she called out, “Ben did some great self-correcting today.” I was able to use that information later in our Reading Recovery lesson to reinforce the same behavior and link it back to his classroom reading.

Those powerfully helpful conversations with Mia came from my uncertainty on how to proceed with Ben. In their book, Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School, Hargreaves and Fullan describe the benefit of sharing our uncertainty with colleagues.

[Uncertainty] is what makes teaching interesting, variable and challenging — a job that is different every day. But uncertainty encountered alone, in enforced isolation, is uncertainty magnified to unhealthy proportions, because teachers must figure out how to deal with all the uncertainty on their own with no feedback, advice, or support. If you are alone and uncertain, you get anxious. And if you are anxious, like a deer in the headlights, your are likely to become rooted in the spot or ‘stuck.’ (2012, p. 107)

Consulting colleagues when stuck is nothing new to Reading Recovery teaching. Actions to take when acceleration is compromised are clearly laid out in Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals (Clay, 2016). Reading Recovery teachers are guided to “seek insights from colleagues” beginning with consultation with the classroom teacher, “about what you have noted for shared problem solving” (p. 167).

In Opening Minds: Using Language to Change Lives, Peter Johnston describes thinking and working together in a cohesive way.

Individual minds are nurtured in the conversations—the interactive thinking—of the community. Thinking well together leads to thinking well alone. But by thinking together, I don’t mean just the rational logic of the conversations. The emotional and relational support we provide for each other in the process of thinking together is equally important to the development of individual minds. (2012, p. 96)

A network that welcomes different perspectives is the basis for powerful conversations and a wealth of opportunities.
A network that welcomes different perspectives is the basis for powerful conversations and a wealth of opportunities. Conversations with Mia changed my approach to problem solving around children who were hard to accelerate, and my understanding of the power in bringing different perspectives into the discussion.

Listen to Gay Su Pinnell’s ideas in the Promising Literacy for Every Child webcast on comprehensive learning and available on the RRCNA website. She reminds us that conversation is a tool of learning within an environment of mutual support. And she says that no matter how expert you might be, you can always get better by talking about your work and listening as others talk. Powerful conversations.

Read the archives from the monthly RRCNA twitter chats that bring together different perspectives for powerful discussion around a topic. I recently read through the “Effectively Using Job Embedded Professional Development” chat, where educators from a variety of backgrounds and geographical locations shared ideas and links. Here are just a few responses to the question, “What are some of the benefits of ongoing, job-embedded professional learning?” all of which reminded me of my collaboration with Mia:

- We build an environment for reflections.
- Takes time to build trust but it is worth it.
- Sometimes small shifts lead to the greatest impact.
- Makes us think and talk about teaching, set goals, learn/plan observe.
- Relevant to the work we do every day.
- Understanding comes from taking a zoom lens to our teaching.

Among my many wonderful experiences at the 2018 National Conference was the opportunity to talk to attendees about where they were from and why they chose to attend. On the first day, I met a group of first-time attendees from Mississippi, distinguished by the bring pink ribbons on their name tags. We talked about their work, about educators we admired, and about our expectations for powerful professional learning in the days ahead. At the end of the conference I met them again. One of the group gave me her pink ribbon and said that she would be back next year; she was no longer a first-time attendee. I look forward to meeting up in 2019 and continuing our conversations!

And as my term as RRCNA president comes to a close, I thank each of you for being part of a community that contributes to the powerful conversations that help each of us grow as educators. You have enriched my life.

References


A Reading Recovery trainer in Canada, Janice is currently doing research on children’s written language development after Reading Recovery.