Being Intentional in Our Teaching and Professional Lives

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Editor’s Note: This article is based on a keynote address presented by Dr. Bates at the 2019 National Reading Recovery & K-6 Literacy Conference in Columbus, Ohio. All names are pseudonyms.

The latest pop psychology catch phrase seems to be intentional living. I was in the Barnes & Noble store recently with my son, and I found a section divider entitled ‘Intentional Living.’ Behind it, were no fewer than 50 books on being intentional. Intentional is a word I have been looking to define for quite some time, and in the last year it has consumed a lot of my thinking as I worked to develop the keynote for the 2019 National Reading Recovery® & K–6 Literacy Conference. As I pondered the word, I thought about students I have taught over the years. The accelerated progress they made and their ultimate success was not haphazard; it was intentional. And this led me to ask the question, What does it mean to be intentional in our teaching and professional lives?

There are three key elements I identified as contributing to being intentional: (a) close observation and recording those observations; (b) professional knowledge and practice; and (c) reflection and collaboration (Figure 1). These elements all led to the development of a rationale for why I am doing what I am doing. I think as educators, these are all concepts with which we are very familiar, but it’s constantly recommitting to these ideals despite the hurried pace of our work that is most challenging. In the remainder of this article, I will discuss each of these elements in relation to the aforementioned guiding question.

Close Observation

One my biggest challenges as a teacher is not to jump to conclusions. I am quick to identify what I think may be difficult for a child or teacher and immediately set about trying to fix it. When this happens, I have to step back and think about the purpose of my observation. I have to ask myself, are my assumptions preventing me from seeing a complete picture? Am I wearing blinders?

In Change Over Time in Children’s Literacy Development, Clay (2001) strongly warns us “not to overlook observation;” in fact she states, “I would argue that teachers DARE not overlook observation” (p. 268). Clay goes on to say we should use “systematic observation as a discovery or fact-finding technique to establish what exists.” If I am not careful, I will only observe for what I think already exists and preconceived ideas will prevent me from truly understanding what a child knows and controls.

Figure 1. Key Elements That Contribute to Being Intentional
Instead, using neutral observation to establish what exists, as Clay suggests, ensures that I am open to what the child reveals as he or she reads and writes continuous text.

In the keynote address, I shared an image of the moving illusion, *Rotating Snakes* by Akiyoshi Kitaoka (2003). A moving illusion is a static image in which you can see motion due to color contrasts and shape position. When you visit the link (see references), notice how the image moves. Then focus on just one circle. By isolating one of the circles, and concentrating on it specifically, you can stop the illusion and stop the circle from moving. When we work with children, especially those for whom literacy is presenting some challenge, there can be a lot of moving circles or parts. If we get overwhelmed by this, it can be difficult to capture the child’s reading behaviors, let alone support the child’s progress.

If, however, I am systematic in my observation and if I approach observation as a fact-finding mission to establish what exists, my records have clarity and focus. Clarity and focus allow me to make sure my planning is intentional and my instruction is responsive. Figure 2 is an example of a lesson record that lacked intentional planning, and as a result, there are few anecdotal notes. When my lesson records are sparse, it may be a reflection of an unproductive lesson. Perhaps it was too hard for the child and so there wasn’t much in my lesson records because I was so busy supporting the child that I didn’t record anything. Sometimes it’s a reflection of time; I waited until the last minute to plan the lesson and didn’t devote enough attention to selecting the right text. Sometimes, I have thoughtfully selected what I think is the right text and it still falls apart.

Regardless of the reason why I may not have captured anything on my lesson records, I have to intentionally remind myself to write down what I am seeing, because I know I won’t be able to recall the information at the end of the day. In fact, the more children for whom I am responsible, the more likely I am to forget what happened at 9:15 am. So, I can be a great observer, but if I don’t record the observations, chances are, they are lost.

The evaluation of the $55 million Investing in Innovation (i3) grant showed Reading Recovery as having impressive effect sizes (May, Sirinides, Gray, & Goldsworthy, 2016). As part of understanding the large gains in students’ reading skills, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) investigated the instructional strength in Reading Recovery. They defined instructional strength as the extent to which a teacher instructs for maximum learning in each and every lesson. Instructionally strong teachers, according to May et al., “convert their subtle observations into data and rely heavily on that data in instructional planning” (p. 92). For these teachers, “instruction becomes a cycle of continual collection, reflection on, and response to observations” (p. 93). Based on this understanding, Reading Recovery teachers “form instructional plans that enable them to teach for maximum impact in every lesson” (p. 93). These findings further make the case for recording my observations so that I have the necessary data to make informed instructional decisions.

Professional Knowledge and Practice

To be intentional in my teaching, I then have to combine the close observation of my students with my professional knowledge. I can read about theory all day long, but it is another thing altogether to connect it to my teaching. For me, professional knowledge is the intersection of my understandings of the theoretical

Figure 2. Example of Lesson Record Lacking Intentional Planning
underpinnings of literacy processing and my practical understandings.

Every year, I select one aspect of my teaching that I need to dig into deeper and that will be generative for my instruction; it always bubbles up from a child with whom I am working and is closely tied to the ongoing cycle of close observation. Further, it is a recursive generative process connecting theory to practice and practice to theory. This process helps establish an instructional rationale. I recently taught a child by the name of José. José was an emerging bilingual student, and I soon realized that his reading and writing vocabularies were not growing at a rate consistent with children who successfully discontinue their series of lessons.

In order to assist José in these areas, I worked on connecting professional knowledge and practice by rereading the section in Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals (Clay, 2016) entitled “What Does It Mean to ‘Know’ a Word” (p. 75). Clay states:

When I revisited Clay’s scale of knowing, I thought about times when a child knew the word here with a lowercase h but not when it appeared with a capital H. I also thought about times when the word was known in most contexts, but when it was embedded in an unfamiliar structure, it caused the child to balk. I thought about what “known” in many variant forms really means. Yes, it means the child knows the word with little or no attention in both reading and writing, but it also means the child can use the known to assist in problem solving the unknown. It was this thinking and professional reading that I then connected to my practice. When I started being more intentional about supporting José in expanding and extending his word knowledge, I stopped myself from saying, “You know that word.” If José knew the word, he would read it or write it and me saying “You know it” just put unneeded pressure on him. To hold myself more accountable, I started keeping a ‘roving sticky note’ that I moved each day from lesson record to lesson record to ensure I wasn’t haphazard with the words on which I asked José to work. I also paid close attention to where the words fell on Clay’s scale of knowing, and I was intentional in supporting José as he made them known in many variant forms.

Further, I worked on creating “echoes from one part of the lesson to another part” (Clay, 2016, p. 70). Since we know the importance of children reading and writing continuous text, these opportunities occur “all the time” (p. 70). Both my parents were teachers, and I spent my summers on a beautiful pond in New England. I could go to the water’s edge and yell out “hello” and hear it repeated exactly seven times. An echo is a sound that is repeated or reverberated after the original sound stops. In Reading Recovery, these echoes are important because our children need repetition. The words need to be reverberated within the lesson and from one lesson to the next in order to move them from new to known.

According to Clay, “The art is to expose the children to opportunities to deal successfully with certain words so that they become familiar, and like old friends” (p. 156). An old friend is an old friend because after being around a while, we can count on them. I wanted José to understand he could count on the familiar, the known, his old friend, because this supported him in his acquisition of the English language. This recursive, generative process of connecting professional knowledge and practice with the literature and again returning to practice requires reflection and sometimes, depending on what I am trying to better understand, collaboration with a colleague.

**Reflection and Collaboration**

Being intentional requires me to engage in reflection and collaboration. In an article in The Reading Teacher, Wetzel, Maloch, and Hoffman (2017) discussed using retrospective video analysis as a means of reflection. They stated that recording our teaching or our coaching (p. 535) can

- document the teaching practices that happen in classrooms,
- zoom in on particular situations that grab our attention,
• capture moments of surprise and tension,
• move from evaluation to rich description in our reflection, and
• find patterns and relationships between teacher moves and learning.

To engage in retrospective video analysis, I have to intentionally make time for it. When Jeff Williams introduced me at the conference, he shared the following quote:

> “Our lives, and our teaching lives especially, are stuffed with expectations, requirements, things. But, instead of more, better, faster, slowing down and looking closely at our teaching can provide opportunities for identifying and honoring what really matters in our instruction.” (Bates & Morgan, 2017, p. 113)

The quote is from an article Denise Morgan and I wrote about creating time for reflection and collaboration. We are all busy, and the article discusses how we need to create moments of stillness to reflect and collaborate. Basically, we have to be intentional about it or, odds are, it won’t happen.

When we reflect on our teaching both alone and with others, it allows us the space to check on any assumptions that may not be grounded in data. It allows us to think through our hypotheses and connect them back to theory. Again, we have to create time for this to happen; the video for the retrospective analysis doesn’t just start by itself and if I want to share the video with a colleague, I have to figure out how to send the file. Technology is a great thing, but sometimes just figuring out how to use it takes time.

Collaborative conversations are all about being vulnerable and finding a trusted colleague who listens when I won’t stop talking, who pushes me to keep thinking about alternatives, who takes me into the literature and contributes to me being able to be intentional. This year I have really been puzzling over one particular student. Dhin is Vietnamese, and I have been working diligently to support his use of English. I have taken Dhin behind the glass several times and have had Maryann McBride, teacher leader in residence at Clemson, conduct two colleague visits. Following one of the visits, Maryann and I discussed the ways in which I was supporting Dhin’s use of language. During our conversation, we explored Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals (2016) and landed on the section “Introducing the New Book.” Clay states, “The teacher must plan for the child to have in his head the ideas and the language he needs to complete the reading” (p. 115). While I had certainly thought about this during Dhin’s lesson series, going into Clay’s text with a trusted colleague and using this quote to think through my lesson records helped me see places that I could be more intentional in supporting his use of language. I went through and made additional notes in my records about structures that were coming under control, which in turn helped me engage in oral conversation after the reading of text to further scaffold “the use of language and ideas” (p. 115) that were presented in the reading. After reading No Snow Toys by Kris Bonnell (2010), I asked him, “What do you think Ben might have done in the snow?” Dhin responded, “Play some snowballs.” I then extended his statement by saying, “Yes, he made some snowballs. He also made some other things. What else did he make?”

The conversations I had with my colleague helped me be more intentional in the conversations I had with Dhin. I am now keeping close record of the language he controls and where I see glimmers, and I am careful to pave the way for language he will be seeing in upcoming text. In the example of No Snow Toys, I used and put in his ear the past tense of an irregular verb (make – made) that does not contain the suffix -ed. Knowing what has occurred in our conversations and in his writing is a key source of support when selecting texts for him. In many ways this year, I have likened his control of the English language to Clay’s scale of knowing a letter or a word (2016). Some language and structure for Dhin is “new and only just recently known;” some is “easily produced and easily thrown” (Clay, 2016, p. 75). In other words, Dhin controls many commonly used past tense verbs like looked and ran, but his control will lapse if these come alongside new structures that may be a little tricky for him.

Reflection and collaboration with my colleagues has supported my teaching of Dhin this year. During these conversations, my records as well as Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals have been instrumental and that is because the outer circles in Figure 1 don’t exist by themselves. Instead, it is a combination of close observation and my records of these observations, professional knowledge and practice, and reflection and collaboration that lead me to being intentional. Simulta-
neously, I also have to be intentional within each of the circles in order to be systematic in my observation, connect professional knowledge and practice, and create time for reflection and collaboration.

**Design-Based Research**

In addition to being a teacher, I am also a researcher. When I think about how the question, “What does it mean to be intentional in our teaching and professional lives?” impacts my work, I also think about it in relation to my university responsibilities. For me that means engaging in intentional research projects. I am particularly interested in design-based research because it is “aimed at addressing practical problems, developing workable solutions, and accomplishing valued goals” (Reinking & Bradley, 2008, p. 5).

In Reading Recovery, we have long answered questions about our longitudinal results. We are also well aware of what the research says about summer reading loss and how this impacts the children we teach. A teacher leader recently shared with me that Reading Recovery is like losing weight. I can get to my goal weight, but maintaining that weight means I need to continue making the right food choices and exercising regularly. Reading Recovery is a short-term early intervention, with children receiving individually designed and delivered lessons. We have a long track record of strong and consistent results, but I want to make sure that the children who have had Reading Recovery continue to grow as readers. If we liken this to weight loss, it simply means we have to help them make the right book choices and encourage them to read. This support means partnering with classroom teachers to strengthen the relationship between intervention and classroom practice.

To this end, we have used grant funding to build a free virtual professional learning library (https://readingrecovery.clemson.edu/home/k-2-literacy-resources/) that hosts six different modules. Each module is accompanied with a set of facilitator notes that allows users to tailor their professional learning at the individual or group level. The modules showcase South Carolina teachers teaching real lessons to ensure that when our teachers view the modules they can relate to the context.

As we work to ensure children have strong classroom instruction, we are also providing support over the summer. We have partnered with Dabo’s All in Team Foundation and Scholastic to send books home with students who were in Reading Recovery. Dabo is the head football coach at Clemson University. This year, under Dabo’s direction, the Clemson Tigers finished the season 15–0. This record-breaking season, which included a 44–16 win over Alabama in the National Championship, hasn’t happened in college football since 1897. College football in South Carolina, like in many states, is huge. Children are excited to cheer for their teams and identify with all aspects of the game. From the coaches and the players to the band and the cheerleaders, everyone seems to rally around their favorite team. Through the partnership with Dabo’s All in Team Foundation and Scholastic we have sent over 34,000 books home with children in the last 3 years. Additionally, each year since we began the project, we have invited the children to campus to interact with the players and coaches. The players read to the children and in addition to the 10 books they receive, they also get to take home the book the players read.
to them. Each year we intentionally reexamine the initiative to figure out how we may increase the likelihood that the children will read the books over the summer. We’ve worked with teachers to introduce the books before summer vacation to increase interest and motivation and we have planned bigger kick-off celebrations on campus. In 2018, we tied in the book the players read, *The Pigeon Finds a Hot Dog!* by Mo Willems (2004), with a hot dog lunch. We also included a postage-paid postcard with the books, so the children could write to the team over the summer.

Last year after sharing our results with the All in Foundation, they agreed to fund book sets for 100 additional children who had discontinued from Reading Recovery, received summer books, and who were now completing second grade. This created the opportunity for us to observe the impact of summer reading opportunities on these children during consecutive summers, that is following first and then second grade.

Their reading levels were identified using the Text Reading Level task of *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 2013) at the beginning and end of each summer. As shown in Figure 3, these discontinued students had made accelerated gains in first grade while participating in Reading Recovery and this is represented by the first blue line. The first green line shows that the students maintained that growth over the summer following first grade and assuaged the summer reading setback that research states can be up to a 3-month decline (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003; Kim, 2004; Mraz & Rasinski, 2007). The second blue line shows their progress in second grade, and the second green line depicts the reading growth observed during the summer following their second-grade year and suggests that they not only maintained but importantly progressed in reading achievement during that summer. This project has taken a practical problem and through intentional partnerships enabled us to provide a workable solution and accomplish a valued goal — addressing the loss of reading proficiency during summer vacations.

**In Closing**

Intentional living doesn’t just happen; it requires discipline. We have to make plans and set goals. In education, we have learned that goals need to be measurable. For example, instead of stating “I want to lose weight,” stating “I want to lose 4 pounds in the next month” ensures my goal is something I can quantify.
Using the elements that engender intentionality (Figure 1), begin by setting a goal for close observation. Perhaps the goal is developing a more efficient system for how to record observations. Or perhaps the goal is to focus in on one moving part to better understand what a child knows and controls. In the area of professional knowledge and practice, maybe it is participating in one of RRCNA’s Sunday Twitter chats and connecting it to practice or reading an article from *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, reviewing it with a colleague, and discussing what it means for instruction. In the area of reflection, set a goal to videotape your hardest-to-teach child or the conversation before writing for each of your students. Finally, think about ways to develop intentional partnerships or relationships that support children during the summer. Make arrangements with the media specialist to periodically open the school library during the summer so children have access to books, or set up a lending library in a local neighborhood or on school property.

Being intentional in our teaching and professional lives can directly impact our students. Clay reminds us that “acceleration depends upon how well the teacher selects the clearest, easiest, most memorable examples with which to establish a new response, principle or procedure” (2016, p. 20). When we use the power of close observation, connect professional knowledge and practice, and engage in reflection and collaboration we are able to intentionally select the easiest, most memorable example to which Clay refers. Clay cautions us about wasting the learner’s time, and being intentional prevents this from occurring.

References

**About the Author**

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**Children books cited**