



President's Message

Reflections on a Journey

RRCNA President Jeffery Williams

As president of the Reading Recovery Council this past year, I have had the privilege and honor to see and hear about the important work of literacy teachers across the U.S. and Canada. By my estimate, I have personally worked with more than 2,500 in the past school year alone: K-12 classroom teachers, Reading Recovery professionals, literacy coaches, special education and ELL teachers, and administrators — all working hard to increase our understanding of literacy learning. This fact is humbling and led me to some deep reflection on how I got to be the teacher I am today.

Naturally, I went back to my childhood, where I know that my family instilled in me a strong work ethic and planted the belief that we are stronger together than we are as individuals. They also taught me that one of life's greatest endeavors is to become helpful and useful to others. These priceless lessons remain with me today and guide my every decision.

My mother claims that my passion for learning was there when I was born. As she recalls, I was enthralled with knowledge and knew that there was more to be had at this place called school. My K-12 years were bursting with opportunities and I was in my element. But even if I had magically possessed a passion for learning at birth, it would have died without the constant feeding and support of my family and my K-12 teachers. What I saw in them, the ability to inspire and teach, led to my becoming a teacher myself.

My university years at The Ohio State University continued to be formative, with new and interesting information that I had not yet considered. And a new developing passion emerged — being in love with how children learn to read. As a recent graduate, I felt well-prepared for my first job in Whitehall, Ohio. But, what I didn't know yet, was how much I didn't know yet!

During that first year as a first-grade teacher, I implemented a workshop approach to both reading and writing. Though there were no books yet on how to do compre-

hensive literacy in the primary grades, what I did have was an amazing group of colleagues in Whitehall: Sharon Esswein, Carole Heacock, Alisa Limbers, and Vicki Gartner. Along with the support of Dr. C. Ray Williams at Ohio State, we read, studied, planned, implemented, and revised together, and I learned firsthand the importance of being part of a learning community that forever shaped my path.

It was also during this time that the Reading Recovery teacher at our building, Cheryl Hayes, invited me to watch her work with one of my struggling students. I couldn't believe what I was seeing — such elegance of prompting; the child in charge and active the whole time; and accelerated growth that I was not able to get alone. I was jealous of her ability and knowledge and begged her to teach me this alchemy. After she laughed at me, which I didn't understand at the time, she shared a few articles and invited me to come back as often as I liked, a decision I'm sure she later regretted.

Recognizing our genuine desire to improve our literacy teaching, Cheryl invited me and the other teachers in our building to hear Marie Clay speak one day after school when Marie was in Ohio for an extended stay at Ohio State.

I remember the meeting was packed and I was mesmerized, not because Marie was particularly hypnotic or entertaining, but because she was so secure in her own beliefs shaped by research and her experience, and because her message resonated profoundly with me. Marie explained that all children CAN learn if we begin with their strengths, use assessments formatively to guide our next moves, and teach in measured ways using authentic reading and writing tasks. I took this message to heart but realized that enacting it was no simple task.

I wanted to know more about and be trained in Reading Recovery. Admittedly, I limped along across the next decade, grasping what I could of Marie's work and seeking more information. And that led me back to Columbus



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where I attended my first Reading Recovery conference in 1998. I was overwhelmed by the choices of speakers and topics and though I was a classroom teacher, I routinely ventured into Reading Recovery sessions. I was gobsmacked to learn that I still didn't know squat.

So, I decided I just couldn't wait any longer. Within 2 years, I changed jobs and districts, landing myself in a literacy coach position with Solon City Schools where I remain today. Solon is one of the most amazing places to work — where every teacher, administrator, and support person work hard to ensure that every child gets what s/he needs every day. And like my years in Whitehall, I had found another learning community to call home. In 2000, when Solon adopted Reading Recovery, I begged to be trained. And when my assistant superintendent, Debbie Siegel, gave me the go ahead, I felt I was the luckiest boy alive!

I was trained by a fantastic teacher leader, Libbie Larrabee, but was not at all prepared for how transformative that training would be. Now, instead of being in love with how children learned, I also became interested in how adults learn, grow, and change. I still wanted more knowledge and after just a few years, I found myself looking at the possibility of becoming a teacher leader who could help make transformations happen for children and adults

alike. Fortunately, I received an RRCNA scholarship, funded by Hameray Publishing, for training and returned to Ohio State for more learning. I am forever grateful to Ray and Christine Yuen for what their generosity has done for me and for the other 20 teacher leaders their funds have helped since 2009. In the past 7 years, I've helped 75 more teachers make the transformation to become Reading Recovery professionals.

And now, after all this reflection and time, three things are remarkably clear to me:

Firstly, we need to expand our offering of Reading Recovery training to more people, a feeling shared by many within RRCNA. Now, beyond the official training model, there are options for classroom, special education, and ELL teachers at most university training sites to get access to the theories, principles, and procedures of Reading Recovery.

Secondly, literacy teaching is complex and requires continual study. As new and diverse problems crop up across our school settings, more research and refinement is needed to help Reading Recovery and classroom teachers as they support and teach learners. We must continue to look for answers, even when that means working in new and diverse ways.

And lastly, our best tool for dealing with this complexity and change is our ability to socially construct knowledge with colleagues. So, we must continue to grow and strengthen our professional learning communities with university partnerships and engage in cross-building, district, and site endeavors using available technologies to expand and capitalize from our learning network.

I hope you are as proud of your personal journey, as I am proud of the journey that led me to become a teacher, coach, Reading Recovery teacher and teacher leader, and president of RRCNA. As my leadership duties in this role come to an end, I know that my journey is not even close to being over. I still have more to learn, think about, and try, and I'm grateful that I will have your company as our journeys continue together.