Wonderfully Disruptive Messages from Reading Recovery

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Author’s Note: This article was adapted from the author’s keynote address at the 2017 Reading Recovery Council of Michigan Institute. All children’s names are pseudonyms.

Introduction

Over the 35 years of Reading Recovery® implementation in the United States, we have wonderful messages to share related to how low-progress first-grade children can make accelerated progress within 12–20 weeks of service. Our messages can and should continue to disrupt how researchers, administrators, teachers, and parents think about children who struggle to learn to read after 1 year of instruction.

In this article, I highlight three such messages:

1. A struggling first grader can make accelerated progress, reaching average levels of his classroom within a short amount of time.

2. The teacher teaches for the child’s accelerated progress; not a packaged program, set of materials, gimmicks, technology, or procedures.

3. The school is responsible for preventing reading failure, organizing effectively to minimize the number of children who will need long-term, intervention services.

Upon first reading, you might agree that these are wonderful, positive messages, but these messages should also be considered disruptive at many levels. If not, the messages have the potential to become so comfortable and familiar that they end up reverberating in an echo chamber where we don’t continually challenge ourselves and others as to the potential and limitations of our work with the most fragile of learners. For example, as a Reading Recovery trainer who continues to teach children, I consider my teaching “disruptive,” but I can consider the adjective, disruptive, as positive, so that each time a child sits down next to me, I am attempting to disrupt this child’s learning trajectory and to disrupt that trajectory for the better. Conversely, if the child isn’t progressing as I had thought, then my teaching needs to be disrupted, so that the child can accelerate his learning.

In the remaining sections of this article, I will attempt to explain how each of these three messages above have the potential to be wonderfully disruptive, while ultimately emerging as messages that can resonate with hope for our future work together with children who are struggling to learn to read.

A Struggling Reader Can Make Accelerated Progress

A struggling first grader can make accelerated progress in a short amount of time. Using An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 2013), the teacher identifies the lowest 20% of the first-grade cohort and from that cohort selects the children who need the intervention the most. In the standard amount of delivery time of 12–20 weeks, most of the children accelerate their progress, reaching average levels of reading achievement by the end of the intervention.

Maria was one such child. She started her daily, one-half hour lessons with me reading at Text Level 3, and after 46 lessons over 12 weeks, Maria successfully exited the Reading Recovery intervention reading Level 14.

We often describe children’s progress by using raw scores and stanines. Why don’t we instead disrupt our comfort with numbers and remind ourselves what those numbers are actually describing. For example, when Maria entered Reading Recovery, she read At the Zoo (Scott Foresman, 1979) at her instructional level, i.e., at 90 percent word accuracy or higher. Figure 1 illustrates a representative page from that book. Maria quickly picked up on the repetitive structure and heavily used the pictures, never pointing.

After 46 lessons over 12 weeks, Maria read George the Porcupine (Scott Foresman, 1979) at her instructional level. See Figure 2 for a representative page from this book. Maria was reading George the Porcupine without her finger as well, but she was very focused on the text, problem solving if she got stuck, and phrasing the passage with expression.
Figure 3 contains Maria’s story, “I like to eat peanuts,” that she co-wrote with me in her second lesson. She wrote I and like on her own. I wrote to. She wrote e in eat as well as the p, n, and s in peanuts.

When she successfully exited the intervention at week 12, she was independently writing the type of story seen in Figure 4: “Ben’s tooth fell down by the apple. He showed his teacher.” An English learner, Maria independently composed and wrote every word in that story, except teacher. For this last word, she wrote the t, e, and er, and for ch, she trialed sh.

If this first message—that a struggling reader can make accelerated progress—is to be viewed as “wonderfully disruptive,” aggregate numbers mute, if not distance us from what this first grader accomplished, i.e., Maria’s reading and writing samples evidence what she accomplished in a short amount of time, not what she earned.

Since 1984, when Reading Recovery was first brought from New Zealand to Columbus, OH, tens of thousands of struggling children, like Maria, have accomplished something similar. What other programs, reading protocols, or teacher training can help our Marias accomplish something similar?

Dramatic progress in a short amount of time; that is what Maria accomplished. Clay (2016) says it better:

The child requiring help with early reading and writing has been making very slow progress and has been dropping further and further behind his peers. In order to catch up he will have to progress faster than his classmates for a time. (p. 19)

Of course, we do use numbers in Reading Recovery that can quickly show this faster progress for groups of children. For example, Figure 5 summarizes the 2018–2019 United States cohort on text reading progress. This graph is produced by the International Data Evaluation Center (IDEC) (2019, p. 17). Figure 5 is like an old family photograph even though it contains a graph summarizing last year’s national data. Those of us in Reading Recovery recognize the trajectory of those lines, the slopes of which have been remarkably similar in the United States, year-after-year, these past 35 years.
The graph describes average progress on the level of books that four cohorts of children read last school year. In Figure 5, search for the blue line’s starting point on the left-hand bottom of the graph. That point is where the fall cohort started the 2018–2019 school year reading, on average, compared to the green line that represents the national random sample of first graders’ starting book level. The red line represents that average reading progress of the second round of children who were picked up for service mid-year, while the average progress of the children who were tested for Reading Recovery but not selected for service is represented by the purple line. The children selected for the intervention in the fall who successfully left Reading Recovery mid-year, read, on average, the lowest level of text at the start of the school year.

At this point, track the blue line on Figure 5 to the point where it intersects with the green line. For children who successfully discontinued from Reading Recovery at mid-year, that steep slope of the blue line from September to mid-year demonstrates accelerated progress for children on standardized text level passages. At mid-year, the children who successfully exited the intervention were reading, on average, what the national random sample was reading and reading higher levels of books compared to the tested not instructed children. That fall cohort acceleration is replicated in the red line for the children who were picked up mid-year for Reading Recovery service. Note the flatness of the red line up to the point the children entered mid-year into the intervention compared to the line’s steep climb in the second half of the year when these children were being served.

The graph in Figure 5 further reveals that even after the fall entry children successfully left the intervention mid-year, they continued to make progress, though not at the same rate as when they were in Reading Recovery. That upward blue line from mid-year to the end of the school year shows continued progress, but it still distances us from what the children are accomplishing without the daily one-to-one intervention. When Maria (discussed, above) successfully exited mid-year from the intervention she was reading George the Porcupine, a Level 14 book. At the end of the year, she was reading No Children, No Pets (Scott Foresman, 1979), a Level 24 book, at her instructional level. A representative page from the book is found in Figure 6.

Once again, Maria’s progress vividly exemplifies what a child can accomplish during her time in Reading Recovery as well as what they continue to accomplish after the intervention is over.

Clay (2016) reminds us how such accelerated progress happens: “The child will get one-to-one teaching, and the lessons will start with his

![Image of Maria — End-of-Year Text Level Passage, No Children! No Pets!, p. 2 (Scott-Foresman, 1979)](image-url)
strengths and proceed according to what he is able to learn about reading and writing” (p. 20).

After reading that quote, I am reminded of Mitchell. He entered his series of lessons with me focusing only on the pictures and using the repetitive patterns of his earliest books. Those were his strengths with which he started. After 16 lessons involving 8 hours of contact time, or the equivalent of one workday, a watershed moment occurred when a teacher, like me, could say, “Now it begins. His trajectory toward reading failure has been disrupted.”

During Lesson 16, Mitchell read *Wake up, Dad* (Randell, 1994), a funny story of how the family tries to wake up Dad, who prefers to remain asleep. Mitchell read the book the previous lesson, after I introduced it to him. During his second reading of the book, I took a running record, using the standardized shorthand to capture Mitchell’s oral reading. On page 12 of that book the text reads, *Look Mom! Look at Dad!* Mitchell read, *Mom for Look*, then immediately self-corrected and read on until he arrived at the word *at* where he read *Dad for at* and *is for Dad*. Not satisfied, Mitchell tried again, *Look Dad*, but then he self-corrected, *at Dad*.

He even reread that second sentence, perhaps confirming he had read accurately.

Mitchell began with a strong sense of what the book was about and as his reading indicates, he persistently looked closely at the print in order to self-monitor and independently and successfully problem solve. The equivalent of 8 contact hours earlier, Mitchell pointed to the picture when I asked him where he should start reading. Just 8 contact hours later, his eyes were no longer riveted on just the pictures.

Clay (2016) writes, “Acceleration is achieved as the child takes over the learning process and works independently, discovering new things for himself…The child must continually push the boundaries of his own knowledge…” (p. 20). For Mitchell, Lesson 16 was the point where he was starting to “push his boundaries.”

Across the nation, Clay’s literacy processing theory is operationalized on a daily basis with the Marias and the Mitchells who are enrolled in Reading Recovery. It is a theory that insists on beginning where the child is, so that the child increasingly “takes over the learning process.” Clay (2016) explains further:

…we create networks in the brain between things we see (print on the page) and things we hear (the language we speak). Messages flow in and out of those networks. In the context of reading and writing this is often called literacy processing. (p. 5)

With opportunities to successfully read texts that are pitched to the child’s instructional level; with opportunities to explore how print works in the daily writing of little stories; with opportunities to problem solve and self-correct; with opportunities to talk about the books he’s reading; with opportunities to be challenged but not overwhelmed for 30 minutes each day, the child increasingly takes over his learning, accelerating toward success.

So, the message that a struggling first grader can make accelerated progress in a short amount of time is wonderful. This first message also should be wonderfully disruptive to people’s views of what low-progress children can accomplish when they see samples of dramatic progress such as Maria’s writing or listen to Mitchell’s extensive, independent, and successful reading of *Wake up, Dad* or study those familiar graphs of the national cohort’s progress. Unfortunately, over the years that I have been involved in Reading Recovery, I have heard disruptive responses that cannot be described as “wonderful.” For example: “Well, Maria doesn’t do that with me in her reading group!” or “Mitchell isn’t reading that level of book with me!”

Responses like these indicate that a child’s accelerated progress in Reading Recovery is also disrupting the expectations of our classroom teachers, school support staff, and administrators. How might we answer these challenges?

I suggest two words: “Why not?” Those two words disrupt the assumption that might influence some of our colleague’s responses, an assumption such as, “Maria can do that because she works with you, but she can’t do that when she’s not with you.” So when the Reading Recovery teacher replies, “Why not?” those two words not only disrupt the colleague’s assumption, but it reestablishes the child’s progress as that which cannot be dismissed so easily.

“Why not?” It opens up a needed, sometimes uncomfortable discussion with our colleagues. It opens up a chance for all of us to try to figure out how the child’s progress in the intervention can increasingly emerge in the classroom as well. Perhaps it means a visit to the classroom to see the child in action or inaction. Perhaps it means the classroom teacher will arrange a visit to the
Reading Recovery lesson. Perhaps it will mean that the Reading Recovery teacher and classroom teacher will commit to regular contact to discuss the child’s progress. There are many ideas for collegial discussion, but it begins with two words, “Why not?” Reading Recovery (Clay, 2016) makes two, and only two claims:

1. The Reading Recovery early intervention was designed to accelerate literacy acquisition for most of the children falling into the lowest 20 percent of literacy learners after a year of school.

2. It also acts as a pre-referral intervention and provides a period of diagnostic teaching to identify a small group of children who still need extra help and probably further specialist guidance. (p. 15)

Last year across the nation, IDEC (2019) reported that 70 percent of the children who received a full program of 12–20 weeks in Reading Recovery successfully discontinued from the program; 30 percent were recommended for further help.

I have taught children who were recommended for further help. Even though I think that their time with me was a useful, prereferral opportunity, and even though I could confidently recommend them for further service in the school’s response to intervention (RTI) process, there is the disruptive reality for me that these children did not make accelerated progress. Clay’s (2016) words are still rattling around in my head as I think about these children: “If a child is a struggling reader or writer the conclusion must be that we have not yet discovered a way to help him to learn” (p. 165).

Earlier in this article, I highlighted Maria’s accelerated progress. Her series of lessons gave her a way to help her learn. But those of us in Reading Recovery know that there will be a small cohort of children for whom the intervention will not produce accelerated learning, and Clay’s quote above leads me into the next wonderfully disruptive message.

The Teacher Teaches for Accelerated Progress
The teacher teaches for the child’s accelerated progress — not a program, set of materials, gimmicks, technology, or procedures. It is with a highly trained, early literacy interventionist that a struggling child can progress and progress quickly.

Early literacy researchers, Elizabeth Sulzby and William Teale (1984) used a Russian word, obuchenie, to describe what they found occurring during storybook time between a parent and a child. It means “teaching” and it also means “learning.” The term assumes that it is very difficult to separate teaching from learning; that what is happening between an adult and a child in the moment is an intricate ebb and flow. The child contributes what he can, and the adult builds off of that. Over time, the child increasingly takes over that which is happening between heads at first. I am a couple years shy of 40 years in education, and I have yet to observe a curriculum, set of materials or books, procedures, or piece of technology that can match the dynamic of obuchenie.

Sarah came into Reading Recovery unable to read any words on the Ohio Word Test or Slosson. She could write two words, to and mom. She was able to read the book, Mom (Randell, 1996) a Level 1 book, only after I read it to her, modeling pointing to the words. In early lessons, one of Sarah’s short-term goals was to build up a small core of known words that she could use to self-monitor her reading as well as to learn how to learn words.

During Lesson 14, Sarah was rereading a familiar book that she and I had co-written together during the first 10 lessons of her intervention, the time in the program referred to as Roaming Around the Known. I took those handwritten pages and typed them up into a readable text entitled, Sarah Grows Food, a nonfiction book that lists the many vegetables she and her family grow in their background garden. A different vegetable was listed on each page within a repeating structure, e.g., “We grow tomatoes.”

Over our time during Roaming Around the Known when the book was being co-written, Sarah increasingly controlled the writing of the word grow. She watched me in the first lesson write it; then she copied it during the next lesson. By the time the fourth page was co-written, she was writing the word grow without a model.

Now in Lesson 14, the book is back as an old favorite, and I decided that I was going to use a procedure, “Locating a Known Word,” to promote an early behavior that helps the child recognize print information from what was probably for Sarah just a bunch of squiggles and lines.

After Sarah successfully read this familiar book, I framed the word grow and asked, “What’s this word?”
She accurately identified it, and then I asked her to write grow on a nearby dry erase board without any model. She wrote grow easily but with a backwards r. She had never written r like that. At that point, I showed her a representative page from her book and asked her, “Are you right?” hoping that at that point Sarah would self-monitor the reversed r she had written when comparing it to grow in her book. But Sarah nodded her head that she was right. Then I said, “Something’s wrong,” as I reached for the magnetic letter r. At that point Sarah replied, “Oh!” and erased the inverted r and produced the proper form.

Sarah could identify the word grow quickly. I assumed she could also write grow because she had done so independently just a few lessons earlier. But she wrote that backward r and that had not happened in earlier lessons. Did I explicitly teach her how to write r? I don’t think so because she had written it correctly in earlier lessons. I simply prompted her—“Something’s wrong”—which started the scanning of her attempt, looking for anything that was amiss. She controlled the writing of the shape of the letter r but for some reason, the directionality in Lesson 14 was reversed. I pulled out that magnetic letter r; but was that model explicitly teaching or was it her learning? As soon as she saw the model, she quickly realized what was wrong in her attempt and fixed it.

I think this description of a few seconds in Sarah’s early lessons approaches what is meant by the concept of obuchenie. Given how Sarah responded to my prompts, I came in and I backed off based on how she responded. The goal was to keep her in control of her reading and writing behavior and inserting myself just enough so that I didn’t get in the way of her progress.

I will admit, though, that I know how to get in the way of the child’s learning. I know how to impede a child’s accelerated progress such as Mitchell’s, whom I wrote about earlier in this article.

Mitchell was reading My Accident (Giles, 1996) for the first time. The boy in the book retells his experience of a skateboard accident that ends him up in the hospital with his arm in a cast. On each page the boy remembers where he goes from the time he falls to the time he arrives back home. For example, on page 2, the narrator says, “Here I am, on my skateboard.”

If the teacher is the hope for the child to make accelerated progress, then if the hope isn’t being realized; it’s the teacher who must adjust. It’s the teacher who must adapt.

In my book introduction, I played off of Mitchell’s strength for using the pictures to get meaning when he reads. Using the pictures, we tracked how the boy was in the ambulance, then at the hospital, then in the x-ray room, etc. Mitchell could also use a repetitive pattern to track the print, word-by-word, with his finger. So, as part of my introduction to this new book, Mitchell and I orally rehearsed the repetitive pattern, “Here I am…” and on I asked him to read that pattern on page 2. Then I turned the book over to him to read.

On page 2 Mitchell read Look at me, instead of Here I am. He stopped, reread, and self-corrected it all, Here I am, on my skateboard. This was similar self-correction behavior that I documented on his running record of Wake up, Dad which I described earlier in this article. When Mitchell arrived on page 4, he invented, again, Look at me, but this time Mitchell continues on the ground. That oral reading replicated good English word order and made sense with the picture. Given that Mitchell self-corrected this invention on page 2, earlier, I prompted him to try page 4 again, that something was wrong. He repeated Look at me, on the ground. I took him back to page 2, his successful page, and prompted him, “Read this page again.” Mitchell read, Look at me on my skateboard.

As his teacher, I realized that I had to change my teaching quickly. Below is a list of everything I think I did or said over the first reading, each time Mitchell read Look at me instead of Here I am — which he reliably did on almost every page:

- “Could this word be Here or Hat?”
- “Check that word. (pointing with my pencil) It’s not Look.”
- “Here I am… You say it. Now you read this page.”
- “Before you read, find Here. Now read.”
- “Say, Here. What would be the first letter you would expect to see in the word Here?”
When Mitchell had struggled through to the end of the book, and he had once again, read *Look at me* instead of *Here I am*, I was exasperated. I thought I was pitch perfect with all the prompts I listed above. Why was he still inventing? Why wasn’t he looking closer at the print like he had originally done on page 2? Why wasn’t he doing that accelerative self-monitoring and self-correcting he demonstrated recently when he read the book, *Wake up, Dad?* I might have answered these questions by blaming the child, but the harder reality is that my teaching at that point need to be disrupted.

I remember half-saying to myself as I put away that book at the end of the lesson, never to return. “Well THAT was a hard word.” As Mitchell got up to leave the lesson, he pushed in his chair and responded, “That was a REALLY hard word!”

I imposed on Mitchell the need to learn that word *Here*, with that book, during that lesson. I imposed what I thought he needed to learn, and I taught, but he didn’t learn. Obuchenie was not present. Clay (2016) writes:

> For thousands of children entering Reading Recovery annually, acceleration is an outcome of sound teaching in the first few weeks of the lesson series … However for some teachers and some children this does not seem to happen. There is only one position to take in this case. The lesson series is not being appropriately adapted to this child’s particular needs. (p. 165)

If the teacher is the hope for the child to make accelerated progress, then if the hope isn’t being realized; it’s the teacher who must adjust. It’s the teacher who must adapt.

It’s too easy to say or think of a child who isn’t making accelerated progress in the following ways:

- “Well, no one is helping him at home.”
- “His classroom teacher doesn’t get it.”
- “You know, his sister had Reading Recovery.”
- “He just doesn’t have language.”
- “I am going to need a full 20 weeks with him because he’s so low.”
- “He’s probably dyslexic.”

Those aren’t wonderfully disruptive responses. Those are disruptive responses that place the problem on the child, when Clay is quite clear where the locus of the problem resides.

There is an entire chapter in *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals* (Clay, 2016) that leads off with a section entitled, “When acceleration is compromised…” And it is not the child who is doing the compromising. In that section, one of Clay’s recommendations is to seek help from a colleague. I have learned to seek help earlier than later when I start thinking the child sitting next to me isn’t progressing like I thought he would. I invite in another colleague to review my records and observe my teaching and the child’s responses. I often find that my colleague will find what Clay calls, “blind spots,” (p. 166) and will work with me to make adjustments to my teaching.

Therefore, if a child is not making accelerated progress, it is up to the teacher to disrupt the teaching and adjust it with the help of colleagues. Nonetheless, there is the reality each and every year that some children won’t benefit from our efforts, that the hope for accelerated progress was not realized.

Anthony Bryk, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, challenged the Reading Recovery community to think about the children who don’t make accelerated progress. In a January 2016 article in the *Educational Researcher*, “Accelerating How We Learn to Improve,” Bryk suggested that the Reading Recovery community move beyond external and internal research that repeatedly confirms that the intervention works, “on average” for the vast majority of children enrolled in the intervention. Bryk recognized Reading Recovery’s effectiveness, but in his article he also recognized the reality that in some schools, Reading Recovery wasn’t successful, that some children didn’t achieve accelerative progress. Bryk challenged us to focus more on why.

A few years ago, a teacher leader and I were analyzing the annual progress of Reading Recovery children in text reading levels in two buildings. Children in both buildings started below the national average of text reading level for full-program children that year. Both schools’ children progressed in their ability to read increasingly complex books. In one of the buildings, the Reading Recovery teachers posted a growth of 17 book levels for their children on average, while the other building’s teachers posted an increase of 9 levels. Both
buildings are in the same district where the majority of the Reading Recovery children successfully discontinued from the intervention.

Bryk challenges us to ask in such districts, “What is going on in that building that produces such accelerative progress of 17 book levels?” Conversely, we also have to ask, “What is going on in that building where accelerative progress wasn’t achieved?”

Such questions disrupt the Reading Recovery network’s focus on district discontinuing rates or large-scale quasi-experimental studies that consistently show that Reading Recovery works, which it does. Rather, these new questions challenge us to try to understand why Reading Recovery is working in some buildings with some teachers and some children and why it isn’t working in other buildings, with other teachers and other children. It bears repeating what Clay (2016) said, “If a child is a struggling reader or writer the conclusion must be that we have not yet discovered a way to help him learn” (p. 165).

The Reading Recovery community in the United States and Canada has taken up Bryk’s challenge by establishing a network improvement community to explore how we can help as many children as possible learn and to no longer content ourselves with “on average.” (For a description of this effort see Forbes, Askey, Flight, & Embry, 2019; Lochmiller & Karnopp, p. 27 in this issue).

Though the second, wonderfully disruptive message maintains that the hope for any child’s accelerated progress rests with the teacher, the teacher should not be alone in challenging herself why that progress stalled. Rather, in coordination with the Reading Recovery network, it is the school’s responsibility to try to understand what was working and what wasn’t working. And that leads me to the final, wonderfully disruptive message.

**The School is Responsible for Preventing Reading Failure**

The school is responsible for preventing reading failure, organizing effectively to minimize the number of children who will need long-term support.

Prior to Bryk’s challenge to the Reading Recovery community back in January 2016, Clay (2016) had already recognized in earlier guidebooks that schools provide variable levels of support to prevent reading failure:

> We know that children learn at different rates. How do we shift children from one level of competence to another? These questions are related to the quality of instruction given to school entrants. There are great variations between schools in how they manage this path of progress. (p. 10)

I like to think that all school personnel recognize that preventing reading failure in our schools should be a group effort, that no one person is responsible for that prevention in any one building. That’s the wonderful part of this third message. There are dedicated personnel, school teams, evaluators, and coaches. Each year, in each building, there is much time and talent dedicated to reducing reading failure. But there isn’t always a coordinated effort to prevent reading failure within a building or a district. Here are three examples that reveal a lack of coordination.

In one district 4 years ago, the teacher leader and I discovered a pattern in the 15 buildings that were implementing Reading Recovery. On average, the children in Reading Recovery across the district entered far below the national average of full program children on the Letter Identification task from the Observation Survey (Clay, 2013). Every building’s children made remarkable progress when it came to their ability to identify their letters over their time in Reading Recovery. (As there is a finite number of letters to learn, it is expected that the children will be able to identify all their letters within a short amount of time, i.e., there is a ceiling effect on this task.) The Reading Recovery and classroom teachers should be commended, especially in those buildings whose children seemed to come into the intervention with very low knowledge of letters. However, the fall entrance scores on Letter Identification should disturb the buildings’ teams that are focused on preventing reading failure. Why did the Reading Recovery children in all these schools start in the fall with such low letter knowledge? Those in this district that organize to prevent reading failure might ask, “Should we be doing something different in our kindergarten classrooms, and can we change the instruction to address this pattern? How can we coordinate and organize an effort to turn around this pattern? Our kindergarten teachers need to be at the table to help us explore this pattern and coordinate a response to this data.”

Missed Reading Recovery lessons is another example of a lack of coordi-
nation in a school’s plan to prevent reading failure. Clay (2016) is clear: “When daily individual teaching is not achieved, the quality of the teaching and the outcomes of the intervention will be seriously affected” (p. 21).

In one district I worked with a few years back, the teacher leader and I discovered that the average number of lessons missed for all children served that year was almost 20. That equates to 1 month of Reading Recovery instruction. That average number includes the children’s absences or unavailability as well as the teachers’ absences or unavailability. What was most concerning though was that almost half of the missed lessons—the equivalent of almost 2 weeks of daily instruction—was because the teachers were “unavailable” to teach. They weren’t sick or away from the school building for personal reasons. I inquired as to why teachers were unavailable for such a lengthy period of time. I was told that many of them were being pulled to help monitor the mandated state testing in the district’s classrooms. How do we respond to that?

Pulling the most highly trained early literacy interventionist to help monitor a state test is like asking the brain surgeon to cancel her surgeries for 2 weeks, so that she can help the hospitalists round on the general surgery floors. To be clear, state tests need monitors. It’s the law in many states, but the decision makers in this district must recognize what it means to reassign a highly qualified early literacy interventionist to a lower level, albeit mandated, educational task. First, it’s not cost effective. One would simply have to cost out the Reading Recovery teacher’s salary and benefits for 2 weeks of daily service, and I can guarantee the decision makers that they have paid an exorbitant amount of money for one test monitor. Cheaper solutions surely can be found to this problem.

Second, and more importantly, these teacher reassignments negatively impact any accelerative progress the children were accomplishing, prior the start of the state testing.

Clay (2016) speaks to this lack of coordination:

Reading Recovery lessons must occur daily. In that way even the child who cannot remember from day to day can be helped. The teacher acts as the memory of what his response was yesterday, and prompts him accordingly … At the same time principals must protect the teacher’s daily access to her students in the interests of achieving the greatest progress in the minimum number of lessons. (p. 21)

My example, above, was extreme. It is disturbing that these teachers’ unavailability was so high in this one district, but the larger point I am trying to make is that the district, building, or team must agree that missed lessons work against the prevention of reading failure and is cost exorbitant. School personnel are responsible to minimize missed lessons, whether due to the child’s excessive absences or, as in my example, teacher unavailability.

One final example of a lack of coordination to prevent reading failure is worth exploring. As a university trainer, I annually receive requests from school building administrators to waive a United States standard that one Reading Recovery teacher is assigned four daily teaching slots. The request is usually for the teacher to reduce her daily load to two children. When asked why, the reply is invariably, “We need the teacher to see more children in small groups.”

Now on the one hand, that reply reveals something positive. The administrator recognizes the teacher’s high level of training and expertise and wants that expertise available for more children.

However, this request to teach fewer Reading Recovery children is not an effective response for preventing reading failure in that building. First, the larger question underlying the administrator’s request has not been addressed. “Why are there so many more children who need service?” There could be a myriad of compelling reasons, but the building or dis-

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strict personnel need to understand those many reasons so that there can be a comprehensive and coordinated effort from all personnel, not just the Reading Recovery teacher.

Second, the request to teach fewer children ignores the large caseload the teacher already maintains. In the United States, most Reading Recovery teachers teach four children daily with the remaining day’s duties going toward small group instruction. In the 2018–2019 school year, IDEC (2019) reported that in the United States the Reading Recovery teacher taught on average almost 50 children in 1 year, 8 of whom received the intervention. That’s a lot of preparation, monitoring, assessing, and record keeping. For many of these teachers, one wonders if the law of diminishing returns isn’t already in operation.

Finally, a request to teach fewer Reading Recovery children ignores the reality that this early literacy intervention specialist knows how to corral the benefits of a one-to-one setting in order to get accelerative reading progress in a short amount of time, an expertise that cannot effortlessly transfer to other learning contexts such as small-group instruction. Clay (2016) speaks to this argument: “When a teacher is faced with a group of children, she inevitably makes compromises as she selects a next move for the group…by some averaging of joint or group needs” (p. 18).

The best Reading Recovery teacher cannot hope to teach for accelerated progress in the small group that she could teach for in daily, individualized lessons. To back up that statement, Reading Recovery teachers should think back to their first grade, small group reading levels at mid-year, that time of the year when fall’s Reading Recovery children were discontinuing. What book levels were the first-grade children reading in these small groups as compared to the book level for the discontinuing children at mid-year? There probably was a big difference, i.e., the text levels of the small groups of children were much improved from the start of the school year but were much lower than the text levels of the Reading Recovery children who were now leaving their intervention, returning to average reading levels of their first-grade classrooms. Reading Recovery teachers should share this discrepancy in book levels with colleagues when asked to teach more children in small groups, while also reminding colleagues and decision makers that the small groups at mid-year were comprised of first-grade children who weren’t the lowest progressing children in the fall.

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From Comfortable to Disruptive

A struggling first grader can learn to read in a short amount of time. The hope for that child’s success rests with the Reading Recovery teacher who teaches for accelerated progress. Finally, the teacher is part of a coordinated, collegial effort that is responsible for preventing reading failure in that building.

As I wrote at the beginning of this article, these three messages are familiar to most of us, but when revisited as wonderful and disruptive, I tried to shake out these messages from whatever comfortable blanket you and I had wrapped them in. I admit that the messages were so familiar that they had stopped challenging me to see the power of what happens when we sit down next to a child who is struggling to learn to read and how that power can be realized or compromised.
The three messages have one thing in common: They keep the focus on where it belongs… on the child. A child is involved, so we want to do better. A child is sitting next to us, and we want to disrupt this child’s march toward illiteracy. That’s wonderful, isn’t it? And if we have to disrupt our thinking for the better as we work together with this child, then so be it.

Editor’s Note:
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References


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Dr. James Schnug is a Reading Recovery trainer with The Ohio State University. First trained as a teacher leader in 1987, he served in that role at the Ashland University/Mansfield City Schools training site in Ohio. He retrained as a Reading Recovery teacher in 2010, after serving as a tenured Ashland University faculty member for over 20 years. In 2010, Jim became the project administrator for the Reading Recovery: Scaling Up What Works i3 grant and ultimately trained as a trainer for the New York University Reading Recovery Project in New York City.

About the Cover
As an English-language learner, Christopher extended oral language as well as his literacy knowledge. His Reading Recovery lessons with Mrs. MacNaughton were discontinued after a full program. Now in third grade, Christopher continues to be a hard worker and a quick learner. His teacher shares that he is always willing to go above and beyond in everything he does!