Where Are They Now?

An Interview with Peggy Phillips, Lexington County School District One

Typically on this page, we share pictures and success stories of children who experienced Reading Recovery and are now in high school, college, or beyond. However, the current answer to the question, “Where are they now?” is that we are in the midst of a pandemic which has pressed Reading Recovery teachers to find creative ways to teach their students from a distance.

So this time, we feature an interview with Peggy Phillips, a Reading Recovery teacher leader from South Carolina, to learn about how she and her teachers have been supporting their students via distance learning.

Where were you and your students at the beginning of the pandemic?
We had just gotten into our second round of students and had finished Roaming when we had to go into quarantine. We left on Wednesday for a long weekend and we got notice Sunday night we would not be returning to school. We spent the first week taking time to figure out what we could do and to connect with parents. Although I was able to stay in contact regularly with all of my Reading Recovery students, two of my students were going to be consistently available to connect virtually so I focused on what I could do to support their learning.

How did your planning go?
I knew about Zoom from previous Reading Recovery training so I was comfortable using that platform. I started by scouring the Internet for books we could use electronically. Thankfully, we were able to get a 30-day free subscription for PM Ecollection from Cengage. We were even able to mask words and teach analogies by sharing the screen with students. Later, Clemson was able to buy 100 licenses for a year that teachers could use. That way, we could also give each child their own account so they could read the books on their own. We also signed up for the free subscription of Literacy Footprints Digital Reader from Pioneer Valley Books when it was launched. In order to continue to provide a variety of texts, we also used document cameras to share texts from our personal collections.
**What barriers did you experience?**
When we left, we didn’t know that we wouldn’t be able to get back into the building for several weeks so we used what we could until we could get access. Some of the teachers used their phone as a doc camera by positioning it between two cans of soup! When we finally got back into the building, we gathered up all our supplies and put book collections together for each child with many easy books for independent reading, dry erase boards, and markers. The school scheduled a pick-up day to get new materials every few weeks. Although we knew the books may not ever return due to COVID concerns, we sent them anyway! If parents couldn’t pick up materials, teachers left packages in mailboxes or on doorsteps. We had to get books in kids’ hands! We also had several families that did not have devices or Internet access. We had to get very creative with ways to connect with these families, oftentimes connecting over the phone to hear the child read or the parents would text pictures of student writing.

**How did you handle the writing portion of the lesson?**
The student would write on their whiteboard or paper and hold it up to the camera. We used the interactive whiteboard in Zoom to share the pen. We also used Jamboard, which is part of Google Suite, to do letter work, word work, and the cut-up sentence. We could click on sticky notes with each word of the cut-up sentence and move them around. For some, we could give the student control of the screen to move the words around and make it interactive. Unfortunately, students were connecting with different devices which created a challenge with functionality.

**What did you learn from this experience?**
I knew the teachers and parents I worked with were amazing, but this experience has shown me their resilience and tremendous growth mindset. We built very strong relationships with our families. We were excited when we saw that parents were taking on Reading Recovery language as they listened to their child read. Our experiences teaching at a distance then influenced the design of Summer Reading Camp for rising third and fourth graders. This year, teachers worked with children individually rather than in groups. They met fewer times, but the data showed that students grew significantly more than students did in the past. It has been truly a learning experience for all of us! The Reading Recovery family—in Lexington District One, South Carolina, and across the nation—is definitely Stronger Together!