

President's Message

Unusual Season Elevates Possibilities for New Community Growth

RRCNA President Leslie McBane

It was early in the spring of 2021, that I was finally able to take my mother for a drive near her home in Carlisle, PA. After a year of distancing, the chance to be in the same physical space with my mom was its own tonic. Add to that her 96 years of wisdom and perspective, and you have the makings of a memorable car ride.

The trees were still quite bare, and the surrounding farms were brown and dormant. My mom gazed out the window while I concentrated on the narrow hilly road. After some time, she turned to me and said, “Winter reveals structure, doesn’t it?” Puzzled, I asked, “What do you mean, Mom?” She went on to say that during summer, when everything is lush and leaf-filled, we can’t see the underlying architecture of living things.

Mom’s observation prompted me to research how master gardeners approach designing a landscape. I discovered that most experts find the effusive display of full bloom distracting and suggest that winter is the time to consider and plan a garden’s structure. During a lecture I attended at the Chicago Botanic Garden, Maria Smithburg encouraged gardeners to “always let the winter tell you something about the garden.”

According to Marie Clay (2001), using a different lens grants us the capacity to gain perspective. She says such a lens “is used for limited purposes for which it is particularly suited (like viewing things in detail or taking a panoramic photograph)” (p. 41). It occurred to me that winter could be a type of Marie Clay’s *unusual lens*, since it offers an opportunity to see what lies hidden from view during the growing season.

We have been in a winter season of sorts, pared down to the essentials during the pandemic. In light of the clarity this unusual lens provides, I’ve noticed some characteristics of our Reading Recovery Community’s landscape. I’ve reflected on our community’s navigation of the events of the past year and how we’ve viewed and tended our own

garden. This atypical season gave us the rare opportunity to examine our structure, unencumbered by the excessive foliage of past growing seasons.

The Reading Recovery community’s vision is to “ensure the competencies necessary for a literate and productive future for children learning to read and write.” According to our mission statement, we aim to “construct collaborative partnerships to change the trajectory of literacy achievement.” Measured against these aspirations, how did we fare during the past year? I would like to suggest some tangible indicators of the vitality of Reading Recovery that another, more typical year may have obscured.

Incredibly, Reading Recovery students who achieved Accelerated Progress outperformed their random sample peers in each and every measure of growth on the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (International Data Evaluation Center, 2021). This remarkable accomplishment is unprecedented and comes during a year when some of us did not see a single student in person! What seemed a dormant season proved quite the opposite, as the blooming of strong readers and writers revealed when spring returned. Whether teachers taught remotely in a hybrid manner, or in person with social distancing protocols in place, learning and acceleration happened. The strength of the lesson framework, combined with the deliberate and dexterous expertise of teachers, ensured that children received the high-quality, responsive teaching that is at the heart of Reading Recovery instruction. Good soil (a sound theory), strong roots (a history of thoughtful practice), and plentiful sunlight and rain (a commitment to daily instruction) led to vibrant growth. We proved to ourselves and to others that our intervention is effective in all seasons because we do whatever it takes to find a way to teach children to read and write.

This past winter also allowed us to see parts of our structure that were hidden by the foliage of previous springs, such as the vital support of a child’s family in the process



The wisdom and perspective of Leslie's 96-year-old mom helped reveal new opportunities for growth in the Reading Recovery Community.

of learning to read and write. Due to the necessities of online learning, many of us were able to connect with the families of our children in more authentic and tangible ways. Families welcomed us into their homes, and we traded the more sterile environment of the classroom for the warmth of kitchens and family rooms. Of course, our families have always been there, but the recent winter of the pandemic reminded us that family connections are critical when growing readers and writers.

In addition, our technical expertise grew exponentially and surprised us. Teachers and teacher leaders, with the support of trainers, found creative ways to maintain the integrity of the Reading Recovery lesson while delivering instruction through a variety of virtual platforms. This is knowledge that will serve us in many ways in the future — from coaching opportunities to increased collegial collaboration. Our attention to the whole child seated (albeit virtually) beside us deepened. We proved our ability to respond proactively through innovation and collaboration and were elated to see the positive effects on children's learning.

Since a garden's structure is more apparent in the winter, gardeners can more easily see gaps in the design, opportunities for new growth.

This is true in our community as well. New initiatives at RRCNA have grown out of a careful look at ways in which our mission can be strengthened and enhanced.

The pared-down nature of the past year gave us an unusual lens for noticing and elevating possibilities for new growth.

In June, Past President Amy Smith, President-Elect Maeghan McCormick, and I attended a presidents' retreat, hosted by RRCNA Executive Director Billy Molasso. Together we reflected on past and present, while imagining prospects for future initiatives. The events of the past year gave us a renewed sense of urgency to examine possibilities for new growth. One of the most important topics we discussed was Kivvit's work on our behalf. For those of you new to Kivvit, this public affairs strategist has been working with us since January 2021, to assist our organization by crafting a concise, compelling message for the public. Because of Kivvit's deep dive into opposition research, as well as testing what messages from our community have the greatest resonance, we are positioned to have a more targeted and robust impact on the literacy conversation taking place in the public square.

We found another opportunity to cultivate new growth in the formation of our Legislative Response Team (LRT). It has been a while since our community focused on advocacy at the state level. The LRT will help us identify and respond to legislative initiatives that directly or indirectly impact the implementation of Reading Recovery at the state and local level. Responses can be quickly crafted and mobilized in real time, to sustain and grow our spheres of influence.

My mom opened my eyes, and hopefully yours as well, to the beauty and clarity that a winter season lays bare. And once we've gazed through this unusual lens, we can't *unsee* what we've discovered. We can't waste what we've learned. The challenges of the last year revealed a vibrant community, and I'm excited to see what new growth springs from our proposed initiatives. Tending a healthy and robust garden requires constant attention and expert care. We've learned a lot about ourselves as a community from the past winter. As we move into yet another, I believe we do so as more evolved gardeners with a deeper understanding of our landscape.

References

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