

President's Message

Working Together to Clean Up the Literacy Landscape



RRCNA President Leslie McBane

This past fall, I shared my mom's analogy of how the barrenness of winter reveals the structure of living things and how our community's navigation of the pandemic unveiled some unexpected strengths and celebrations. As I wrote that message, we had no idea what this past winter would bring. Who could have predicted the effects of the Omicron variant on our schools and our families?

While it is a welcome thing to see the last of winter, its departure does expose debris uncovered by the receding snow. As I drive to work each morning, I am astounded by the amount of litter along the highway. I think of the huge task of clearing it away. Frankly, I'm bothered by it. I'm tempted to stop and begin picking it up. I find it unsightly and distracting. It's obscuring my view.

In some ways, our receding winter has exposed some detritus and distractions in our community as well. The challenge is to determine what merits our attention and what we leave for others to address. It is critical for us to decide what steps and structures will advance our stated vision of ensuring "the competencies necessary for a literate and productive future for children learning to read and write." If we want such a future

for the children we teach, we need to keep our own theories on teaching and learning robust and clutter-free.

First, what might constitute the 'litter' in our community? It is found in the clamor of voices, the clutter, if you will, of opinions and viewpoints that make a mess of the landscape

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but do not really achieve anything of value. The distractions that get our attention but aren't worthy of our time and energy. The social media pettiness and noise that sap our energy. We've got some litter defacing our garden. When is it our responsibility to pick up the trash and when must we leave it to decompose?

Back in 1991, Marie Clay was prescient when she stated, "I find the big debates divisive, for people feel obligated to take up opposing positions on matters like phonological awareness, the reader's use of context, and the nature of getting meaning from texts" (updated 2016, p. 3). She knew that holding a complex theory of literacy development would serve to keep us out of the weeds of oversimplified conclusions. We are attempting to grow readers and writers, while narrow views and simplistic theories are threatening to starve these tender sprouts by withholding needed nutrients — such as continuous text, responsive teaching, and books with natural language patterns. Instead, let's make sure they thrive by clearing away the weeds of compromise.

To clear the way for spring growth, we need like-minded partnerships with friends outside the Reading Recovery Community. Happily, these friends have become a part of our family through our advocacy initiatives, and their presence is creating a stronger and healthier garden. We need to nourish these relationships, ensure their cultivation, and seek to expand them even more. Helpfully, our offense-based messaging strategy has created more visibility and increased opportunities for others to

align with our purpose and join our efforts. We are also able to support these new friends as they seek to actualize their own goals and aspirations. It is very much like the work done each spring in my neighborhood's tiny park: Friends from all walks come together for our spring cleanup so that we can all enjoy the green space. And we appreciate it even more because we had a hand in filling those bags of yard waste.

Litter is not only an eyesore, it is depressing. But in contrast, our message is attracting others because it is attractive. We have a joyful message. There are countless stories of cheerful readers and writers who, guided by us along different paths, have entered the world of literacy with competence and success. My current student, Tyler, approaches reading and writing with exuberance, agency, and good humor. When I recently cut a word in his cut-up sentence into parts he exclaimed, "Get a medic!" Tyler has a can-do spirit in part because he has successfully learned how to look at print. And my hope for each of us is that we, too, learn how to look. To train our eyes to see possibilities among the problems. To see growth emerging through the garbage.

As we move into this new season, what litter should we focus on collectively and what should we let go? First, as a community, we can speak up against misinformation and oversimplification. I have a tiny garden in a historical neighborhood, and I have had to learn how to create and maintain an attractive outdoor space. I've had master gardeners teach me how to plant herbs and divide hostas. In the same way, we are

learning from others how to speak up and speak out in knowledgeable ways. Kivvit—our master gardener—is helping us create powerful and attractive messaging. And we can now respond to real time legislative happenings through our legislative response team. In Clay's words, we are "strengthening our range" (2016, p. 106). Together, we are engaged in cleaning up the literacy landscape. We may not be able to attend to every piece of detracting information, but we are able to achieve much as we combine our efforts.

Closer to home, my responsibility is to respond thoughtfully to those who may not agree with me. Think of it as making sure that my personal space is clutter free. Individually, this requires refining how I describe my work, and using all my ingenuity to clarify what I say and do when others misrepresent Reading Recovery theory and practice. In our own backyards, we must become adept at presenting our viewpoints with more than just fervor. Whether we are speaking with a school board member, administrator, or fellow teacher, we must learn how to be what Clay (2016) describes as "charmingly negative," if necessary (p. 183).

It is heartening to be able to say goodbye to winter. In the spirit of spring cleaning, let's rid ourselves of what might be littering our landscape. Let's tend our gardens shoulder to shoulder, so that young learners can thrive in the sun.

Reference

Clay, M. M. (2016). *Literacy lessons designed for individuals* (2nd ed.). Heinemann.

RRCNA Board of Directors Election Results

*We are pleased to share
results of the recent election
for terms beginning
July 1, 2022.*



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