Using Cycles of Inquiry: A Reflective Tool to Foster Acceleration

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Author’s note: All student names are pseudonyms.

For some children, coming into Reading Recovery® lessons immediately puts them on a path to accelerated learning, but this is not the case for all. As teachers we need to find ways to support the learning of those we find difficult to teach. Teacher reflection is a critical action to scaffold student learning when acceleration is compromised.

The pace at which teachers reflect on and adjust instruction is important. Clay (2016) states, “When you are learning a complex thing a bit at a time, the pace at which you put it all together appears to be important. Negative effects tend to accrue if you do a lot of reading and writing on the basis of a half-formed theory for too long” (p. 6). Clay was referring to children, but this also applies to us as teachers. If we don’t see that our teaching is making a difference, over time, there are cumulative effects. We can’t let this happen. We need to take immediate action to support a positive shift in the child’s learning trajectory.

In reading Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don’t Know, by Adam Grant, I was struck by the story of a group of wildfire fighters in the Mann Gulch Fire of 1949 (Grant, 2021, pp. 3–7). The fire had shifted direction and the firefighters needed to shift from fight to flight mode to outrun the fire and reach safety. Firefighters have tools and processes for their work. In danger, many were unaware their heavy gear was slowing them down, and once they did, some were still reluctant to drop their tools. William Dodge, the leader of the group, quickly rethought the situation and saw a possible way to survive. He started a fire, burning the area around him, called to his team to join him (no one did), and was able to lay low and the fire went around him. Of the 15 men, only two firefighters were able to outrun the fire. Dodge survived because he quickly rethought the situation and was open to new possibilities.

As teachers, when students are not making expected progress, we feel pressure or in the case of the fire analogy, we feel heat and smell smoke. This feeling is a warning sign to pay attention and immediately take on a rethinking stance. Perhaps we need to drop previous ways of doing things, change course, or let go of materials and procedures. Rethinking is a challenge; We hesitate at the idea of rethinking, we go with what we have been taught, what our experiences suggest is best, and give things more time. More time is not the answer. Clay (2016) tells us, “The pace at which you put it all together is important” (p. 6). We need to pay attention and act fast, just as Dodge did as he trialed a new technique in firefighting, the escape fire.

As teachers, we know daily and weekly reflection is necessary for us to design lessons for individuals, yet it is challenging to find the time needed to do this well. We know adaptation is required “to ensure the construction of effective processing at all times despite a not-so-balanced repertoire of the struggling learner” (Clay, 2015b, p. 221). How might we make the process of reflecting and rethinking easier? How do we make teaching decisions with the particular child in mind? How do we evaluate the effectiveness of our actions?

In this article, I will introduce a rethinking framework, the Plan Do Study Act (PDSA) improvement cycle as a tool to discipline rethinking and adjust instruction (Bryk et al., 2015, pp. 121–122). I will share some of my thinking about accelerating learning through stories of three students who made me rethink as I worked to puzzle out how to best support them as learners. As you read these stories, I challenge you to consider a student who needs you to rethink instruction to make it easier for them to learn.

Tools for Rethinking

Reading Recovery teachers have tools to support rethinking how we design instruction for individual learners. We have Clay’s texts, which we read and reread thinking about a particular student. We keep daily records, including predictions of
progress and weekly reflections. We problem solve challenges with colleagues in professional development sessions, coaching, and colleague visits. We work with parents, classroom teachers, and school teams. Multiple and differing perspectives help us to be more open to rethinking, as “we learn more from people who challenge our thought process than those who confirm our solutions” (Grant, 2021, p. 86). These people make up what Grant calls our “Challenge Network.”

When progress is slow, “the intent is to find a way to get around the roadblock and establish or reestablish accelerated learning” (Clay, 2016, p. 168). In considering the roadblock to learning, it is necessary to be open to doing things differently. Clay tells us the “early intervention teacher must know of many ways to foster literacy strengths, must vary her teaching sequences, and be bold in negotiating short-cuts” (2016, p. 25). The PDSA cycle can guide us in “testing” a bold short-cut (PDSA Worksheet, Appendix A). The cycle is a mini experiment to determine if improvement occurs when a change or bold move is implemented. For planning purposes, the order of the cycle does not begin the plan, but by studying the data.

**Study.** What do you know about the student’s behaviors as related to the roadblock? Strengths? Weaknesses? Note: If you are planning continuing PDSA cycles, compare what you learned with your prediction(s).

**Act.** What might you do next? Consult with colleagues to gather varied perspectives to provide a number of options.

**Plan.** Define the bold move/change to test. Make a prediction(s) about what will happen. Determine what data you will collect to evaluate if the change was an improvement.

**Do.** Carry out the bold move/change and document what happened.

The PDSA cycle frames what you are teaching in the short term, similar to short-term predictions of progress. I have found it helpful to reword the prediction of progress from “in the next few weeks he will need to know” (Clay, 2016, p. 28) to “in the next few lessons he will need to know …”. Testing the bold move is quick—3 to 5 days—to learn quickly.

The following examples will link both predictions of progress and the PDSA tool as a support to thinking about how to eliminate a learning roadblock.

**Case Study 1: Collin**

Preparing for Roaming Around the Known lessons with Collin, I knew I would need to approach teaching with an openness and curiosity to what might be possible, as I had limited experience in teaching multilingual learners. Writing predictions of progress helped me to “maintain a long-term perspective” by beginning lessons with the end in mind. Two long-term predictions of progress related to language use guided the earliest lessons.

At the end of the lesson series Collin will need to know how to

- Expand his syntactical knowledge in order to anticipate complex literary structures in text.
- Actively engage in conversation in order to share his ideas on a variety of topics in preparation for writing.

Beginning lessons in the known, thoughts of simplifying learning arose. Practicing commonly used phrases (e.g., May I get a drink of water) or learning vocabulary through reading books with simple pattern structures (e.g., Mom is cooking. Mom is running,) came to mind. What might be a bolder move to accelerate language learning? The PDSA cycle and my challenge network guided me to rethinking possibilities (Figure 1).

**Step 1: Study – Analyze the data**

I first met Collin in May of first-grade year. He had been in school in Canada for 3 months, having immigrated from China. In his classroom, Collin did not speak and was easily distracted in classroom learning activities. From initial assessment data, Collin knew a few letters by name, wrote his name, a friend’s name (Colin with one L), and the word “I.” He heard and recorded five sounds and was able to dictate a sentence to describe his drawing, “Daddy, Mommy, and me.” Based on this data, it was evident that Collin knew a few things about print in terms of both reading and writing. In order to learn more about Collin’s use of the English language, the *Record of Oral Language* (Clay et al., 2015) and *Biks and Gutches* (Clay, 2015a), were also administered. He repeated back three 5-word sentences and added an “-s” ending to a word to make it plural, e.g., book-s.

Thinking about beginning lessons in the known, Clay advises, “It is
powerful to harness the established power of children’s oral language to literacy learning from the beginning, so that new literacy knowledge and new oral language powers are linked and patterned from the start. Children with the least preparation for literacy learning need such an integrated approach if they are to catch up to their classmates” (Clay, 2015b, p. 95). Aware of the need to link talking, reading, and writing, how might lessons in the known begin when Collin’s English oral language use appeared to be very limited?

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analyze the data.</td>
<td>Decide what to do next based on what you learned.</td>
<td>Define the change.</td>
<td>Carry out the change. Collect data. Document surprises, obstacles, challenges, and successes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No evidence of speaking in the classroom.</td>
<td>• Learn more about Collin’s ability to use English.</td>
<td>• Tell Me Task</td>
<td>• Collin was highly engaged and joined in on the retelling from the very first day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Labeled a picture by dictating a 4-word utterance.</td>
<td>• Collin will retell a story using pictures in order to begin to use some English language phrases.</td>
<td>• The pictures supported me to hear and understand what he was noticing.</td>
<td>• Collin was highly engaged and joined in on the retelling from the very first day.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Repeated a 5-word sentence with a subject, verb, and phrase.</td>
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**Step 2: Act — Decide what to do next**

It was important and necessary for me to engage my “Challenge Network” to expand my thinking about ways to support language learning. At the time, I was training as a teacher leader and had an opportunity to discuss possibilities of a bold move with colleagues that led to a research project of what might be possible in the first 3 weeks of lessons. I had a goal to learn more about Collin’s ability to use English language.

**Step 3: Plan — Change, prediction(s), test/data collection**

I trialed the “Tell Me Task” procedure; a process that scaffolds the retelling of a familiar story. This task is part of the New Zealand Ministry of Education’s School Entry Assessment (2000). The process is as follows, with the same book read to the child each day.

**Day 1:** Teacher reads the story to the child. Teacher retells the story.

**Day 2:** Teacher reads the story to the child. Teacher and child retell the story together.

**Day 3:** Teacher reads the story to the child. Child retells the story. The retelling is audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Using this procedure, I predicted that Collin would be able to use the pictures of the story to support his use of some English language phrases. I planned to audio record Collin’s independent retelling on the third day and transcribe the retelling to make his use of language visible.

**Step 4: Do — Take note of surprises, obstacles, challenges, and successes**

Collin actively joined in with retelling the story from the very first day. This was a big surprise! The illustrations helped me to hear and understand what Collin was noticing in the story. Following is the transcript of Collin’s retelling of *The Gingerbread Man* fairy tale.
They a woman and pick a, in the woman.

I, I think the woman put the over there, because smell over there.

Gingerbread man jum in the roo, put you in the door. And go, go, go.

The old woman talking, Stop! Stop! Come back!

Be- Because da run fast-ta, gingerbread man run fast-ter.

Cow. Stop! Stop! I will eat you.

Gingerbread man talking, you can’t catch me I’m a gingerbread man.

Come meet the horse. Stop! Stop! I will eat you.

You can’t catch me I’m a gingerbread man.

Because gingerbread man don’t, don’t know, water.

Fox in, in, time in, time in, climb in my tail. Climb me tail.

Tim talking, climb on my back. Climb in my nose. Up ... down. Snip! Snap! Fox is yummy.

This PDSA cycle took three lessons to complete and provided evidence of how powerful story retelling can be as a starting point for learning more about a child’s ability to use language.

**Follow-up PDSA cycles**

The retelling language sample became the language data that informed the next PDSA cycle where I continued with the Tell Me Task procedure, reading and retelling a different fairy tale, in addition to, recording longest utterances to learn more about Collin’s use of language (Figure 2).

(Note: To read more about my work with Collin, please see my 2017 article titled, “Language Learning — Run, Run as Fast as you Can,” in The Journal of Reading Recovery.)

**Case Study 2: Kaleb**

Kaleb was a student who had been homeschooled for kindergarten and most of first grade. Once attending school, he was selected for Reading Recovery. A roadblock to Kaleb and I working together presented itself in the third lesson. Kaleb would refuse to engage when introduced to a new book. I led with, “I will read you this story …” to which he would hide his hands in his sleeves, put up his hood, and roll up into a ball on his chair. I felt I was clear that there was no expectation for Kaleb to read the book. I was puzzled by this behavior and recognized it was critical to get an immediate shift so we could share the task of reading, he would be open to noticing and talking about print, as well as trying new things. I had written a couple of predictions of progress related to noticing print.

At the end of the lesson series, Kaleb will need to know how to

- Self-monitor for language, movement, and visual infor-
mation in order to understand the author’s message.

- Articulate words slowly in order to write new words using sound analysis.

Kaleb and I needed “to develop useful ways of interacting” (Clay, 2016, p. 30) with stories and books and a bold move was necessary.

Step 1: Study – Analyze the data
From Kaleb’s initial assessment, he could 1–1 match on one line of print. He recognized two words, “I” and “is” and he could write five words (his name, “mom,” “I,” “cat,” “Godzilla”). He liked to draw detailed pictures and to tell stories about animals. Unexpected was his refusal to engage when invited to share the reading of a previously heard book or to engage when I read a new book to him (Figure 3).

How can Kaleb and I find useful ways of interacting? How can I support Kaleb to begin to look at print? How can I help him to recognize that he can use what he knows to learn new things? Guiding my thinking was the need for Kaleb to find links between what he knows and new things he notices. Clay (2016) tells us, “As children get better about finding links, they look for more opportunities to engage in these activities. To make progress you must learn some rules about scanning the printer’s code. Only then can you direct your language and visual perception to the challenges of extracting meanings from text or constructing messages in print” (p. 5). A quick shift would need to happen so that Kaleb was willing to engage and initiate noticing things about print.

Step 2: Act – Decide what to do next
Do I continue with standard ways of working? Perhaps selecting books with simple pattern structures and known vocabulary? Or do I continue reading books on different topic, hoping that I will select well, and he will engage with the story? I knew that I needed to arrange the learning conditions so that Kaleb would engage with printed text. Clay (2016) tells us to “organize things so the correct response occurs … intervene to prevent the occurrence of an unwanted response. Do not give an old habit any chance to recur when you are trying to eliminate it” (2016, p. 61). I felt it necessary to make a bold move and temporarily abandon the use of leveled texts/published books and use Kaleb’s dictated stories and shared writing as reading material to arrange for success.

Step 3: Plan — Change, prediction(s), test/data collection
I decided to test using only dictated stories for reading practice. I predicted Kaleb would actively participate in reading activities and

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**Figure 3. Kaleb PDSA Cycle 1**

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<tr>
<th><strong>Roadblock:</strong></th>
<th><strong>Refusal to engage when introduced to a new book</strong></th>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>2. Act</strong></th>
<th><strong>3. Plan</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decide what to do next based on what you learned.</td>
<td>Define the change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Temporarily abandon the use of leveled texts.</td>
<td>• Use only dictated stories for reading practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use Kaleb’s dictated stories and shared writing as reading material.</td>
<td>Make a prediction(s) about what will happen.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>1. Study</strong></th>
<th><strong>4. Do</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analyze the data.</td>
<td>Carry out the change. Collect data. Document surprises, obstacles, challenges, and successes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Actively participated in reading and rereading his stories.</td>
<td>• Informal running records taken on dictated stories.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Self-monitored for language, movement, and visual information with evidence of rereading to self-correct.</td>
<td>• He will begin to self-monitor for 1–1 match ad known words, noticing some visual information; he will begin to reread and self-correct.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Beginning to notice high-frequency words seen in other places.</td>
<td>Design a way to test the change.</td>
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begin to self-monitor one-to-one match and known words, noticing some visual information. He might begin to reread and self-correct. I would collect information about his reading behaviours through taking running records on his dictated stories.

**Step 4: Do – Take note of surprises, obstacles, challenges, and successes**

The first PDSA was four lessons in length. Kaleb was actively engaged in composing, illustrating, reading, and rereading his stories. He read his stories quickly, using a finger to monitor one-to-one match. By the second day he increased his participation in writing, adding what he knew, including linking words he wants to write with words written in previous stories, e.g., “see,” “cat,” “is” (Figures 4–7).

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**Follow-up PDSA cycle**

In reading his dictated stories, Kaleb learned that what he can say he can write, and what he can write he can read. In comparing what happened to the predictions, Kaleb was self-monitoring for both one-to-one match and known words. When he noticed a discrepancy, he reread to search for more information and to self-correct. Knowing this, for the second PDSA cycle I planned to thoughtfully introduce selected Level 3 and 4 texts, making explicit links to his understanding of the world. Given his knowledge about animals, I introduced *Tiger, Tiger* (Randall, 1994) using language that he could relate to, predator/prey, and playfully drawing his attention to known words. Kaleb
again disengaged and refused to listen to the book. I made an immediate decision to return to creating and rereading dictated books with Kaleb for an additional 4 days. After 8 lessons of only using dictated stories as reading material, I again trialed introducing a new book, supporting Kaleb in orienting himself to the book prior to the first reading of the book. Kaleb was now willing to engage in talking about and reading published texts, and a shift to the structure of a typical Reading Recovery lesson was made (Figure 8).

I can see now that I was hoping that time would support Logan in learning to compose when it was a bold move that was needed to shift us out of a pattern of me suggesting story topics, whether they be of personal interest or from books. This also led me to rethinking a prediction of progress to better reflect what Logan needed to be able to do:

At the end of the lesson series Logan will need to know how to

- Compose a story in order to write two to three complex sentences.

(revised to)

Initiate constructing and composing a story in order to put his own ideas into messages.

How might the composing context be adjusted? Logan had many experiences with storybooks, he was being read to regularly, and from observations, he was eager to engage in reading and talking about the books. Logan had a good sense of story. Building on his story strength, I wanted to find a way to make it easy for him to compose stories. What might be possibilities?

- Sometimes, when composing is difficult, we encourage a child to write about a familiar book. For Logan though, I wanted him to begin to see himself as a composer of his own ideas, not as a reteller of someone else’s ideas.

**Case Study 3: Logan**

Logan’s learning trajectory was accelerated from the beginning of his lesson series. He was an active reader and writer with a large bank of known words in both reading and writing. He had ways of solving problems with increasing independence in both reading and writing. Part-way through the lesson series though, I became increasingly concerned about his ability to compose stories for writing. In talking with his classroom teacher, she related that Logan required support to both begin writing and to maintain focus. This is when I recognized that composing was not a speed bump but a true roadblock.

**Step 1: Study – Analyze the data**

After working with Logan for about 10 weeks, I reflected on all that I knew about how we interacted in lessons and his response to instruction (Figure 9). Logan actively engaged in conversations about

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**Figure 8. Kaleb PDSA Cycle 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Study</th>
<th>Analyze the data.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Able to 1–1 match on one line of print.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Not aware that noticing known words in reading is helpful.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Refusal to engage when being read a new story and when invited to share the reading of a familiar book.</td>
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<tr>
<th>2. Act</th>
<th>Decide what to do next based on what you learned.</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Carefully select Level 3 and 4 texts; make explicit links to his understanding of the world.</td>
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<td>• Direct attention to links between works in his stories and words in books.</td>
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<th>3. Plan</th>
<th>Define the change.</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Introduce carefully selected Level 3 and 4 books.</td>
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<td>Make a prediction(s) about what will happen.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Active participation in reading activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Monitor reading for 1–1 match and known words; he will reread and self-correct.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Design a way to test the change.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Running records taken on familiar Level 3 and 4 books.</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Actively engaged and willing to compose.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Accepted help with writing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Dictated stories are much more complex than the pattern stories he had been reading in the classroom.</td>
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books. He talked about what he noticed and implications of characters’ decisions. When prompted to engage in a brief conversation in preparation for writing, Logan was reliant on me to provide an idea for writing. He was usually compliant and would work with suggestions, but he did not volunteer his own ideas.

Step 2: Act – Decide what to do next
A bold move was needed to shift the interaction pattern to allow Logan to independently compose. “Composing has to be learned. It is about going from ideas in the head, to spoken words, to printed messages” (Clay, 2016, p. 78). To change the composing context, from a teacher-initiated idea to an idea Logan generated himself, I provided a few wordless picture books from which he chose to write a story. The wordless picture book provided aspects of story that he was comfortable discussing — characters, setting, plot, and opportunities for dialogue.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Step 3: Plan – Change, prediction(s), test/data collection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In testing a wordless picture book as a tool to support composing, I predicted Logan would compose his own story using the pictures. He would draw on the characters as a support to creating dialogue. To collect data, I would note on the lesson record who initiated the conversation by tallying teacher-student initiated comments.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Step 4: Do – Take note of surprises, obstacles, challenges, and successes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Logan took to composing a story with ease. This was a surprise given the previous reluctance to engage in conversation. The pictures provided the content and opportunity for him to initiate conversation. What did he learn? He determined names for characters, narrated, read the pictures to get a sense of how the character was feeling and used this to write dialogue, and he used what he knew about stories to compose a story similar in structure to those he would read (Figure 10).</td>
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<tr>
<th>Follow-up PDSA cycles</th>
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<tr>
<td>Logan used the scaffold of wordless picture books to write a few books over 10 lessons. Following this, I wanted to see if he could initiate composing his own stories. I met with his classroom teacher and we both encouraged Logan to take an everyday activity and turn it into something to write about, just as he had done with the wordless books. (Figure 11). He wrote about a variety of self-initiated topics. Sometimes about something happening in his life:</td>
</tr>
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</table>
In bed I weared my watch. Today I brought my watch to school!

My Nana is coming to my house after school.

My Dad told me that the Jets won in the overtime. I was cheering for Calgary.

He also wrote stories centered around an everyday object, bringing in a sense of imagination. The following story was inspired by his bedtime stuffed toy, Moose.

*Moose Goes to Sleep*

Dad goes to sleep with baby moose.

He has a bad dream.

He wakes up in the middle of the night.

I have a bad dream.

He hears a fire. His Daddy wasn't home.

He calls the police.

Through changing the composing context, Logan learned to initiate composing a message from a topic of his choosing.

Figure 10. *The Haircut Written by Logan*

Figure 11. Logan PDSA Cycle 2

2. Act
   Decide what to do next based on what you learned.
   • Work with Logan’s classroom teacher to arrange conditions for independent composing in the classroom.

3. Plan
   Define the change.
   Make a prediction(s) about what will happen.
   Design a way to test the change.

1. Study
   Analyze the data.
   • Having the characters talk seemed to make composing easy
   • My contributions were limited to wondering about relationships between the characters and prompts to begin writing.

4. Do
   Carry out the change. Collect data. Document surprises, obstacles, challenges, and successes.

Conclusion

Reflecting on student learning has the potential to help us to adjust the conditions to foster accelerated learning. Disciplining a process for thinking quickly about a child’s learning and designing instruction for the individual student is necessary to make it easy for that child to learn. Through the stories of my work with Collin, Kaleb, and Logan, I recommend attention to four key ideas:

1. Pace matters. If the child’s learning is not accelerating, pay attention immediately. How fast am I learning about this particular child? Am I arranging for learning opportunities that will allow for active behaviors from the
very start? Have I adapted learning opportunities for this child?

2. Engage your challenge network. Additional perspectives will help you to identify or confirm the learning roadblock and expand the possibilities for rethinking instruction.

3. Maintain a long-term perspective on day-to-day teaching decisions. Keep what the child needs to learn how to do at the end of their series of lessons as a guide.

4. When acceleration is compromised, “plan” and “do” a simple but bold change and “study” progress after 3 to 5 lessons. Continue to use the PDSA cycle until accelerated learning is (re)established. Keep in mind, “These processes are complex and will not be easy to observe and explain. We need to be tentative and flexible because we could be wrong in our explanations from time to time, or from this child to that child” (Clay, 2016, p. 6).

To teach is to learn. Rethinking helps us to stay curious about challenges and problems, develop hypotheses, and design experiments to test them. “The solution is not to decelerate our thinking — it’s to accelerate our rethinking” (Grant, 2021, p. 29). In accelerating our rethinking, we accelerate our learning and create conditions for a child to accelerate their learning.

References

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