

**Reading Recovery Teacher Leader
Resource Paper
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**Observing and Supporting the Learning of
Reading Recovery Teachers:
Extra Support for Teachers Having Difficulties
with Reading Recovery Training**

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Observing and Supporting the Learning of Reading Recovery Teachers:

Extra Support for Teachers Having Difficulties with Reading Recovery Training

Purpose

The purpose of this Teacher Leader (TL) Resource Paper is to provide information on the role of the TL as she/he observes and supports the learning of teachers in the training class. First, we will provide information on the selection of teachers and on grading policies the TL should have before the training class begins. Next, we present indicators of a teacher having a difficult time taking on the new learning and ways to increase the level of support for the teacher having difficulties. Finally, we will offer advice for TLs when problems persist and extra efforts to support learning have not been successful.

Introduction

The TL is the key person in the implementation of Reading Recovery (RR). It is the TL who trains the Reading Recovery teachers (RRTs) and acts as the liaison between the teachers and local administration as well as between the teachers and the university or college. The TL provides on-going professional development each year for trained RRTs and insures the quality of the RR program implementation over time.

Most TLs come into RR training with a background of successful experience in their school systems and a proven record of working with adults as part of a leadership role. Educators who want to train as a TL complete an application and go through an interview process. During the training year, TLs develop a high level of expertise in teaching students who are the most difficult to teach while building a theoretical understanding of how young children learn to read and write. The training for TLs is comprehensive and the level of commitment is high. Some practice in working with

teachers is provided during the TL's training year, but most of what they learn about helping teachers to develop new understandings and practices takes place as they work with their own training classes. Trainers provide support for TLs in their first year at the site through site visits and annual professional development.

Factors Affecting Teacher Learning

Selection process. The qualifications and the level of commitment for the role of RRT differ from those of TL. RRTs are responsible for teaching the lowest achieving students identified in the first grade classrooms in their school. Ideally, teachers have an understanding of the RR program and volunteer for the training; however, sometimes teachers are required or assigned to take the training. We believe that the reasons for taking the training may affect the level of commitment and motivation for learning. Consequently, TLs need to know about the selection process for each teacher and their reasons for training. *A Principal's Guide to Reading Recovery* (NATG, 2003) and *A Site Coordinator's Guide to the Effective Implementation of Reading Recovery* (NATG, 2006) are good resources to guide the selection process.

Theoretical stance. Many teachers in the United States, but certainly not all, enter the RR training with a skills-based theory of reading. This was verified through early studies using the *Theoretical Orientation to the Reading Process* (TORP) (DeFord, 1985). A skills-based orientation to the teaching and learning of reading is inconsistent with Clay's theories which may cause confusion and/or dissonance for teachers in training when their current beliefs and RR training conflict.

Previous professional development. As they enter RR training many teachers have experienced a prescribed approach to teaching. They are given a curriculum, materials, and a teacher's manuals as guides. Most professional development has been during a single day, or at best several days, of in-service training or graduate level courses. The primary mode of interaction during these classes or in-service sessions was probably lecture or presentation. RR teaching and the model for training teachers may be quite different from what teachers have experienced. What defines a 'good teacher' in a traditional education setting may not carry over to the observational, analytic, and problem-solving skills needed to make the critical teaching decisions of an effective RRT.

A Different Kind of Teaching

This is not to say that a RRT is better than another kind of teacher. It is that RR requires a different kind of teaching skills. For example, on a school visit by the TL, the teacher, Susan, greeted her with this lament:

T: I don't know what to do. Charles can't do anything. He's still on level 2 and he isn't learning any words in his writing. What should I do?

TL: What can Charles do in the areas of early strategies?

T: I knew you we're going to do that. This is so different. You really don't tell us what to do.....You want us to THINK!

Susan was right; it is different. We want teachers to focus on the child's strengths, to observe, to analyze, and to think in order to problem solve independently and make teaching decisions which have an accelerative impact on students' learning.

A Different Kind of Learning

The RR training model expects teachers to join together, discuss, and analyze teaching as they learn more about how to teach the students who are having the most difficulty learning to read and write in the classroom or in a small group environment. Historically, teachers in the United States have little interaction with other teachers (Lortie, 1975). Teachers have worked in isolation and experienced little collegial contact as they practiced their craft in separate rooms. This tradition is being changed in many areas of educational reform and restructuring, including RR. In fact, the RR training model has been cited as exemplary to help teachers support each other as learners (Wilson & Daviss, 1994).

TLs should remember that, for most teachers, the RR training model is a new and different experience. It is also important to understand that previous experiences in learning and practices in teaching children how to read and write will have a strong impact on how teachers build new understandings and learn new skills as they progress through the RR training.

Reading Recovery Training Model and the Role of the Teacher Leader

Training class sessions. The TL has the primary responsibility for training the RRTs. The training class sessions with the lessons taught behind the glass and the discussion after the lessons are the core of the RR training model. We believe that all RRTs in training begin with questions and concerns about the procedures. How teachers respond to their training, questions, and concerns affects their learning. Many TLs believe that the hallmark of high progress teachers in training is self-reflection; that is, the teacher who, early in the training, begins to question his/her own beliefs and analyze their own teaching decisions. They are able to offer alternative teaching options based on the responses of the child and link the practices and theories in their readings with teaching and learning.

The TL must understand where the teachers are at the beginning of their training and then closely observe how they respond as teachers watch and discuss the lessons and teaching interactions. TLs must be skillful in guiding the observation, posing questions

to encourage the teachers to analyze carefully, and helping teachers propose tentative hypotheses for teaching and learning. Giving feedback in a supportive manner and helping RRTs sort out confusions and gain insights for new learning are critical attributes of an effective TL.

Experienced TLs offer the following axioms to think about and discuss with your colleagues as you reflect on your experiences with teachers in the training class setting.

Teacher Leader Axioms

- Teachers have years of teaching and experiences as they begin the training. Look for and build on strengths.
- The amount of teaching experience does not necessarily correlate with the best progress in learning.
- Additional courses and/or training for teaching outside the classroom setting does not necessarily correlate with success in teaching students in RR.
- The most talkative teachers do not necessarily develop the best understanding of RR practice and theory.
- Quiet teachers do not necessarily develop low levels of understanding.
- What teachers say in class is not always reflected in how they teach students.
- Effective teaching is easier to talk about and to observe in others than to do.
- It is difficult to understand many of the procedures unless you first see the procedure during a teaching interaction (live or video).
- High progress teachers seem to gain insights and share generalizations which help to lift the level of understanding of the group.
- TLs should expect shifts in learning for all teachers. We believe in and teach for accelerated learning for children and adults!

School visits. School visits are the second important component of the RR model for training teachers. One truth with wide spread agreement among TLs is: *TLs will never be able to provide all the school visits the teachers want.* Providing training on a school visit is for helping teachers build independent problem-solving skills as they work with

children. When teachers are having difficulties in the training year, intensifying the number of school visits, while also trying some specific interventions, can be quite productive in supporting learning. This will be addressed in more detail with specific suggestions later in the paper.

Before Beginning the Training Class

Ideally, TLs should be involved in the process of selecting teachers for training in RR. The TL has the clearest picture of what the training involves and the commitment needed from the teacher. Sometimes, however, there is a misunderstanding that teaching one child at a time is going to be easy. Or, teachers are required to take the training with the goal of improving their skills as teachers. Volunteering for the training and having a clear understanding of the nature of the training should be established at the onset of any RR implementation. In addition to the requirements stated in the *Standards and Guidelines of Reading Recovery in the United States* (NATG, 2008), evidence of willingness to take on new learning is probably the best indicator of success in RR training. The TL should use *A Principal's Guide to Reading Recovery* (NATG, 2003) and *A Site Coordinator's Guide to the Effective Implementation of Reading Recovery* (NATG, 2006) to make sure that decision-makers in schools and districts are clearly aware of these requirements and the personal characteristics needed to ensure success.

Working with the college or university. TLs should work closely with the college or university granting credit to establish grading policies and procedures for RRTs in training. Information about semesters or quarters, letter grades or pass/fail, and requirements for successful completion of each course must be clearly stated in the syllabus. TLs need to have an understanding of the policies concerning students' rights and have a faculty member designated to inform and support the TL regarding college or university policies. For example, some universities have policies about the confidentiality of a student's grade. This can become a critical factor when the teacher in training is not making satisfactory progress and the district administrator wants to be informed about his/her progress. Some colleges or universities allow teachers in training to sign a waiver regarding communications about academic progress and grades since the school district or other organization is paying for the training. The waiver allows TLs to put concerns about a teacher's progress in writing and share it with the administrator or organization as well as the teacher. Sometimes, it is after problems develop that the teacher gives permission to communicate with the administrators involved or the teacher assumes the responsibility to meet with and discuss the problems with the school or district administrator. It is the TL's responsibility to have a clear understanding of the policies of the credit-granting institution regarding the sharing of information with others and to adhere to those policies.

Essential documentation. Documentation of observations, attendance, participation, and teaching are critical if persistent problems with the teacher's progress become

evident. The TL should share copies of the documentation and/or goals with the teacher and take notes during individual meetings that are dated and organized in a file specific to that teacher. The meeting should be conducted in a professional, caring manner with the dual purposes of informing the teacher about his/her progress and the development of an action plan leading to appropriate teaching and learning. The TL should schedule regular meetings with the RRT so that the teacher is always up to date on progress. **Do not hesitate to initiate this series of meetings.** It is the TL's responsibility to inform teachers of their progress in a timely manner and to also inform the faculty member serving as instructor of record for the course. The end of the quarter is not the time to let a teacher know that they have not completed the class satisfactorily!

The lesson to be learned is that the TL must be knowledgeable of his/her responsibilities and of the student's rights as stated in university or college policies. All of these understandings need to be clearly communicated to RRTs as the training class begins. Information and communication are the key words to remember in order to prevent problems at a later time.

Supporting the Learning of Teachers during the Training Year

Expect shifts in learning. *"TLs should expect shifts in learning for all teachers"* is one of the TL axioms shared previously. The training model for RR has proven to be consistently effective in many different educational cultures around the world. Most teachers enter RR and successfully complete the training; a few teachers may need more support during their training year to successfully shift their learning. Occasionally, a teacher and TL will come to the understanding that RR is not the best career option for the teacher at this time, and even less often the TL may need to make the decision that the teacher is not being successful in meeting the requirements for the RR course. The goal of the program and the TL is to support and help all teachers successfully complete the requirements for the course and put into practice their skills to effectively help their students achieve average range levels in reading and writing.

When extra support is needed. The chart below was created by TLs on the sub-committee who wrote this paper initially and the TLs who participated in the Special Interest Group at the 1996 Teacher Leader Institute. We offer this list of possible indicators as early warning signals that more support *might* be necessary to help the teacher sort out his/her learning. *Please note these are only possible signs of a teacher having difficulties.* The list is based on collective observations over time, not research. Certainly, evidence of difficulties in *several* of the areas, rather than one or two, would be a stronger indicator of problems.

Behaviors That May Indicate a Teacher Who Needs Extra Support

The teacher:

- lacks experience in teaching primary age children.
- reveals questionable motivation about taking RR training.
- is late to class or misses several classes.
- is highly involved in other activities or other classes and has only limited time to devote to the RR course.
- takes copious notes during class (or takes no notes).
- demonstrates persistent confusion about RR procedures.
- is not keeping up with the group in gaining understandings.
- is not completing assignments.
- tends to take class discussions literally and applies insights across all children.
- is disorganized in keeping instructional records (or sometimes highly organized).
- has few observational notes of student behavior or responses in the lesson record.
- has difficulty completing lessons and fitting in all the components of the lesson.
- uses RR terminology inappropriately.
- responds to questions about evidence of teaching for strategic activity by talking about sources of information.
- responds to constructive feedback in a defensive manner.
- blames the child or the child's family for lack of progress in learning.
- asks the TL what to do or frequently states: "I don't know what to do."
- tries to state a rule or use only a number or scores to make decisions.
- demonstrates little or no evidence of teaching for strategic activity.
- does not appear to provide teaching that is specific to individual students.
- often has all students at the same or similar text levels.
- misses many lessons with students.
- accepts or ignores inappropriate behavior by students during the lessons.

A TL supports learning, respects individual differences, and recognizes and supports the different pathways that may be taken to successful completion of RR teacher training. We also recognize that close observation by the TL can determine which teacher may need extra help and support. As with the children we teach, the timeliness of the extra support can be a critical factor. The behaviors listed above are meant to be helpful in assisting the TL to make decisions about providing extra support for any teacher who may need more intensive help for a short period of time.

Providing Extra Support for Teachers Having Difficulties

Identifying the problem. RR training is complex. The training classes are scheduled over time to allow for ongoing practice and learning. The TL must be reflective about the progress of the teachers and alert when difficulties are persistent. There is an old adage which says: *Half of the problem is solved when the problem is identified.* Identification of a teacher having difficulties is the first step. It is also important that the problem is clearly specified and discussed with the teacher in training. Sometimes, the TL believes there is a problem and begins providing extra help and support without the teacher in training being aware that a problem even exists. If this situation continues over time, the teacher is often taken by surprise when grades are reported. The most common complaint from the teacher in difficulty is: "Why didn't you tell me there was a problem? I didn't know I was having any more difficulties than anyone else in the class." Clear communication from the start avoids this problem.

Talking with the teacher. It might be helpful to consider how identification of the problem might sound in a one-to-one meeting or perhaps on a school visit. The TL might say: "I notice you are having some difficulties with your teaching and with using the procedures. I want to set up some extra visits with you so I can help you catch up. What do you think some of the problems are? What do you think I need to help you with? What would help you the most?" If the teacher cannot identify the critical problems say: "These are the problems I have observed" (clearly stating the problems). "This is what I will do to help you. Let's set some goals."

Providing support. Once the problems are identified, extra support should be outlined, goals should be set, and visits scheduled. Experienced TLs have shared the following suggestions, which they have used successfully with teachers in training. These suggestions are intended to be examples. They are not all inclusive of the support that could be offered.

- Try to help the teacher articulate some specific areas of concern, for example: "I don't understand how to do the new book introduction." Or, "I don't have a clear idea of what I am supposed to do to get the *Hearing and Recording of Sounds in Words* going so I just haven't done it at all." Now that a problem area is identified provide a clear demonstration using one of the teacher's students. The teacher leader could teach the child while the teacher observes and takes notes. *Do not assume the teacher has new understandings based on the observation alone.* After the lesson, be sure to discuss the teaching interactions during your demonstration. Ask the teacher to articulate: "What did you learn? What did you notice that I did? Talk about what you noticed." Modeling and

demonstrating can be extremely powerful *if* the teacher has the opportunity afterward to talk about her/his learning and to pose clarifying questions. If possible, continue the observation while the teacher demonstrates his/her new understanding with a child.

- Record detailed observational notes as you watch a lesson. Prioritize two or three key areas of confusion and work with the teacher to get some shifts in learning in these key areas first. What new learning will move the teacher ahead in understanding? Talk with the teacher about what happened, what could have happened, and then do a follow-up demonstration with the student showing how it might look. Sometimes, working with the student right away is effective or it might be more productive to have the teacher do some reading in *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals, Part One and Two* (Clay, 2005) and then schedule a return visit for the next day. Remember, for most teachers it is difficult to understand the procedures unless they see the procedure carried out. It is also helpful for teachers in difficulty to see their *own* students responding while you work to get shifts in learning.
- Many TLs agree that coaching the teachers in training to write down key learning points at the end of a school visit is a good policy in general. This can be a critical step for a teacher who is disorganized and/or having difficulties taking on the training. You could ask the teacher to have one special notebook (some TLs even provide the notebook on the first visit) which is used only for school visit notes. Teachers can also use the notebook to record questions that come up during their teaching that they would like to sort out with you on the next school visit or during a training class. During the school visit, the notes are used during the discussion and new learning points and goals are recorded by the teacher. Example questions to pose to highlight the learning are: "What are you going to make sure you do in tomorrow's lesson with _____?" or "You write three key things you think you learned today while I write three, then we will see how we compare." Or "Try to write two or three things you learned from our work together today."
- Schedule an in-depth school visit to model teaching with a RR student you have recently observed either behind the glass or on a school visit. (Make sure the classroom teacher has agreed for the student to be out of the classroom for more than the usual 30 minutes for his/her lesson. Also, make sure the child understands this is a special lesson to help the teacher learn.) While you teach, the teacher takes thorough observational notes. You may give brief explanations or coaching points as you are teaching the child and the teacher may interrupt to ask questions if clarification is needed at that time. The teacher's notes can be a central source of information during your discussion after the lesson.

- Arrange for the teacher experiencing difficulties to visit an organized RRT who is effectively teaching students and using lesson time and instructional records successfully. These visits are particularly effective if specific goals for observation and learning have been jointly set by you and the teacher experiencing difficulties. Accompany the teacher and quietly coach as she/he observes the lesson. *Just observing a good lesson does not guarantee the teacher sees critical factors and develops new understandings that will affect teaching.* The teacher should have an appropriate amount of time to interact with you and the RRT to talk about his/her learning and to pose clarifying questions.
- Have the teacher experiencing difficulties make an audio tape/video/DVD of a lesson or lesson segment. Analyze a recorded lesson together as you coach the RRT on what to look for and how to analyze his/her own teaching. This activity has proven to be one of the most effective ways to support teachers and help them make significant shifts in learning. Initially, you may need to invest a high level of support to guide and coach the teacher through the first analysis; however, you should then be able to do a quick viewing or read a brief analysis summary as the teacher improves in self-analysis.
- Ask the teacher experiencing difficulties to share some of her/his new understandings during the training class discussion time. Make sure you have alerted the teacher ahead of time that you will do this. You may want to suggest a specific example from a lesson to be used to share in class.
- Help the teacher organize his/her instructional records if necessary. More importantly, help the teacher learn to record observations of how the child is responding during the lesson. Teach her/him how to use instructional records to be more reflective and to gain insights which will inform his/her teaching decisions.

An example. One TL, Jeanne Lemire, outlined a specific plan she had used successfully with two teachers in training who were having difficulty learning to teach for strategic activity. Jeanne had the two teachers visit her and take notes on how she was prompting and interacting with her students. After a good deal of discussion and many references to *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals*, goals were set and dates for a school visit to each of them was scheduled. The goal for the teachers was to incorporate prompts from *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals* and specific praise for reading/writing work into their teaching repertoire. Before the school visits, the teachers were to audio tape two lessons and do a self-analysis of their use of prompts and specific praise. The TL carefully read each analysis before the visit and found insights from the papers to be very helpful while coaching during the visit. After the visit, the teachers designed a plan for where they needed to go next with their students and with their own learning. This intensive work had excellent results for all involved.

A few words of wisdom came from another TL who stated: "Don't let up too soon!" A teacher may look like he/she has shifted in teaching with extra help but, there is a danger in removing TL support too soon. Continue to visit and be sure to visit when the teacher is teaching different students until you are confident the teacher has fully grasped your coaching points and is now making quality teaching decisions that meet the needs of individual students.

Feeling frustrated? It is natural to feel frustrated and want to give up on teachers who are not taking on the training. Resist this urge. Lean on your knowledge about children and their individual needs to support your efforts to meet the individual needs of your adult learners. And, do not hesitate to get help from your TL colleagues and/or your affiliated university trainer.

Making Decisions after Intensive Efforts with Little or No Results

The hard decision. Even with all of the support outlined in this paper and other support you have provided, a very few teacher will not be able to develop sound understandings and complete the requirements to pass the university/college credit course to become registered as RRTs. *It is only in the training year that the TL has the authority to make a decision with regard to the teacher continuing in the role of RRT.* Grades are earned based on successful completion of the course work based upon your professional opinion as an instructor for the credit-granting institution. Do not be tempted to take the easy path of passing an unqualified RRT. The training year is the only opportunity to determine who is acceptable as a RR professional. This is a huge responsibility that should not be taken lightly. Legally, grades cannot be influenced by administrators in a school district or by representatives of a teacher organization/union. TLs should be prepared if there is any possibility of a grievance procedure being filed and seek support from the Trainers at the affiliated university/college training site who can be of great assistance in difficult situations when you need support or clarification of policies.

Keep the doors open for the teacher to leave the training class/university course at any time. Some TLs reported that once they talked with the teacher and made it clear that many good teachers do not choose to do RR and that other choices are still open, the teachers reacted with relief and were positive in their decisions to leave the class during the training year. Grades should not be given with a hope that there might be some improvement. Most universities/colleges offer the grading option of "I" for **Incomplete** and have a set amount of time for the work to be completed and the grade changed. If problems have progressed to this point, contact the instructor of record at the credit-granting institution to work together on a suitable plan for satisfactory completion of the course.

Closing Statement

Collective wisdom has established that, in most cases, if teachers in difficulty do not make shifts in learning during their training year, they will not get better as time passes. And, they may get worse without the on-going support of the weekly training class. The exceptions to this are teachers who may have had a health or personal problem during the training year and now have specific plans for an individualized program of work and study to make up for the gaps in their learning. Most teachers complete the training and their course work with high levels of effort and high levels of understanding. The few teachers who demonstrate low levels of effort and understanding should not pass the courses and be recognized as a registered RRT.

We want to thank the TLs who contributed to the discussion of these issues and the TLs and Trainers who gave input to this resource paper in 1997. We hope that the TLs and trainers who use this information will do so in a positive way and will give us feedback and suggestions for refinements as we continue to work and learn together.

In 2009, this document was revised by the faculty at The Ohio State University and the Teaching and Professional Development Committee of the North American Trainers Group.

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