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A Reason to Read: Discovering a Purpose for Books Through Play

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A Reason to Read:

Discovering a Purpose for Books Through Play

By

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Teaching Reading and Literacy: Clinical Practice (Non-Certification)

Mentor:

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Abstract

Sara Russell Dewey

A Reason to Read: Discovering a Purpose for Books Through Play

Children need desire and motivation to learn. This study examines the responsive, child-centered teaching practices of a reading and literacy specialist as she helps a student, with low motivation for reading, find a reason to want to read. Although her student is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and aspects of autism come up in this study, the focus here is not on teaching children with autism. Since no two children with a diagnosis present similarly, teaching to a diagnosis is not individualized or sensitive enough to meet the educational and emotional needs of a student. Instead, teachers must consider each child individually; thinking about where the child is developmentally in different areas of their learning, how a child's strengths and interests might lead them to motivation and success, and what a child needs to feel safe and valued. Teachers can then build engagement and rapport, and create content conducive to a specific child's needs. By considering an experienced teacher's methods, this study hopes to enlighten other teachers as to how to meet the needs of their students with sensitivity and skill.

keywords: teaching literacy, motivation, differentiation, developmental differences

Dedications

To Marylen for your inspiration, generosity and wisdom.

To Max for being the wonderful person you are.

To Max's family for their generosity and support.

To Gordon for...everything.

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Section 1

Rationale

What do you do when a student has no desire to read or reach for a book? As a reading and literacy teacher in a clinical setting, my goal is to help students read and write so they will feel capable and excited to grab a book or write down a thought. For many students, learning our complicated written system is difficult. It may take time and practice (Allington, 2013; Clay, 2014; Moats, 2010; O'Connor & Vadasy, 2011; Wolf, 2007). Usually, the prescribed solution for reading and writing intervention calls for routine, step-by-step, repetitive learning that can be less than inspirational. Teachers sometimes forget that reading is meant to inspire and be fun. Ayers (1995) stated "learning requires assent, desire, action: it is characterized by discovery and surprise" (p. 6). Engagement and motivation are key to helping children learn (Clay, 2014; Miller, 2013; Taberski, 2011). If a student has complex learning and emotional needs, they are at a higher risk for reading and writing challenges (Allington, 2013; Rogoff, 2003; Wolf, 2007). For this study, I examine an experienced teacher's creative, responsive teaching practices as she discovers a way to help a child learn to enjoy books and engage in literacy learning. This student, diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), initially presented as having very low motivation to read. Since two people with the same diagnosis may present very differently from one another, teaching children with the same diagnosis needs to be individualized. So, this study is not about teaching children with autism. This paper focuses on looking at every student as an individual and how to figure out the strengths of that individual child and discover that child's motivation for learning. Through this research, I hope to expand my knowledge so I can meet the needs of many students as they navigate the sometimes stormy waters of literacy acquisition.

How the Study Came About

The inspiration for my study comes from a specific teacher, Marylen Massen, and a specific student, who I will call Max. Max is an 8-year old boy who actually already has a pseudonym for himself (not the one I'm using). One day he bounced into the learning center and insisted we call him by another name and, of course, we have. Interestingly, for a child who did not like reading, the name Max chose for himself comes from the main character in a series of books. The character is a hero who fights many battles. This is fitting, as Max is the hero of my paper. I am constantly impressed with his learning and his vibrant, lively imagination.

Figuring how to teach Max is not simple, however, which brings me to Marylen. Marylen is a reading and literacy specialist in a clinical setting. She specializes in teaching children who struggle to read and write. Many of her students have been diagnosed with learning disabilities such as dyslexia, ASD, attention deficit disorder (ADD) and other language processing disorders. While Marylen believes that diagnosis can be helpful in understanding a student's challenges, she emphasizes that each child is different, including children who share the same diagnosis. She endeavors to see children as individuals with unique needs, even those with very complex learning challenges.

I have worked as a teacher in Marylen's practice for the past few years. I met Max and his family when they first came to see Marylen. Max's parents brought him to Marylen because, despite receiving intensive Orton-Gillingham based reading intervention at a specialized school, he was not learning to read. His parents were concerned that Max might become a non reader, which is a risk for some people who have autism. Marylen assessed Max and saw that he had strong reasoning skills and a lot of sophisticated language. He was

good at problem solving and seeing patterns. He knew many letter sounds and had a basic ability to segment and blend phonemes. Despite having many of the cognitive abilities that are the foundation for reading, he was not progressing. Marylen noticed that he was very self-directed and had a hard time attending to tasks that did not interest him. His frustration tolerance was quite low and he became frustrated and angry if he could not have what he wanted. Marylen wondered if Max's reading and writing challenges could be overcome by teaching Max to love stories and helping him to manage his tolerance for work.

I have known Marylen for seven years. Before I was a teacher in her practice, she taught my son to read. At that time, I saw how she created a specific plan to match my son's unique learning style. Marylen differentiates her teaching for the student in front of her. She uses a child's strengths to build their learning and she is attuned to their emotional needs. Marylen is warm and friendly and she uses her creativity to make lessons engaging, so children are excited to learn with her. With all of her skills and knowledge as a teacher, I was curious to see how she would plan for Max's learning. I was also interested in learning more about teaching a child with the diagnosis of ASD. I was only tangentially familiar with what having ASD might mean. I asked if I could join Marylen and Max's sessions and everyone agreed. I was so impressed with the teaching and the learning that Marylen and Max were doing that I asked if I could use their sessions as the basis of my Integrative Master's Project. I hope that what I observed will be as interesting and informative to others as it has been for me.

Some Biases I Bring to the Study

I believe teaching starts with the child. By discovering the strengths of a child, what they already know, and what motivates them, teachers are more likely to provide effective

opportunities for learning (Clay, 2014; Berk & Winsler, 1995; Miller, 2013; Taberski, 2011). Children are active participants in their education, not empty vessels to be filled. Clay (2014) found that:

Probably the most common error made by adults about the learning of young children is that we can bypass what the child is thinking and just push new knowledge into the child. We often assume that knowledge out here gets put inside their heads by means of the things we do. However, any learning situation is like a conversation for it requires the learner to bring what he or she already knows to bear on the new problem being explored. (p. 15)

If the teacher supports the student just enough, academically and emotionally, the student will hopefully feel confident enough to reach beyond their abilities and gain new knowledge (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Learning is not linear. It is complicated and relies on many social interactions and experiences (Clay, 2014; Nager & Shapiro, 2000). Ideally, educational systems would allow “children to try out, shift backward as well as forward, to create where necessary the opportunities for the kind of interaction that is essential for the assimilation of experience, the achievement of new integrations, and the resolution of conflict—in both the cognitive and emotional realms” (Nager & Shapiro, 2000, p. 22). Within this supportive and thoughtful relationship, many different types of learners can be successful.

For teachers, it is important to believe all children are competent and able to learn (Allington, 2013; Donnellan, 1984; Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Jorgenson, 2005). Children, who are perceived as unable, often receive limited educational opportunities. Jorgenson (2005) summed up Anne Donnellan’s writing, saying that:

the least-dangerous assumption when working with students with significant disabilities is to assume that they are competent and able to learn, because to do otherwise would result in harms such as fewer educational opportunities, inferior literacy instruction, and few choices as an adult. (p. 5)

This then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and an unknown amount of potential is lost.

Marylen echoes this sentiment when talking about how to teach students who have autism.

When we teach students who have been given a poor prognosis, it's hard to know what their potential is. I think the best approach is to assume their potential is unlimited and go from there. Throw out the timeline and let them go at their own pace. But believe that they will grow. All children are children, even those with complex learning challenges, and they should be approached like children, full of possibility. (M. Massen, personal communication, April 23, 2019)

Learning to read and write is a complicated process. Unlike learning to speak, it is not a natural process (Moats, 2010; O'Connor & Vadasy, 2011; Wolf, 2007). Literacy is a skill that requires children to develop a circuit between many different cognitive pathways. Due to this complexity, the way teachers teach literacy needs to match the demands of the task. According to Wolf (2007), "children need instructional environments that support all the circuit parts that need bolting for the brain to read. Such a perspective departs from current teaching methods that focus largely on only one or two major components of reading" (p. 19). Allington (2011) found that "One reason that struggling readers receive fewer high-quality reading lessons is our fixation on one-size-fits-all core reading programs" (p. 42). The teaching needs to be differentiated, since students learn to read and write differently from one another.

When a child does not learn to read quickly, there are consequences at school. Rogoff (2003) stated that in America we have a “racetrack” mentality about learning. Children are “ahead” or “behind.” She stressed the value of learning to read early and well in our society because “Children who are slower in following predefined stages of learning to read (on the teacher’s schedule) are regarded as failing or likely to become failures” (p. 163). According to the New York Common Core Literacy Standards, children are expected to comfortably read (decode) text by the end of second grade. They are also expected to write and speak about their ideas at this time. In third grade, they are expected to extract knowledge from what they read and build upon their ideas, verbally and in writing. Since our schools are heavily text based, being able to decode for reading and writing is important for accessing and producing content. When a student has not been taught to read and write well, they may fall behind and judge their intelligence based on these challenges, which is inaccurate (Allington, 2013; Rogoff, 2003; Wolf, 2007). I once heard about a child who was struggling to learn to read. He was offered a single intervention program at his school. That program didn’t work for him, but the school had no other support, so they kept using the same program year after year. Eventually, he decided he couldn’t read. According to Allington (2013), in Florida struggling readers are held back grades and provided the same reading program each year (p. 523). The program that has already failed these children will most likely continue to do so and their reading will not improve.

A diagnosis does not define or limit a person. Assessments and diagnosis are guides, not determinations (Cohen & Spenciner, 2015). Marylen talks about the dangers of teaching to the diagnosis:

It's so easy to look only at the disability, the label, like "autism" and teach to that. But there is a child in there and if you don't teach to the child, you dehumanize them.

Once you dehumanize a student, they know it, and then you don't have a scene partner anymore. You can't build learning together because you don't admire them anymore. You don't have a partnership. (M. Massen, personal communication, April 23, 2019)

For teachers, knowing a student has a certain diagnosis may aid in understanding about aspects of a child's learning or performance. It does not give enough information to determine a child's true learning needs or potential (Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Greenspan & Wieder, 2006; Jorgensen, 2005; Kluth & Chandler-Olcott, 2008). Some children are difficult to assess and their abilities do not come out well in assessment (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006). Some assessments are skewed for different populations, so testing reveals only so much or is inaccurate (Freeman & Freeman, 2002). Also, our brains change over time, so previous assessments may no longer be valid or accurate (Wolf, 2007). My son's diagnosis of dyslexia does not tell a teacher how well he currently reads, what his interests are, how motivated he is to finish an assignment or what makes him excited to learn something new. Only by getting to know him, will a teacher understand how he learns best. Teaching a child with a diagnosis is the same as teaching a child without one, it starts with the child.

Having a diagnosis may be clarifying and life changing however. My son's diagnosis was the basis for him attending a specialized school for three years. Now that he is in the mainstream, his diagnosis allows him to receive important testing and classroom accommodations. Because of the assessment, my son learned more about himself and what

he needs to perform well. This helps him when he talks to teachers or needs to advocate for himself. He also understands that he needs more time for testing, to have someone check his writing for spelling errors and that, when he's learning something new, it gets easier over time. The diagnosis also helps his father and I understand our son's needs better, so we can better support him.

Important Terms

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): ASD is a complicated diagnosis encompassing a diverse group of neurodevelopmental differences with a wide range of associated behaviors and symptoms.

Recognized causes of ASD include genetic factors, metabolic diseases, toxic and environmental factors, and a combination of these...early diagnosis is hampered by the lack of nongenetic specific biological markers. In the past ten years, the scientific literature has reported dozens of neurophysiological and biochemical alterations in ASD children; however no real biomarker has emerged. (Abruzzo et al., 2015, p. 1)

Since there are no biological markers associated with ASD, Kluth and Chandler-Olcott (2008) noted that “the categories and descriptions that many people use are constructed and culturally reproduced based on the professional judgment and opinion of scholars, researchers, the medical community, and, in some instances, people with these labels themselves” (p. 3). People with ASD may have challenges with:

social interactions, speech disabilities—ranging from language delay to lack of speech, repetitive and/or compulsive behaviors and echolalia, hyperactivity, deficits in memory, learning, motor skills, or other neurological functions...excitability, and hyper- or hyposensitivity to sensory stimuli, anxiety, and difficulty to adapt to new

environments/habits. Frequent association with comorbidities such as sleep and gastrointestinal problems has been also reported. (Abruzzo et al., 2015, p. 2)

For teachers, it's important to understand that a child with ASD may have a range of factors affecting them, including not getting enough sleep and gastrointestinal issues. Before reading about ASD, I had a myriad of impressions and assumptions about what having ASD meant. According to Greenspan and Wieder (2006), there are many myths and misunderstandings associated with ASD, such as the inability to love, the inability to communicate and think creatively and the inability to read emotions, none of which is true. Greenspan and Wieder (2006) found that viewing "ASD in a dynamic framework that considers all the factors that influence the child's development over time" is important and that, instead of assuming this is a fixed disorder, "practitioners should try to move each child through the stages of emotional and intellectual development to the best of the child's ability "(p. 18). Through observation, a more complete understanding can be developed. These observations should take place over time and adjust as the child changes and grows, so the child is given many opportunities to learn to the very best of their potential (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006; Kluth & Chandler-Olcott, 2008).

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy: ABA therapy focuses on behavior. The goal is to change certain behaviors by positively reinforcing ones that are desired and ignoring ones that are not. Since ABA therapy can look very different depending on the specialist doing the treatment and whether it is being combined with other therapies at the same time, it is important to note that one person's understanding of ABA therapy may differ from another person's understanding.

Developmental Individual-difference Relationship-based model (DIR) - Floortime

Model: DIR is a relationship-based model of therapy that focuses on integrating the “emotional, social, intellectual, and educational goals for each child” (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006, p. 41). Floortime is a component of DIR that “focuses on creating emotionally meaningful learning interactions” to encourage certain basic developmental capacities (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006, p. 40). Similar to the statement for ABA, therapies for children diagnosed with ASD may be combined. It may be challenging to label precisely what kind of therapy is being used.

Biomedical Therapies: Some medical and neurological problems in children with ASD are addressed with biomedical therapies. These therapies differ depending on the medical or neurological issues being addressed (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006, pp. 266-268).

PROMPT Therapy: A type of speech therapy that is “a tactile-kinesthetic approach that uses touch cues to a patient’s articulators (jaw, tongue, lips) to manually guide them through a targeted word, phrase or sentence. The technique develops motor control and the development of proper oral muscular movements, while eliminating unnecessary muscle movements, such as jaw sliding and inadequate lip rounding” (<https://www.promptinstitute.com/page/FamiliesWIP>).

Decoding: “Ability to translate a word from print to speech, usually by employing knowledge of sound-symbol correspondence; also, the act of deciphering a new word by sounding it out” (Moats, 2010, p. 274).

Reading: To read a book, an article or a subway sign, the reader accomplishes the task of reading by make meaning from what they read. Reading is more than simply decoding text. For accurate, fluent text reading to happen, the reader both decodes and comprehends what is

on the page. My definition of reading includes making meaning by listening to texts. When Max reads with Marylen, he is sometimes decoding and sometimes listening. When Max reads independently, it is often hard to tell which words he is decoding, which words he remembers from previous readings and which words he recognizes other ways. Marylen's goal is to teach Max to read text independently. As you will see, she approaches this task using many different kinds of reading: decoding, read alouds, repeated readings, word games. Max is not following a single straight path for learning how to read, rather he is swimming in a big pool filled with various methods and opportunities. This is similar to how most people learn to read. I bring this up because decoding is often equated with reading, but reading is much more.

Pragmatic Language: Communicating using “the system of rules and conventions for using language and related gestures in social contexts” (Moats, 2010, p. 279).

Receptive and Expressive Language: Receptive language is the ability to understand what is being said. Expressive language is the ability to express one's thinking by putting those thoughts into words and sentences.

Limitations

One teacher and one child are the subject of this study. Only a small portion of what I observed is presented here. I chose examples that I feel are useful for others and myself, but much more could have been written about and explored. A literature review was not the focus of this study. More could be gleaned from a thorough review of the writings and research on teaching children with complex learning needs, such as ASD, integrating play into teaching, and the effects of child-centered, responsive teaching and differentiation in clinical settings.

Section 2

Methodology Employed

From October 2018 through March 2019, I joined Marylen and Max in their sessions. Max sees Marylen once a week for 45 minutes in her private practice. Her practice is separate from Max's school. I observed sessions and joined in when directed by Marylen or Max. I took notes and audio recorded sessions and wrote about them afterwards. The teaching decisions and lessons were Marylen's. Max knew me before I joined the sessions and the transition of my being there went smoothly. I collected artifacts from sessions, including a sample of Max's writing (fig.7) and a few games Marylen made for Max (fig. 1, 2). I documented books that were read and other materials used during sessions (fig. 3-6). I interviewed Max's parents. Max's mom sent me two emails with videos of Max at home involved in reading activities. I read Max's neuropsychological evaluation from July 2016, his speech and language evaluation from July 2017, and his school report from November 2018. I visited Max's school and saw him in small group reading instruction and in a whole class social studies lesson. I read about teaching children with learning differences and ASD, the effects of incorporating play into learning and various theories of child development in education. Marylen and I talked about her experiences teaching Max, as well as other children. Marylen shared with me how she developed her approach for working with Max and how her work with him has changed over time.

Setting

Max sees Marylen at her private practice, which is in the Cobble Hill neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. The space is bright and welcoming and feels more like an apartment. Two specialists often work here at the same time. When Max is here, he has the

whole space for himself. There is a smaller session room upstairs with a round table and a window seat, a lounge-like living room area where families often wait for their children and a large room downstairs, which has a large comfy bean bag chair and lots of space to do pretend play. Marylen designed this space for the various needs of her students. There are places for writing and drawing, cozy spots to lounge in while reading and open spaces for movement. Books are everywhere. Each session room has a table and chairs, a carpet and a bean bag chair. There are balls for throwing and blocks for building. Children's artwork and colorful maps line the walls. The space feels warm and creative. Max moves from room to room, depending on the activity he is doing and how he is feeling that day.

Background

Developmental History. Max's parents report that Max had a normal birth and was, what the nurse called a very "chill baby." He did not fuss or demand attention. Mom says he didn't cry often. She reports that Max spoke only a few single syllables like "ma" and "ba" at 12 to 13 months. She says Max responded to what was being said to him, indicating that he understood what people were saying, but he had no expressive vocabulary. When he was still not talking at 16 months, Mom requested an early intervention screening. A Speech Language Pathologist (SLP) told Mom that Max had some tendencies that looked similar to children who are diagnosed with ASD. Max was fully assessed when he was almost two-years old. He was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum and given several recommendations for treatment. Once services were in place, Mom says it was like, "having a school of one at home." Max's caregiver was a family friend who made sure Max received his therapies each day. The family reports having a wonderful specialist who provided 20 hours of ABA therapy a week. Mom says the ABA therapy was not factory-like, that it also

incorporated Floortime methods. Mom reports that it seemed to work well for Max, giving him structure and helping him to regulate himself. Mom remembers the ABA therapist commenting that Max was like a little bee going from flower to flower. He would spend two minutes with one toy and then two minutes with another, going around the room from thing to thing. In addition to ABA therapy, Max received speech therapy and occupational therapy (OT). For speech, Max also did PROMPT therapy, where the therapist manipulates the mouth as the child is speaking. Mom reports that Max had a weak immune system and that he has allergies. Max did some biomedical therapies and his diet was gluten and casein free. He had blood work done and received vitamins and supplements to improve his immune system.

Max's first word was uttered while getting blood drawn, when he yelled, "Stop!" Mom says that it seemed like his survival instincts kicked in and out came the word. Max was about 3-years old when he began speaking words. He was about 3-years, 6-months old when he started using phrases. At 3-years of age, Max went into a sensory-based preschool program. This setting did not seem stimulating enough for him. Mom reports that Max was not interacting with other children and did not seem to be progressing socially. Max's parents moved him to a small neighborhood preschool with a total of twelve children. Mom says that being with neurotypical children seemed like good modeling for Max. He began having conversations and made a friend. During this time, he continued receiving his therapies. Since Kindergarten, Max has been at the same specialized school in New York City. He is now in his fourth year at the school, in the third grade. The school provides many educational supports. Max receives OT once a week, speech language therapy twice a week, individual counseling once a week and he is in a social skills group once a week. He also receives

outside speech language therapy and the reading support with Marylen. Max also does music therapy and is involved in various sports activities. Currently, he is doing flag football.

At the end of Kindergarten, Max had a neuropsychological evaluation to learn more about his learning profile. His scores were inconsistent; some superior and others below average. Max had a full speech and language evaluation a year later. Both of these assessments show Max to have strong reasoning skills. The SLP and neuropsychologist both point out that Max's true reasoning and higher order thinking skills may not be accurately represented because his challenges with attention, working memory, organization and executive function may skew his results lower. Both assessments find Max to have challenges with receptive and expressive language, pragmatic communication, attention, executive function, and regulating his emotional responses. Max's expressive language is seen to be stronger than his receptive language. The assessments find Max to be at risk for reading challenges due to difficulties with phonological processing, working memory, orthographic memory and retrieval, alongside his challenges with attention and organization. Recommendations include placement in a special education setting with a high teacher-to-student ratio for bright children with learning differences. In addition to the supports at school, the SLP recommends outside speech language therapy and reading support. For reading, the SLP recommends support targeting Max's phonological processing, decoding and comprehension. Because of Max's challenges with receptive language, both the neuropsychologist and SLP state that Max benefits from having directions repeated and given in clear, short sentences. They also say that Max responds well to visual reminders. In all of the assessments about Max, his teachers and specialists comment on his outgoing, friendly personality and creativity.

Background of Marylen and Max's Work Together. Max's parents originally contacted Marylen on the recommendation of the SLP who assessed Max. When Mom spoke to Marylen, she shared her concerns that Max might become a non reader. She said that Max did not want to read and that he was not progressing with the Orton-Gillingham teaching at school. Mom is a teacher and was doing supplemental phonics work at home. She reports this made both her and Max miserable. Mom reports being impressed that Marylen was not going to use one program with Max, that instead Marylen was going to get to know Max and then develop a plan based on his needs. Marylen's initial service agreement to the family explains that, before diving into reading instruction "we must first create an environment where [Max] feels welcome, safe, and motivated to learn."

Max began once a week sessions with Marylen in September of 2017. Both Marylen and Mom remember that all Max wanted to do was run around and play. Marylen says that she couldn't get him to sit down and he was not willing to look at books. Since Max's anxiety around books and reading was so intense, Marylen recommended Mom stop working with him at home on reading instruction. Mom was nervous to stop, but also relieved. She says the anxiety this was causing Max and herself was not helping either of them. As Marylen decided on a approach to take with Max, she asked Mom and Dad questions to learn more about Max. Mom says she appreciated Marylen coming to her and taking the time to get to know Max before deciding what method might work best for him.

Marylen wanted to start with something simple, so she set up a sign-in book where Max could write his name and circle how he was feeling. There were several drawn faces showing various feelings and Max was invited to circle the one that matched his mood. It turned out that Max did not like anything having to do with pencils or that looked like a

workbook page, so the sign-in book did not work. Marylen decided that the structured activities, often associated with working with children with ASD, were not going to be productive. She did not want to force Max to perform. She wanted to be the teacher waiting to enjoy a book with Max. She needed to develop a positive rapport and somehow nudge him towards reading. She decided to focus on a model for social emotional learning, where the child leads. This is similar to the Floortime DIR model where the teacher takes “the child’s cue in order to build new interactions and experiences” using “the child’s interest to help him move up the ladder of shared attention, engagement, two-way communication, shared problem-solving and creative and logical use of ideas” (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006, p. 203).

Marylen saw engagement when Max was moving and actively playing. She had some early success racing Max to letters. She tried to take advantage of Max’s propensity to move around the room by sticking phonemic awareness sorting activities to the walls. She then directed him to move about the room, attaching his matches with tape. Marylen noticed that Max loved building things, then exuberantly knocking them down. She began incorporating storytelling into the block building work Max was naturally doing. Marylen says that, each week, she looked for clues that Max was becoming more interested in becoming a reader. In the beginning, it was clear he was not and he told her so. She says he would remark, “I don’t want to learn how to read!” That’s very clear. A breakthrough happened one day when Marylen invited Max to build a nest for himself in a nook of the room. He piled blankets, pillows and stuffed animals in a corner and nestled in. Marylen sat next to him and read to him, as if reading him a bedtime story. It was the first time Max allowed Marylen to read a book to him. For many weeks, Max made his nest and Marylen read aloud to him.

Marylen chose her book carefully. She is aware of the developmental stages children go through as they acquire literacy skills. She thought about where Max seemed to be developmentally, in terms of books, and what someone might enjoy at that stage. She says that she considered what a highly intelligent 3-year old might like and chose *Rabbit and Robot: The Sleepover*. In this book, Rabbit wants to control every part of a sleepover and he panics when things don't go according to plan. Robot calmly helps Rabbit work through his anxieties. While reading the book, Marylen spoke to the Rabbit character about his emotions and she invited Max to join in. By inviting Max to advise Rabbit, Marylen hoped to empower Max to take on the role of expert. She also thought that talking to the character might help Max think about how to deal with his own strong emotions. At this time, Marylen also discovered that Max has a robust sense of humor and that he enjoys and appreciates character. This new information helped Marylen figure out the next steps for their work together.

Marylen found that she could capitalize on Max's appreciation for humor and enjoyment of character by reading books dramatically. Her background in acting came in handy as she did funny, dramatic voices for characters and Max respond joyfully. They began playing around with how a character's voice should sound. Sometimes, Max directed Marylen to make a voice sound a certain way. Their characters started having side conversations, outside the books, which then led to imaginative play. Marylen introduced blocks and sand to build the stories with after reading. She taped images of some of the characters onto blocks to prompt for story building. Max's enjoyment of active play had transformed into an opportunity for recreating stories. Max now had several books that he asked for. He was reaching for books and identified a few series that were his favorites. This

signaled a big shift. Max was getting closer to wanting to become a reader. To get to this point, Marylen had considered Max's academic and emotional needs. She had also learned how to create an environment where books were emotionally relevant to Max. He now was engaged and wanted to participate in reading with Marylen.

When I joined their sessions in October 2018, it was clear that Max had made quite a bit of progress. He was more mature and had become more amenable to table work. What follows is some of what I noticed while observing the learning and teaching in Marylen and Max's sessions.

Section 3

Observations

Setting the Stage. Max is an eight-year, nine-month old boy. He has light skin and brown hair. He sees Marylen once a week for session. Max usually walks into the center saying, “Hi, guys!” in a friendly tone. He is always neatly dressed in comfortable clothing. Usually, he’ll slip off his shoes as he walks into the upstairs session room where Marylen and I sit at the table. There is always an empty chair between us for Max. As he enters, Marylen always greets Max warmly and invites him to sit down and play the game she has prepared for the day. Max usually comes in, does a quick walk around the room, scans the table and sits down. He often comments on what he sees on the table, saying, “What’s this?” or, “Is this a matching game?” Starting the session similarly each week sets the tone and provides a familiar space for Max to enter each time. Marylen then adjusts the routine to Max’s energy and needs of the day. For the past several sessions, the routine has followed this general sequence:

1. The three of us start at the round table and play a word game together. This is where Marylen presents more structured school-like activities.
2. Marylen and Max move to the window seat to read one or two books together. Marylen presents opportunities for and encourages Max to decode as they read.
3. Marylen and Max go through Max’s pack of sight words.
4. We all move downstairs to the large room to create a story through pretend play.
5. The session ends with Max sitting in the big bean bag chair sharing books with Marylen.

This routine shows how far Marylen and Max have come in a year. Max no longer runs around the room refusing books. Now, he eagerly flips through books and sits with Marylen to read. There is a lot of reading throughout the session. They often read from three to six books each session. The pretend play either stems from a book they're reading or is built around other content that is exciting to Max. Sessions don't always follow a smooth progression. Sometimes, Max experiences intense frustration and the session needs to stop so Marylen can help him cope. However, this has been the the general shape of sessions for the past six months.

A Place of Yes. Marylen cultivates a strong rapport with Max through positive language and honoring what Max wants and needs. Vygotsky believed that “ Children’s engagement with a task and willingness to challenge themselves are maximized when collaboration with the adult is pleasant, warm, and responsive and the adult gives verbal praise and attributes competence to the child” (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 29). Max’s challenges with receptive language sometimes make it hard for him to understand comments and directions. His challenges with expressive language can make it difficult for Max to express his feelings or what he’s thinking (Merritt & Culatta, 1998). This can be frustrating. Miller (2013) found that:

Every time I value a child’s idea by acting on it, think out loud to make sense of a question or response because I really want to understand, or ask children what they think and then listen carefully, I let them know I respect their thinking and trust that they have something smart to say. (p. 24)

If Marylen sees Max getting frustrated or upset, she lets Max know she hears him by restating what he says. Max once said in an upset voice, “I got this. I don’t need anything

else.” Marylen mirrored back, “You’ve got this. You don’t need anything else.” Max was searching for a book and his comment was in response to an offer of help. As soon as Marylen restated what he said, Max relaxed and returned to what he was doing. In another exchange, Marylen followed Max’s lead and also probed a little further:

Marylen, “Okay, ready, read.”

Max, sounding agitated, “What! I thought you were going to read it!”

Marylen, in a calm tone, “Oh, I could read. We could read together. The Rope Swing. Can you read that?”

Max, “Nooo! You read.”

Marylen, in a friendly upbeat tone, “Okay, I’ll read. Can you read in your head?”

Max, in a calm voice, “Okay.”

When Max does not want to do an activity, Marylen respects his choice and says okay with a smile in her voice. It’s important for Max to want to read. Having him do so when he’s not comfortable is counterproductive.

An example of Max becoming willing and ready happened with his sight word pack. For several months, knowing that Max’s receptive language was stronger than his expressive language, Max and Marylen practiced the sight words as a receptive language game. Marylen would put down two words like “children” and “are” and say, “Race me to *children*,” or, “One of these words is the word *are*. Can you find it?” Marylen’s hand would hover over the two words, giving Max time to successfully get to the word first. As Max slapped the word, he might smile and say, “Ha, ha,” or, “I got it!” When Marylen noticed that Max knew most of the words, she began inviting him to read them instead of playing the game. One time she put the words out for reading, and Max said, “Can we race?” Marylen responded in a friendly voice, “Right, I forgot to race.” Her actions provided an opening that this time Max did not

take. She continued presenting opportunities for reading the words and each time Max chose the game instead. Then, one day, when the sight words were put out for the game, Max said, in a bit of an exasperated tone, “Can I just read them?” and Marylen said yes. Max went through the pack reading the words as Marylen calmly and positively supported him when needed. Now Max reads the pack of sight words in this straightforward manner each session. What used to be a highly supported receptive reading game is now a more independent expressive reading task.

Max has also started self-correcting when he reads the sight words. When a child self-corrects, they are attending to print and showing confidence in working out words more independently. Marylen had been modeling these behaviors for Max while playing the sight word game. She would put her finger under the part of the word she was reading and say something like, “m, m, ma...magic” or, “this one is ch, ch, children.” Miller (2013) noted how “gradually releasing responsibility is all about teachers reducing the amount of scaffolding across time, and lessons, as students gain independent control of applying what they’ve been taught” (p. 18). Marylen does not know Max’s timeline for independence, so she works on building his skills and modeling strategies until he is ready.

Introducing the sight words as a game worked for Max. He enjoys the racing game and was willing to play. One element of play has stayed with his pack. Our names are included in the pack and Max makes sure his name is placed last. Each time, he either asks Marylen if it is at the bottom or he checks to make sure it’s there himself. When Max sees it’s in the right spot, he smiles. When he reads his name as the final card, it’s with a big, “Max!” and he smiles again. Satisfaction, success, and enjoyment are part of what makes reading this pack of sight words worthwhile for Max.

These games are opportunities for Max to practice and acquire new skills (fig. 1, 2). Max likes playing games, but he worries about losing, so games can also be stressful. Marylen came up with the idea that she and I alternate our turns. This gives Max two turns for each one of ours so Max has more chances to play and win the game. This also means that Max practices the targeted skill more often. At the end of a matching game, Max will happily have a big pile of cards in front of him. After he counts his cards, he will proclaim, “I won!” with a smile on his face. While playing, Marylen models various ways of thinking about emotions associated with games. She might say, “Oh, I didn’t get a match. Maybe next time,” or, “If I don’t win, and I get upset, will you help me calm down?” In this last statement, Marylen provides Max with an opportunity to comfort her. We all get frustrated at times, even grown ups. By taking into account Max’s emotional needs, these games are productive and fun.

The rules of the game need to be understandable. If there are too many steps, and Max gets frustrated, the game is not successful. Sometimes, Marylen adjusts the rules to make them clearer. Sometimes, she and Max negotiate how to change the rules. Marylen listens carefully to Max, mirrors back his language and then asks questions. Vygotsky believed in the effectiveness of collaborative problem-solving activities to help children learn. “What is important is that children interact with someone while the two are jointly trying to reach a goal” (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 27). While Max and Marylen figure out the game, Max practices using pragmatic language. Even when games don’t go according to plan, Marylen still gains useful information. As a diagnostician, Marylen learns from successes and failures. Once, Marylen designed a game to preview a story. Max realized part of the story would be revealed before he read the book and he was upset, “But then we’ll

know what happens in the story!” he exclaimed. Marylen responded with, “You don’t want to know what happens before we read. Okay, let’s not play the game. Let’s read.” By refusing the game, Max protects something he enjoys about reading, the element of surprise. For her part, Marylen notes that it’s important for Max to discover the book as they are reading. Max doesn’t want to know what’s going to happen beforehand. Marylen can use this information to further inspire Max’s reading.

Games can be simple to be satisfying. Marylen might put the book she wants to teach in a bag and hand it to Max. One time, Max took the bag and said, “What’s this?” and Marylen responded happily, “It’s the book for today.” Max turned his head, closed his eyes and slowly reached into the bag. As he pulled out the book, he smiled, looked at it and said, “Oooh, it’s *Red Noses!*” Another time, Marylen made a game by giving us all a pile of letters. We each put one letter out to see if they made a word. Max decoded most of these three sound words himself with little support. He even turned a *u* card around to see which way it worked. Does this work as a *u* or an *n*? This shows flexibility and awareness about how words work. These kinds of tabletop activities were not possible a year ago. By keeping them playful, Marylen has slowly built up Max’s tolerance for sitting at the table and learning.

Enjoying Books Through Play-filled Reading. Watching Marylen and Max read together is an exciting, active experience. Marylen uses distinct and dramatic voices for the characters as she reads. Max laughs and makes comments. There are discussions about how things should sound. Max might direct Marylen to, “Do it in a British voice. Try to do it like a gentleman. No, like a queen!” Then he laughs as she does the voices. Then they might jump outside of the book to create side dialogues for the characters. This playful, imaginative

sharing of stories is what brought Max into the world of books. According to Lukens, Smith and Miller Coffel:

the closeness of reader and children as they focus together on a story has emotional benefits as well. The feeling of a communal understanding wraps children in the comfort of the story. Once children meet words, ideas and experiences that expand their awareness of the world and what's in it, their growth can be almost infinite.

(p. 332)

Reading is powerful, not just for information, but for the expansive experience it provides. Bringing play into reading adds another significant element. In Vygotsky's theories, play was seen as an essential component for a child's development. Not only does play further the cognitive abilities of children, but it also helps develop their social skills, enriching their involvement in their communities (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

Everything Marylen does around books with Max is geared towards enchantment so he will want to read. Max chooses the books they read, ensuring that he is genuinely interested in what they're reading (Miller, 2013). Marylen might offer him a particular book, but she always defers to his choice. She has stacks of books for him to choose from, both old favorites and new ones he might like. His current favorites include the Mercy Watson series, Elephant and Piggie books, the Biff, Chip and Kipper series and Dodsworth books. Both the words and the illustrations in these books are clever and funny. Having great pictures along with text means there are "multiple layers of meaning available for discovery" (Lukens et al., 2003, p. 51). Once Marylen asked Max what his favorite thing about a certain book was and he said, "the expressive faces."

Oppenheim, Brenner and Boegehold (1986) wrote about books as places “touched with humor, suspense, drama, adventure and feelings” (p. 141). Marylen chooses voices for the book characters to add to the drama, emotion and humor as she reads. When Marylen reads the part of Francine Poulet, the animal control officer in *Mercy Watson Thinks Like a Pig*, she uses a Texas drawl. Marylen, as Francine, says, “Raccoon in your trash? Squirrel in your chimney? Snake in your toilet?” Max bursts out laughing, “Snake in your toilet?” A little further along, a flustered, elderly neighbor, named Baby, warns the Watsons that their pig, Mercy, is in danger. Baby’s so flustered that all she can say in a tremulous, soft voice is that, “an *unmentionable* horror approaches.”

After hearing Marylen read this, Max laughs and asks, “What’s an *unmentionable* horror?”

Marylen responds, “Something so bad you don’t even want to mention it to anybody.”

Max then says, in an incredulous voice, “An *unmentionable* horror actually approaches right NOW???”

Marylen dramatically answers, “Yesssss.”

Max is now laughing and rolling on the bean bag chair saying, “Oh, my god, oh, my god, oh, my god, oh, my god, oh, my god, oh, my god. I’m going to diiiiie!”

Marylen smiles and says, “Can we continue?”

By reading aloud in this interactive manner, Marylen and Max enjoy and make sense of the story. Max’s questions clarify meanings. He also tries out some of the dialogue to see how it feels. Clay (2014) found that reading aloud to children lets “children hear text structures that expose them to language beyond their own control... Reading aloud to children of any age

will sketch for them a landscape of features into which their own language usage may expand” (p. 137).

Making up side conversations creates other opportunities for enjoyment and thinking about the stories. Marylen says to Max, “Do you want to be Frank? It starts here,” and she points to the part where Frank’s dialogue starts. Max replies, “Let’s make up the words.” The picture in the book shows Frank, a boy who is about 8-years old, looking miserable in a woman’s hat. His younger sister, Stella, is forcing Frank and Mercy to attend her pretend tea party. Frank and Mercy are hungry, there’s no real food and they don’t like wearing silly hats.

Max adjusts his voice lower and says, “I look stupid sitting here in this girl hat.”

Max and Marylen laugh.

Marylen makes up the next part using Stella’s voice, which is a bit like a pre-teen with an attitude, “But, Frank, you know you don’t have any other friends to play with, so you might as well just stay at my tea party.”

Max replies in his lower voice, “I look stupid in this hat and I’m really hungry!”

Marylen, in Stella’s voice, “Well, maybe, you should have some of these tea sandwiches.”

Max, laughing, “Okay! Fine!” making motions like he’s shoving food in his mouth and saying, “Aaaahhhhhhh!”

Max and Marylen both laugh.

Marylen, as Stella, says, “Wasn’t that delicious?”

Max closes the conversation, saying in his regular voice, “Yeah. Can we stop now?”

Marylen agrees and she continues reading the book.

Another time, Max used side dialogue to make sense of an unexpected part in a book. In *Mercy Watson Something Wonky This Way Comes*, Max encountered Leroy Ninker, a thief from a previous Mercy Watson book. As Max got to the page with Leroy, he exclaimed, “What! *He’s* there! How did *he* escape jail? Can you imagine if maybe the Watsons are going to come up there. I bet Mr. Watson is going to see him.” As Marylen and Max talked about what the characters might think, Max made predictions and inferences about the story. Max then started naming different characters and asking Marylen to make up what they might say. When it came to Police Officer Tomilello, Marylen said in a deep man’s voice, “Is it legal for a former thief to sell popcorn at a movie theater? Why, yes, I believe it is.” Max seemed to think this was especially funny and asked Marylen to do it a few more times. Marylen then suggested Max give it a try and Max put his own spin on Officer Tomilello’s comment, saying, “Is it *illegal* for a cowboy thief to sell popcorn at the movie theater? Yes, it most certainly is. Maybe, at the end of the movie, I’ll sneak up and capture him and put him in a bag and bring him to the police station.” Max used his imagination to extend what was happening in the book. Irwin (2007) said:

Comprehension is an active process to which each reader brings his or her individual attitudes, interests, expectations, skills, and prior knowledge (reader context).

Because the writer’s message can never be entirely explicit, the reader must actively infer and interpret what is on the page in light of what he or she brings to the task.

(p. 8)

A little later, Max made up a bit of side dialogue for Mercy, the pig, saying in a soft voice, “Wait, wait, I know that little man. That’s the same man...wait...I still have no idea who that little guy is.” His comment refers to the previous book when Leroy is in Mercy’s house.

Throughout the book, Mercy does not know who Leroy is. Max's side dialogue shows that he understands what happened in the previous book and that he's applying that knowledge to what's happening in this one. When characters repeat from one book to the next, readers bring important background knowledge with them. They use this background knowledge to think more deeply about what they read (Lukens et al., 2013).

As Marylen makes up side conversations, she models thinking about books and their content. When Max joins in, he learns useful comprehension strategies that also serve to further his verbal language skills. "As children share their ideas out loud and hear how children respond, they refine their understanding for how words convey meaning, transport information, and communicate ideas, and that talk lies at the very heart of comprehension and learning" (Taberski, 2011, p. 9). In this instance, Max and Marylen share their ideas with one another to form understandings about what's happening in the story and what they both think about the book and its characters.

Active, playful comprehension spills out after reading, as well, when Max and Marylen build parts of stories using blocks and other materials. For example, as Marylen and Max finish *Mercy Watson Something Wonky This Way Comes*, Marylen asks Max if he wants to build part of the story. Max smiles and replies, "The treeeeeeee!!!" indicating the part when Francine Poulet dramatically falls out of the tree onto Mercy, Stella and Frank at the tea party. Marylen scaffolds the play, asking Max how he wants to build the scene and what the sequence of events should be. While building, Max talks about the characters, what they are doing and where they are sitting. Max uses a big block for Mercy because she's bigger than Frank and Stella. He adds other blocks for other characters, making the scene more complex. Max and Marylen use blocks for the table and cut out pieces of paper to represent the toast

Mrs. Watson gives everyone at the end of the book. There is a discussion about how it would feel to have someone fall on your table. Max decides that a large, oversized, plastic beach ball should be Francine Poulet smashing down onto the table. Max is thoroughly engaged in building and talking about the story. At the end, Max exclaims, “Here comes Francine Poulet!” as he rolls the ball over everyone. He and Marylen cry out dramatically in the various voices of the characters as the ball rolls over the scene, ending the story.

During play, Max revisits parts of stories that interest and delight him. Since he has Marylen as his scene partner, he also develops his thoughts and ideas in collaboration through discussion. Greenspan and Wieder (2006) found that “Playing different roles in a drama enables individuals to learn to improvise, be more flexible, practice uncomfortable situations, and think more creatively” (p. 216). Taberski (2011) stated that “By engaging in conversations and dialogue, students expand their thinking and their world, and are exposed to new ideas, perspectives, and vocabulary” (p. 179). According to Clay (2014)

Children of all ages, preschool through high school, need frequent opportunities to formulate their thoughts in spoken language...Children need to continue their oral language development during the school years, to expand their vocabularies and their control over the structures of the language, the patterns of sentences they can use.

(p. 28)

Wong Fillmore & Snow (2000) asserted that “Oral language functions as a foundation for literacy and as the means of learning in school and out” (p. 290). Since Max has challenges with expressive language, opportunities for discussion and creating dialogue are especially meaningful. In his discussions with Marylen, Max practices using the language of stories and the pragmatic language of back and forth conversation.

Every time she reads, Marylen models reading to Max. She sits a little in front of him, so he has a good view of the page, and she reads. This past month, Max started incorporating independent reading into parts of our sessions. Once, when we were upstairs, Max looked in the book bag, took out the book and announced, "I'm going to read it!" and jauntily walked out of the session room and sat on the sofa, smiling and waiting for Marylen. Another time, during pretend play, Max directed our characters to all choose books to read. We all picked different Elephant and Piggie books. Max sat in the bean bag chair, with Marylen and I sitting next to him, and then he said, "Okay, let's read," and we read our books independently. Max read each page of his book to himself out loud. He used expression and attended to text. When we were done, Marylen asked if we all enjoyed our books and we all said yes and then continued with the rest of our pretend play. Play "is not only a matter of expression but a prime means for consolidating, extending, and creating knowledge" (Franklin, 2000, p. 48). During play, children can perform beyond their comfort level because play is a safe place to try out new activities because it's not yet real (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Last week, when we were about to build a story with blocks, Max said, "Oh, *Dog Man!*" He grabbed the book, plopped down in the bean bag chair and flipped through the pages. Marylen and I built with blocks while Max, the boy who used to run away from books, chose to engage with a book instead.

Pretend Play for Building Stories. "Hey, Guys! Want to play Ninjas?" Max says with a big smile. Max chooses the theme of our stories during pretend play. He is the director. We are his troupe of actors who help bring his vision to life. Marylen prompts Max, asking about the theme of our story, who the characters are and what's going to happen. She models writing it down, quickly putting some images on paper (fig. 3). When she asks Max if

he wants to write the plan himself, he says no, but then he takes the time to direct Marylen as to how to draw the characters and what colors should be used for who they are. Marylen asks Max to check and see if she's doing it right. He looks at the plan and says it looks good or asks for more drawing or words. There's a lot of back and forth about how things should go. We figure out which characters we will play and what our powers should be. Max, as the ninja expert, gives us advice. Once Marylen was the Pink Ninja and her superpower was "the element of surprise." This part of our pretend play is the brainstorming part. It is similar to writing an outline or making a story web, which children often do in school.

For the story itself, we energetically act out what's been planned, pausing every once in a while to make sure we've got it right. For several weeks, we are the three ninjas protecting our hideout from Garmadon, the villain. At one point, we mistakenly blame each other for something Garmadon has done, and Max directs us all to argue:

Sara, "Hey, who ripped up my list? I was busy writing it!"

Max, "Who destroyed my punching bag? I had just built it. It was special to me and now it's ruined!"

Marylen, "I was making cupcakes and they were going to be delicious."

Max has us continue pretend arguing until his character figures out that Garmadon is causing the trouble. Garmadon has escaped. We must stop him and bring him to justice! Together, we use our super sleuthing expertise and superpowers to find the villain and put him behind bars (fig. 6). Max is the protagonist and the hero who ultimately saves the day.

In composing this story, Max is the author. He figures out the beginning, middle and end. He decides who the main characters are, what the setting is and how the story will go. His story makes sense and progresses in a logical manner. It's dramatic and built around a problem that needs to be solved. He gives his two cohorts room to do our parts and add to the

play. We are also part of the fun. There are lots of discussions about what's happening. Marylen supports Max's literacy awareness using the language of stories; setting, events, characters, plot, conclusion, hero, villain. Franklin (2000) wrote "the child's development of scenarios in play reflects a more encompassing ability to understand and construct narrative that bring parts into a coherent, sequenced whole" (p. 62). Paley (2004) stated:

The mind that has been freely associating with playful imagery is primed to tackle new ideas. Fantasy play, rather than being a distraction, helps children achieve the goal of having an open mind, whether in the service of further story telling or in formal lessons. (p. 26)

Max sometimes edits or elaborates on his story. Once, during play, Max walked up to me and sniffed and said in a suspicious voice, "Hmmm, you smell a little like...Garmadon!" Max then added a part where Garmadon morphs into my character. We then had to figure out where my character was and save her from Garmadon's clutches. The stories Max composes are exciting and funny, similar to the books he enjoys.

Noticing what the story is about gives Marylen clues to Max's thinking and what's important to him. Paley (2004) pointed out that the characters created in fantasy play did "not mask reality; they helped us interpret and explain our feelings about reality" (p. 29). In this story, Max is part of a team of cohorts who solve problems. He is powerful and capable. He is the hero who ultimately saves the day. He may argue with his friends, but eventually we come together to support one another and battle for justice. At the end, Max celebrates success with his friends by toasting to the three ninjas (with real water from the kitchen). Max is an upbeat powerful hero who sometimes struggles, but he always finds success in the end.

Be Open to Surprises. One day, Marylen said, “Now, we have some jokes. Do you like jokes?” Max looked at the written jokes and said that he wanted them to have pictures. He and Marylen talked about what Max meant and then Marylen asked Max if he could show her. He said, “Yeah, pass the pencil,” and wrote: Y Di the ckin kros the roD to Git to the uDr siD (fig. 7). Max handed Marylen the page and she read out loud, “Why did the chicken cross the road?” Max, smilingly replied, “To get to the other side!” and they both laughed. This is the most writing Max has done in session and it came out of the blue. Looking at Max’s writing gives Marylen an important snapshot into Max’s phonemic awareness so this is useful information. Marylen has offered Max many opportunities to write in the past. Perhaps Max will be open to more writing in the future.

At Home. Max’s parents report more independent reading activities at home. Mom says the books Marylen sends home are on the coffee table by the couch during the week. Max will take a book and page through it. Sometimes, he does a picture walk, turning the pages and looking at the pictures. In the last four months, Max’s parents notice there’s more of a narrative as Max turns the pages. Mom suspects Max may be secretly reading. She says Max is moving his mouth in a way that looks like he’s sounding out words. They notice that sometimes he says the word he’s looking at correctly and sometimes not. Either way, Mom says he’s making the attempt. When they read aloud to him, they see Max looking and listening and sometimes he’ll ask, “What’s that word?” Mom tells Max that she sees words everyday she doesn’t know. Even grown ups have to stop and figure out words, just like kids.

In one of the videos Mom sent, Max is practicing for a test. He reads a passage that is next to three pictures. Many of the words Max decodes correctly and several he does not. Max’s decoding skills are emerging. They are not yet accurate enough to be the basis for a

comprehension assessment. At one point, his mom helps him a bit. He turns to her and says, “Mom, I *can* read.” Max is developing his identity as a reader.

In the other video, Max sits on his own reading, *I’m a Frog*, an Elephant and Piggie book that he and Marylen have shared before. As he reads, Max exhibits many independent reading skills and strategies. He uses his finger to point to words as he says them. He slows down to sound out words and then rereads them. At one point, Max asks for help, saying, “Pretending is when you, pretending is when you...when you...hey, what does *a c t* spell?” His mom, in the background, replies, “*A c t* spells *act*.” Max looks back at the page and says, “pretending is when you...pretending. Pretending is when you act like something you are not.” It takes Max several tries to get that sentence out and, when he does, it flows out smoothly. Max uses expression and phrasing as he reads. His tone changes depending on what’s happening and who’s speaking. He laughs at funny parts. His body moves back when Gerald yells something. At one point, Max reads in a tone similar to Marylen’s. He says, in a particularly sneaky sounding voice, that grown ups pretend, “*ALL* the time!” By enjoying a particular expression from his sessions with Marylen, Max transfers that experience to his independent reading. This video celebrates the work Max and Marylen do. It shows Max deeply enjoying a book he loves.

Section 4

Conclusions and Recommendations

What I Noticed. I started this study with a question about how to motivate a student to read who has no interest in books. The answer lies within the student. For Max, the answer has to do with safety and joy. For him to want to do something, he needs to feel safe and the learning needs to be fun. Watching Marylen weave play into her work with Max reminds me how much thought goes into responsive teaching. This is not a simple process. Noticing what works for a person can be elusive. Applying that knowledge effectively takes skill. Marylen draws from a varied background for her teaching. She is familiar with several step-by-step, multi-sensory literacy programs. She is a clinician and diagnostician. She understands how the brain works and why learning literacy is so complicated. She has studied child development and the child-centered teaching that is part of the developmental-interaction approach, where the teacher responds to the needs of the student through relationship and meaning-filled content (Nager & Shapiro, 2000). Marylen's background in acting also helps teach Max. All of this knowledge and experience is valuable, but what makes it work is Marylen's flexibility and her respect for her student. Her flexibility allows her to differentiate. She can try one method and then decide another is better. She might toss them all out and invent something new when needed. Her respect for Max builds their strong rapport. They are a team; working, reading and playing together and enjoying one another's thoughts and ideas. When Max walks into the learning center, he is comfortable, which means he can be himself. This then means that he is free to learn in his own way, which is the best way for him to learn.

For this study, I also wanted to learn more about ASD. I only knew a little about this diagnosis and was confused by some of what I heard. The reading I did was just a beginning and it will serve as a base from which to learn more. It helped me understand better the complexity of the diagnosis. Max's family was also incredibly generous with sharing their story and the many supports Max received over the years. Many children diagnosed with ASD do not get enough educational opportunities (Donnellan, 1984; Jorgenson, 2005). Some of the symptoms associated with autism may stem from a lack of opportunities for cognitive and emotional growth, not from the child's actual abilities or potential (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006). Since the diagnosis covers a wide range of possible behaviors, symptoms and manifestations, getting to know the student is the most important start for any teacher. This is the same as with any student. For some children with ASD, there may be several challenges happening at the same time, so it may be hard to discern what is going on for a child. Careful observation over time helps teachers discover the best teaching practices for that person. It is also good to check your assumptions at the door. Marylen is not seeing out of Max's eyes. She doesn't know what or how he's feeling. She can, however, let him know that she hears him and that she values what he says. This too is what most children want, to be heard and acknowledged. It turns out that learning how to teach Max helps me learn better how to teach other students, as well.

What Teaching Max Tells Us About Teaching Other Students. Max benefits by being allowed to learn his own way. Since Marylen focuses on responsive teaching and differentiation, she changes her methods depending on the student in front of her. Since she is a diagnostician, she observes and thinks about what she sees in order to create curriculum specifically for a child. These methods are helpful for teaching many children and may be

especially useful when the path to success is unclear. By compiling a list of teaching practices that I observed, I hope to provide a picture that may be helpful for many teachers:

- **Observe and ask questions** to determine a plan for teaching.
 - What is this child's particular strengths?
 - What do they already know?
 - Where is the child developmentally in different areas of their learning?
 - What do they need to feel safe?
 - What does this child like to do? Where is there a spark of joy?
 - What motivates them to interact with their environment?
 - What are the next steps for this child's learning?
- **Follow the child's lead** to learn what interests the child. Then take that knowledge further to create engagement, so children are reaching a little beyond what they know.
- Figure out what constitutes a **safe learning environment** for a child and build that into lessons. Children need to feel safe in order to take risks and learn.
- Consider the **language abilities** of a child to determine the language you use. Does the student have expressive or receptive language challenges? Do they benefit from short, clear directions? Do they like to play around with language? Are there times when you can expose a them to more complex language? Are there times when language needs to be kept concise?
- **Listen carefully and repeat back** what a child says to check for understanding and to show you are listening.

- A **routine** helps students know what to expect, but make sure there is variety so the routine does not get stale and uninteresting. Maintain engagement and interest and change the routine if it's not working.
- **Model learning behaviors.** Model ways of thinking about problems and solutions. Model ways of talking and using language for discussion, imagining things and thinking about one's own feelings. Model specific strategies and skills, such as sounding out words, ways to comprehend text while reading books and ways to compose stories. Model writing by making plans or sketching out a scene.
- Find **books that students really enjoy** so they will want to read. Both the words and the illustrations pull children into books. For children who have language challenges, pictures may be especially meaningful.
- **Read aloud often** to children. Read alouds are especially important for giving children access to interesting, rich content and language before they can access it on their own. Bring books to life by reading with expression.
- **Allow lots of room for discussion** through interactive read alouds, negotiating play and working out the rules for games.
- Expose children to a **variety of language**: pragmatic, academic, technical.
- Try **creating outside dialogue** for characters so children can use their make believe powers to build a deeper understanding about characters and what's happening in a story.
- After reading, invite children to **build the parts of the book** they most enjoy by using blocks and other props. Think about story elements while building, such as plot, setting, character and sequence.

- **Pretend play** is a rich place for learning. Through pretend play, children can learn how to compose and rework their ideas as they discuss and decide who the characters are, what's going to happen, and what's special about a particular setting. Through pretend play, children get a chance to work out and make sense of complex thoughts and problems that they encounter in the real world.
- **Games** can entice children to do routine practice for learning (i.e. for sight words or phonics rules). Games often can be quite simple. Just having the element of play can make something more fun.
- Use **positive language** so children can see they are successful, celebrate their learning and build self-esteem.
- Everyone's **emotions are valid** and to be honored.
- **Everyone learns differently and at different speeds.** Allow children to take the time they need to learn something. If one way of teaching doesn't work, try another.
- **Enjoy your student** so they see they are interesting and valued. Learning happens through social interaction and sharing experiences. Establishing a good **rapport** is important for learning.

Some Other Responses to Help Max Thrive and Feel Safe. Marylen makes some important adjustments for Max based on her assessments and his ASD diagnoses. These responses may also be applicable to other children, but have been especially helpful for Max.

- Max is the only child at the learning center during his sessions. Since Max is the only child there, Marylen has more control in **creating a positive and safe space** for Max. By having the space to himself, there are also **less distractions** and he is free to use all of the rooms for his learning.

- Marylen is aware that the timeline for Max's learning may differ from other students. She **allows him the time he needs** to swim in a subject. She **keeps sessions lively, engaging and meaningful** so Max will continue to be motivated as he builds his confidence and skills for the next developmental shift.
- When something unexpected happens, Max may have a big reaction. Marylen functions on a level of **radical acceptance** with Max. By listening closely to him and acknowledging his concerns, Marylen builds a **strong rapport** with Max, so he feels valued and safe.
- Because of Max's ASD diagnosis and reading and writing challenges, he is at a higher risk for having his cognitive abilities and potential underestimated. Marylen provides **many opportunities** for Max to learn and to develop and practice his oral language. Rich and varied discussions about topics that are emotionally relevant to Max help him develop his abilities for various kind of thinking, including higher order and abstract thinking.

Pulling Things Together and Opening Them Up. Nager and Shapiro (2007) stated that teachers "should expect to fumble and make mistakes, that they will and must keep on learning and trying and reexamining their experiences" (p. 25). While working with Max, I saw Marylen rethink her approach many times. She thinks about what she can do differently and what might help Max the next time. In this way, she keeps pace with Max and learns as he learns. They are a team. They come up with fantastic pretend play scenarios and laugh at the funny parts of books. They share jokes and play games. Max is relaxed enough with Marylen to burst into a four minute rap (see Appendix A) about some books they've been reading. When they read Elephant and Piggie books, Marylen seamlessly supports Max,

using her voice as a bridge for him to stand on when he needs help with a word. Their reading is fluent and fun to listen to. Max experiences the joy of reading and building stories. He is learning literacy. Marylen still doesn't know exactly how things will go with Max, but perhaps it's in the unknowing that the potential lies. By staying open to possibilities and making adjustments along the way, Marylen and Max continue learning and growing together.

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Figures



Figure 1. Tabletop game for Max where he matches puzzle pieces to make two syllable words such as ninja and cactus.

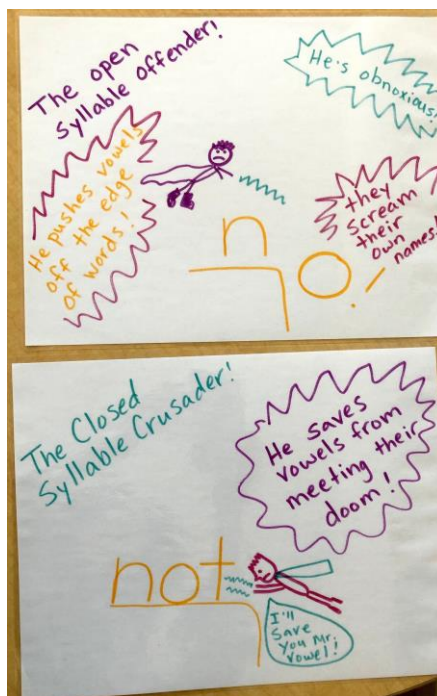


Figure 2. Tabletop game for learning about open and closed syllables.

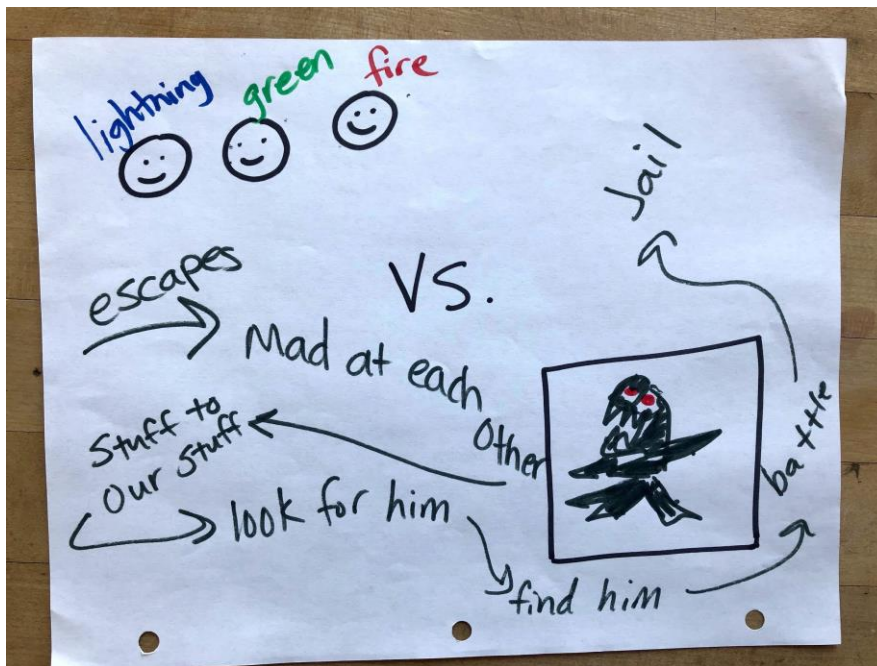


Figure 3. Max's plan for pretend play, written by Marylen at Max's direction.



Figure 4. Sign written by Marylen at Max's instruction for our pretend play.



Figure 5. Ninjago City built from blocks.



Figure 6. Garmadon trapped in jail!

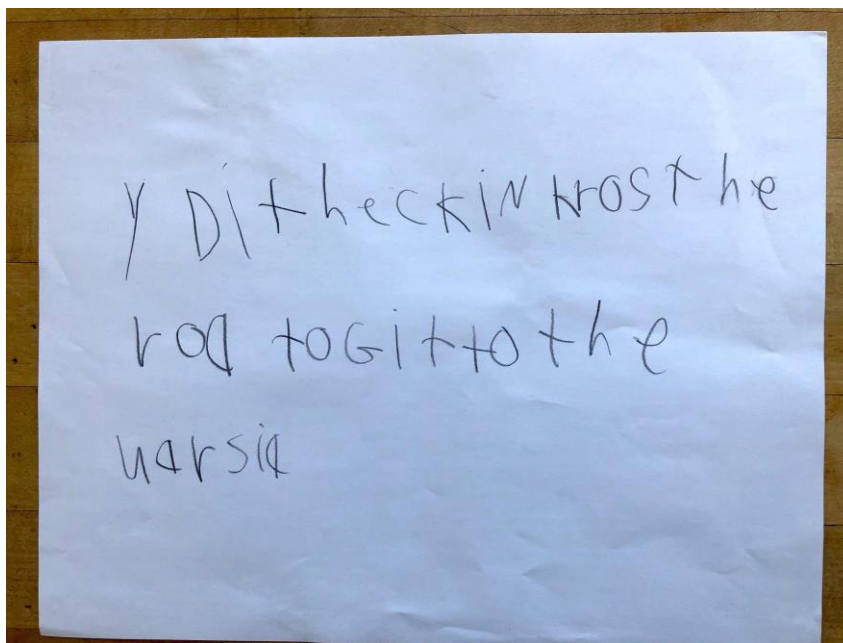


Figure 7. Max's joke: Why did the chicken cross the rode? To get to the other side.

Appendix A

Max's Dodsworth Rap

April 6, 2019

Note: As much of this was taken down as possible, but parts were missed.

Max beat boxes off and on while rapping.

There was a story about a raccoon named Dodsworth.
Then he made a friend.
His name is Duck.
It was Hodges' duck.
He's an elephant.
The duck got stuck inside Dodsworth's suitcase.
And Then he ruined his adventure.
Then Dodsworth tried to catch him.
He ate cotton candy with all the rats out at Coney Island.
Dodsworth tried to catch the duck.
He got off the Ferris wheel.
Dodsworth called Hodges.
He said, "I have your duck."
But the duck was gone again.
But then the duck was getting on the boat.
He said we gotta swim.
But the duck can't swim.
The boat was going to Paris.
And then he got to Paris.
When he jumped off the boat.
But the duck had flew off.
Then he had to swim.
They was going to Paris again.
But they found an air balloon.
And then they were going to London.
Then Dodsworth called Hodges again.
And he said it might be a little more longer than they thought.
Then they got to London.
Then the duck got lost again.
He took the wrong bus.
Then Dodsworth found the duck.
He thought it sounded like the duck.
But he had a different hat.
Dodsworth thought he was the duck was his.

But then he had to go.

Then Dodsworth found out that wasn't his duck.

And the duck took a swim.

And then the duck had to take a swim.

Dodsworth cried and cried and cried cause he never found the duck.

Then Dodsworth found the duck.

Then they went to Rome, Rome, Rome.

Then Dodsworth and the duck got back home.

They went to Hodges' cafe, but Hodges was not there.

And Dodsworth and the duck lived happily ever after.

You can get this CD new at Cool Song Store.

Appendix B

Interview with Marylen Massen

April 26, 2019

Questions in bold were submitted by Sara Russell Dewey.

How did you first get to know Max? What are the first steps you take when meeting a new student?

I first got to know Max by interviewing his mom. It's really important to hear from the child's family first because they know the child best. They know the hard data as well as the soft data. There are so many different lenses that we can look through when trying to understand a child. The parent lens is like a kaleidoscope, where all the lenses smash into each other. I like to start there, with a big mess, and then slowly pull the parts apart.

How do you a plan for a child like Max, whose potential is unknown?

It's hard to make a literacy learning plan for a child who is living with a challenging developmental difference, no doubt. It's hard to predict how much progress a child will make and when they will make it. But if you are able to accept that you can't make a prediction, then you can sort of zoom out and get to what really matters to this child. It's a beautiful place to be actually, when you can say, "forget the timeline, we are just going to see if we can turn this child on to reading." We have so much more freedom to try new things. Beyond these big, theoretical ideas, my advice is to use your excellent task analysis skills and figure out what cognitive processes reading demands from your student. Then break down your big goal into tiny parts. Make activities that enchant your student. Do what works and don't do what doesn't work. You wouldn't believe the number of times I have seen teachers continue to do what doesn't work, and the student suffers.

How did you create a safe space for Max where he would feel comfortable and confident?

I believe he is a person. What he thinks and feels is important to me. I think the teacher's role is to create a partnership with the student, and to do that you have to have a friendship that runs like a current under the guidance you are giving. That's the basis of a "safe space," I

suppose. Having a true and deep respect for the person you are teaching and not trying to throw your weight around as an adult, demanding respect. My wizened old classical theater history professor in college used to say, “you can’t get a rabbit by screaming at it.” Don’t scream. Be the kind of teacher Matilda likes: “kind and helpful, not bossy and annoying.” Beyond that, make the space inviting to kids. Kids like pillows and nooks and soft things. I didn’t do anything unusual for Max except to schedule him at a time when the learning center is quiet so he can have the whole space to move.

How can you tell when a teaching strategy is not working and needs to be changed?

For Max? Normally, he just tells me. If you set up with your student that you are interested in their feedback, they can tell you when something isn’t working.

**How do you keep engagement when a student needs a long time to learn something?
How do you keep sessions from becoming too repetitive?**

You can play with routine. You might find a game that the student really likes, and then find a way to modify it with different concepts. Goals shift with progress and you find yourself doing new things. When a student is at the same reading level for a long time, you need to change up the books they read as their interests grow. You have to remember that a child who is not moving forward quickly with reading is still growing up, and you need to honor that. You have to check in with yourself too. Are you bored, as the teacher? Chances are the student is double bored. Don’t teach bored.

How do you know you are on the right path with a child when you are designing curriculum individually and not following any type of program?

Well, keep this in mind, just because you aren’t following a published curriculum does not mean you aren’t doing a program. You are following an unpublished program that you created based on the expert knowledge that you have about teaching literacy. I’m going to caution your readers here that you should not do this unless you feel you have the expertise. I want your readers to read that again imagining that I am saying this in a very serious voice while making a very serious face. I did not make my own plans in the beginning of my career, I had mentors guiding me, I followed published programs. I didn’t go into private

practice until I had the skills to improvise, and until I had total trust in my ability to help children learn.

All this being said, when you sign on to working with children with complex learning needs, sometimes there are going to be rough days, terrible days even. Days even when you have to end the session because of what the student is dealing with. On these days, I don't always know if we are "making progress." But it's not the days you want to look at, it's the trends over months and years. And there will be awesome days, days with breakthroughs and hugs and rainbows. Those days are just blips too. It's all blips. Look for the trends. And keep on talking to moms and dads and caregivers. Sometimes the progress actually shows up at home first.

You use the term "radical acceptance" with Max. What does "radical acceptance" look like between you and Max?

You know, it's funny but until you started this study I had never used the term "radical acceptance" in the context of teaching and learning. I think it was just a way of explaining things. Radical acceptance means being okay with who your student is and what they need to do. Nobody likes it when their core needs are unacceptable.

When you call Max your "scene partner," what do you mean?

I literally mean he is my scene partner. I don't know if that term means anything to people outside the theater world, but it works for me. Before I was a teacher, I was an actor. In modern times, actors approach scenes from a psychological point of view, wondering such things as: Who am I? What do I want? What tactics will I use to get it? How far will I push that tactic? and Who is my scene partner? What do they want? What tactics are they using? How far do I think they will push that tactic? If you want to get what you want from a scene partner (the student) then you have to make sure you are giving them what they need. So that the scene (session) is a win for both of you. Then you are creating something awesome that progress can stand on.

What has Max taught you? What new things have you learned or what's been confirmed for you in your teaching?

That there are a lot of stereotypes about people with autism. That, for example, they don't make eye contact, or that they aren't funny, or can't make good inferences. Max obliterates these stereotypes. When you hear me laughing at his jokes, I'm laughing because they are truly funny. I would love to be in a writers room with him. He's great at dialogue.

Is there anything else that comes to mind or that you would like to say about teaching Max?

Just that it's been such an honor to be able to share him with you, and the wider world. I hope that your work inspires teachers of children with developmental challenges to go looking for the strengths. They are there, they are remarkable, and they deserve to be shouted about.

Permission Letters

Dear ____ and _____,

I've been so impressed with the learning and teaching that Marylen and _____ are doing together. I was wondering if you would allow me to observe and write about the methods Marylen and _____ do in their sessions as a part of my Integrated Master's Project for my master's program at Bank Street. The purpose of this project is to cap off my years of study with an exploration into meaningful ideas in teaching. It's so important for teachers to be responsive to the needs of students and to make creative teaching choices. I think Marylen's evolving work with _____ is a great example.

_____ would be kept anonymous in the paper. _____ is already comfortable with me in his sessions and this would need to continue. The notes that I take would become part of the feedback loop that Marylen and I maintain to help Marylen plan lessons. To gain a deeper understanding into _____'s learning environment, I would also be interested in visiting his school and talking to his teachers and possibly doing a home visit. This is not essential, but would add to my picture about how _____ engages with books and stories in different environments. If you are willing, it would be interesting to interview both of you, as well, so as to hear your thoughts about _____'s developmental history, his current learning and any impressions you would like to share about his work with Marylen. Again, your names, the names of his teachers and the school will all remain anonymous. Marylen would like her name to be used in the study. This study may be submitted as a PDF to the Bank Street Library where it would be catalogued as part of the library collection and downloadable via a live link on the catalog entry. It may also be entered into an international database for wider circulation. If this all sounds acceptable, please sign below. If you have any questions about any of this, please let me know.

I think of this project as a celebration of _____'s way of learning. He's a remarkable person who benefits from being allowed to learn in his own way. Let me know what you think!

Warmly,

Sara Russell Dewey

Dear Marylen,

I am consistently impressed with the creative and thoughtful teaching and learning that happens in your and ____'s sessions. I was wondering if you would allow me to observe and write about these sessions as a part of my Integrated Master's Project for my master's program at Bank Street. The purpose of this project is to cap off my years of study with an exploration into meaningful ideas in teaching. I am hoping to learn more about using play and responsive teaching to help motivate and engage students in literacy. I am also hoping to learn more about teaching children with ASD.

____ would be kept anonymous in the paper. He would also need to continue to be comfortable with my presence in his sessions. To gain a deeper understanding into ____'s learning environment, I would like to visit his school and talk to his teachers and possibly do a home visit and interview his parents. I will make sure that ____'s parents are fine with this and get written consent of their agreement. All participants will remain anonymous in my paper. I would also like to interview you and write about your teaching methods and choices. Let me know if you are fine with this and if you would prefer to remain anonymous. I hope having access to my notes and research will be interesting and beneficial to you as a teacher.

This study may be submitted as a PDF to the Bank Street Library where it would be catalogued as part of the library collection and downloadable via a live link on the catalog entry. It may also be entered into an international database for wider circulation. If this all sounds acceptable, please sign below.

Let me know what you think! Your work with ____ is inspirational. I have already learned so much by joining you in ____'s sessions these past few months. I look forward to exploring this further.

Warmly,
Sara Russell Dewey

I agree to participate in this study. Please use my name in this study:

_____Yes _____No

Name of Participant (please print)_____

Signature_____ Date_____



Bank Street
Graduate School
of Education

Bank Street College of Education
Institutional Research and Review Board

January 25, 2019

Dear Sara,

The IRRB committee has conducted a subsequent review of your proposed project, "*Integrative Masters Project for Sara Russell Dewey*" and approve your study.

Approval of this application expires September 1, 2019, at which time you can apply for an extension if it is required to continue activities associated with the project.

Please be in contact with any questions or concerns regarding this correspondence.

Sincerely,

Wendi S. Williams, Ph.D.
Associate Dean of Academic Affairs
Chair, Institutional Research and Review Board

cc: Brian Hogarth, Leadership Department
Robin Hummel, Leadership Department
Robin Hancock, Teaching & Learning Department
Sean O'Shea, Teaching & Learning Department
Dirck Roosevelt, Teachers College, Columbia University

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For office use only:
Reviewed by: Wendi Williams
Date December 19, 2018

Approved January 22, 2019
Revisions required yes