

# Applying Wood's Levels of Contingent Support for Learning in Reading Recovery

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## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to present a framework based on David Wood's (2003) work on contingent tutoring that Reading Recovery teachers can use as they consider how to improve both the efficiency and the effectiveness of their interactions with children. It is a hallmark of the Reading Recovery intervention that teachers think deeply and critically about their teaching, always considering how to arrange learning opportunities to advance the child's control over literacy processing, help him gain confidence, and learn by his own efforts. As Clay reminds us,

"...One teacher and one child work together in ways that allow a myriad of instructional adjustments to be made. From the recommended procedures a teacher selects those that she requires for a particular child with a particular problem at a particular moment in time. *There are no set teaching sequences: there is no prescription to learn this before that.* A highly appropriate recommendation for one child could be an unnecessary one for another child" (Clay, 2005b, p. 2).

The challenge for those of us in Reading Recovery is to make optimum use of lesson time providing the *just right* support for a child to increase his strategic control over literacy processing while encouraging

his independence and without doing for the child what he can manage for himself.

I first present an overview of Wood's work on contingent tutoring (referred to as *teaching* in the Reading Recovery context); second, relate Wood's work to Clay's work in Reading Recovery; third, present four transcripts of child-teacher interactions that illustrate principles of contingent teaching during select Reading Recovery writing and reading activities; fourth, analyze these transcripts in terms of their suitability for the particular child and suggest possible alternative moves, of which there are many, on the part of the teacher in response to the child; and fifth, provide recommendations that we as Reading Recovery teachers might keep in mind as we consider our interactions with children.

## Wood's Work on Contingent Tutoring

According to Wood (2003), tutoring has its origins in the basic human need to provide help when encountering a person who is struggling. Wood describes helping as essential to the survival of the species: an investment in the organism to help him adapt to the environment. In Wood's view, contingent tutoring is based on the principle that the tutor works at an appropriate level that will ensure success, perhaps interacting only minimally to help the learner

successfully complete the next step in a task. Wood identifies three dimensions of contingent tutoring: "...instructional contingency—or how to support activity; domain contingency—what to focus on next; and temporal contingency—if and when to intervene" (Wood, p. 14). In Reading Recovery, teachers fine tune their understanding of how to support learners, what to teach them, and the timing of their interventions with children as they study Clay's work during their training and professional development experiences. With support from their teacher leader and colleagues, they build case knowledge while working one-to-one with students year after year. Although any discussion of tutoring should examine all the contingencies holistically, for the purposes of this paper I focus attention primarily on the instructional contingency or levels of support for learning outlined by Wood and with application to Reading Recovery teaching as informed by Clay's teaching procedures (2005b).

### *Instructional contingency: Levels of support for learning*

In Reading Recovery, a thorough understanding of literacy processing and how much of it the child controls are considered the domain contingency. Use of the 30-minute lesson time, timing of intervention, e.g., waiting a few seconds before telling the child a word, or helping a

child right away if he does not have the information needed to help himself, are equivalent to the temporal contingency. While these two contingencies are important considerations in any Reading Recovery teaching context, the focus of this paper is on the instructional contingency or how to support the learner. Within instructional contingency, Wood describes five levels of support from least help (Level 1) to most help (Level 5) that are typically provided to the learner in a teaching context.

Wood identifies these levels of support within an instructional contingency:

Level 1: General verbal intervention

Level 2: Specific verbal intervention

Level 3: Specific verbal intervention with nonverbal indicators

Level 4: Prepares for next action

Level 5: Demonstrates next action

Each of these levels of support is described as follows with examples of the possible moves on the part of the teacher suggested by Clay (2005b) to support the child when engaged in Reading Recovery lesson activities that involve the reading and writing of continuous texts (Table 1).

Level 1 would include statements that encourage responding in some way on the part of the child. Many different kinds of general verbal response are possible and include “You try it” to encourage the child to make an attempt, or “Maybe...” to serve as a warning to the child that he should consider an alternative response or

action before proceeding, or “Good job!” and “I like the way you worked that out!” which provide validation of the child’s attempt and serve as a source of encouragement to the child. Wood suggests that general verbal interventions can also signal to the child that the teacher is focused on his work and is closely monitoring what is happening in the lesson.

Level 2 specifies for the child what he should do next, suggests some feature of a task that is needed for the child to continue solving, or reminds the child to use information over which he has control. For example, in the writing activity a teacher might say to a child who has forgotten his story, “Read your story and think what to write next.” To support a child who has begun solving a word he wants to write using sound analysis, the teacher might say “What else can you hear?” suggesting to the child that the next sound in the word that he articulates slowly should be represented with the letter that comes next in the sequence. Or, to support word solving in reading, the teacher might prompt the child to “look for something that can help you.” Support provided at Levels 1 and 2 keeps the problem-solving action moving forward or reminds the child of what he knows that could be helpful, but falls just short of teaching or showing the child how to do something new.

Level 3 continues from where the Level 2 intervention left off by adding some nonverbal cue that provides a frame of reference to the child or helps him concentrate his attention. Unlike a Level 2 intervention which prompts or directs the child to search actively his known repertoire for a solution, a Level 3 support provides hints to the child or highlights both verbally and nonver-

bally what specifically he should do to problem solve. At Level 3, the teacher has begun to solve the problem for the child. For example, in the writing activity, the teacher may draw Elkonin boxes to support the child’s sound analysis of a word or she may articulate slowly for the child to help him hear and isolate the sounds in the word he is trying to write. If this is a child who has demonstrated control over sound analysis—recording letters for words in serial order and supplying most of the vowels—the teacher might shift her focus on what to teach next (the domain) or solving using sound analysis *and* orthographic awareness, by drawing Elkonin boxes with one box for every letter in the word. She would then say the word slowly for the child and direct his attention to the orthography—which may include a mismatch between the letters seen in words for which there are no corresponding sounds—and ask him to record what he would expect to see. In reading, the teacher might help the child solve a word he is trying to read by masking a particular feature of the word with a card or her finger—perhaps the onset *pl-* in the word *play*—and suggest that he “say the first part.” In Level 3, unlike the previous two levels, some new learning is introduced by the teacher to the child as she initiates the solving process for the child.

Like a Level 3 support, Level 4 involves the teacher initiating the solving process for the child but now involves a higher level of support, with the teacher asking the child to respond in some way from one or two of the alternatives provided to him. For example in the Reading Recovery writing activity, the teacher might ask the child who has used a

**Table 1. Wood's Levels of Contingent Support for Learning Applied to Reading Recovery**

Level of Support	Examples of Reading Recovery Teacher Responses
1-General verbal intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good job!</li> <li>• Why did you stop?</li> <li>• Hmm...I'm not so sure...</li> <li>• Was that okay?</li> <li>• Try that again.</li> <li>• I like the way you worked that out.</li> </ul>
2-Specific verbal intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What else can you hear? (writing)</li> <li>• Say it as you write it. (writing)</li> <li>• You know a word that starts with those letters. (reading)</li> <li>• Does it look right and sound right? (reading)</li> </ul>
3-Specific verbal intervention with nonverbal indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (demonstrating slow articulation) <i>b-a-t</i> (writing)</li> <li>• drawing Elkonin boxes—sound or letter (writing)</li> <li>• (while masking off with her finger or a white card, asks) Do you know a word that starts like this one? (writing or reading)</li> <li>• (demonstrating a slow check) <i>w-e-n-t</i> (reading)</li> </ul>
4-Prepares for next action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What letter goes on the end to make it look right? (writing)</li> <li>• (to help the child write a word used as an analogy) You know this word (writes <i>look</i>) and you're trying to write a word that sounds and looks like this one; try it up here. (writing)</li> <li>• (while masking off the first part with her finger, articulates the beginning letter cluster) <i>Sr-</i> It starts like your name. (reading)</li> <li>• (to show crisp pointing under words while reading to support one-to-one matching) Watch me. (reading)</li> </ul>
5-Demonstrates action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (tells what needs to be done specifically and writes <i>-ed</i> at the end of the word) It needs this at the end to make it look right. (writing)</li> <li>• (demonstrates letter formation with language to show movement, e.g., forming the letter <i>e</i>) Across and around. (writing)</li> <li>• (demonstrates cross-checking one source of information with another by rereading for the child) Father Bear went down to the (pauses and points beneath the first letter in word and taps on the picture) river. Could it be <i>river</i>? <i>R</i>, yes it could! (reading)</li> </ul>

sound analysis to record the first three letters *m*, *a*, and *k* for the word *make*, a question which hints at what else is required next for successful solving and which requires a very specific response: "What letter do you need to add to the end to make it look right?" The teacher asks this question knowing for certain that although the child did not solve the word completely and on his own, he has read or written words like this before and now needs only to have it brought to his attention so that he can initiate this solving for himself. Without reciting unhelpful rules that could confuse or interfere with his

processing, the teacher suggests with her question that the frequency of occurrence of this letter at the end of words like it is very high and that he can count on the applicability of this principle (final *e* at the end of many words that have a consonant-vowel-consonant pattern) resulting in many correctly and independently written words in the future. For a child who is further along in his control over literacy processing, she might show the child that a word he is trying to write is just like a word he already knows by prompting "You know a word that looks like *bent*—you know *went*—write it up here, 'cause they're almost

the same." Or, in a reading activity in which the child neglects to initiate solving a word, the teacher might say "It (*shop*) starts like *she*, *sh-* (articulating for the child and masking the onset), inviting the child to complete the solving of the word that she has begun for the child. In Wood's view of instructional support, the teacher exerts much stronger control over a response from the child within Level 4 than she has in the previous levels, preparing the child precisely for whatever is next in that specific solving process, enabling the child to respond quickly and with a high degree of accuracy.

The highest level of teacher support is provided in Level 5. At this level the teacher takes complete control over the next step in the solving process. She models or demonstrates exactly what needs to be done next. For example, in the writing activity, the teacher might write the letter *a* for the child in the word *boat* after his recording of the letters *b* and *o* and before he writes the *t*, commenting: “And it needs an *a* here (pointing) to make it look right.” She might demonstrate letter formation, showing the child with actions and words, exactly how to form the letter *e*: “across, up and around; that’s *e*.” The teacher might also have the child attempt the letter formation task first with guidance (holding his hand and describing the movement) then prompt him to try writing the letter independently, or she may just write the letter for the child without requiring any contribution from him toward the solving. In the child’s first reading of a new story, the teacher might anticipate what the child will need help with by telling a word (“Her name is *Rachel*”) or having the child rehearse a phrase (“Along came Greedy Cat”) either before the child begins reading the book or before he turns a page to encounter the word or phrase in print. Or, she may tell the child a word or read a phrase for him if it becomes an obstacle to his processing. Although several interactions are possible within Level 5, it is different from the previous level of support in that the teacher does for the child what he is unable to do on his own or solves the problem herself in order to move quickly to the next

task or tasks that might provide better opportunities for whatever the child needs to learn how to do next.

***Instructional contingency: Challenges for the Reading Recovery teacher***

This is not to suggest that the levels of support are procedural; there is no prescription for what the teacher should or should not say or do in her interactions with the child. In fact, the teacher will decide upon a level of support based upon her hypotheses about what help the child needs in performing a specific literacy task. She must decide quickly, after each of the child’s responses, what to focus on or do next and whether to increase or decrease the level of support for the child. If the child hasn’t moved closer to solving his problem the teacher may abandon her approach altogether and try a different move or interaction (Rodgers, 2000). Teaching contingently is not easy; the teacher has to integrate a complex range of competencies and actions in the face of significant challenges. These challenges, according to Wood (2003) include “knowledge of the task; relating knowledge to performance; perspective taking; self-inhibition: from doing, to guiding, to fading; communicative competence; and timing” (p. 7).

For a Reading Recovery teacher, knowledge of the task involves embracing a complex theory of literacy with a clear understanding of the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing and a thorough understanding of the teaching procedures and rationales as presented in

*Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals Part One: Why? When? and How?* (Clay, 2005a) and *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals Part Two: Teaching Procedures* (Clay, 2005b). In Reading Recovery, the teacher is challenged to consider at every moment what is needed for *this* child’s learning in order to solve *this* particular challenge or problem, and to respond to his attempts.<sup>1</sup>

For example, in a writing activity the Reading Recovery teacher may need to decide whether the child can and should solve a word using a sound analysis, whether he should be encouraged to solve a word using a known word as an analogy, whether a combination of these two approaches is warranted or whether she should prompt the child in some way to retrieve a word from his memory of known words. The teacher keeps accurate records of the child’s responding history in order to structure tasks within the child’s level of competence so that he can be strategic and utilize all the various options that are at his disposal.

Perspective taking involves the teacher seeing tasks from the child’s point of view. Lose (2005) discusses one writing activity in which the child wrote *glou* to represent *glue*. Rather than viewing the child’s attempt as an error, we could view it as constructive activity on the part of the child (perhaps on saying the word slowly, he considered the sound similarity and thought of an analogy, e.g., *you-glou*; or perhaps he associated the sound heard with an orthographic feature in words encountered in read-

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<sup>1</sup>It is worth noting that in Reading Recovery, knowledge of the Reading Recovery teaching procedures and when, how and in what order to use the teaching procedures in response to a particular child, as well as knowledge of the specific problem encountered by the child, together represent what Wood has called *domain contingency*.





*The Reading Recovery teacher helps the child focus on the composing and production tasks while considering carefully what the child knows and how she knows it in order to judge when to demonstrate, guide, and fade support, or when to just let the child go it alone. Teachers adjust the support so that the child can contribute to the recording of her message with some new challenges to advance her learning.*

ing, e.g., through-glow). The child's attempt is a plausible though incorrect response; to respond contingently and to support the child's learning further, the teacher is well-advised to consider the child's perspective. Clay (1993, 2001, 2005b) has long advised that we value the child's close approximations and use that knowledge to inform our interactions with the child. As Wood (2003) explains, "If you can't or will not try to see a situation from the learner's point of view, you are very unlikely to provide assistance that proves helpful" (p. 8).

Self-inhibition is leaving space for the learner to do what he can to problem solve, inhibiting the inclination to do for the child what he can do for himself. Clay provides numerous

reminders about levels of help that teachers might consider from least help—letting the child solve—to most help, and recommends adjusting the task difficulty in reading and writing so that the child can contribute whatever he can toward correct responding. The teacher must make sure that tasks are just right; not too difficult or too complex to interfere with the learner's independence. In Reading Recovery teachers aim for an instructional level in reading at 90–94% so that the challenges the learner faces are embedded in long stretches of text that he can read easily and fluently. Although there is no "instructional" level in writing activities, the teacher helps the child focus on the composing and production tasks while considering carefully

what the child knows and how he knows it in order to judge when to demonstrate, guide, and fade support, or when to just let the child go it alone. In writing teachers adjust the support so that the child can contribute to the recording of his message with some new challenges to advance his learning. If tasks are always too difficult for the child, the teacher's fading role is seriously compromised. Likewise if tasks are too easy, there is a risk that the child will be inattentive or disengage.

Reading Recovery teachers are also challenged to demonstrate communicative competence using language that is precise, concise and to the point. Clay (2005b) has referred to the importance of "an economy of words" and states that "speechless demonstrations do help" (p. 87). Clay emphasizes that "too much teacher talk" interferes with literacy processing and problem solving and that "conversations in the lesson should be warm and friendly, but when the child must attend to something, or must pull several things together, the prompt should be short, clear and direct" (Clay, p. 202). Clay has provided a list of useful prompts to illustrate the language that might exemplify competence on the part of teachers during lessons (see Clay, 2005b, Appendix 2, p. 202-206).

The final challenge to the teacher according to Wood is timing. Within this challenge, the teacher must think carefully about the pace of her interactions: when to work quickly with a child, when to encourage his speed and when to move on, and when to create time for the child's careful thought and working slowly within a complex or newly learned task. The teacher must also consider "wait time" or how quickly to intervene on

behalf of the child. Research suggests that more-competent learners are better than lower-performing learners at regulating and self-monitoring their own learning. But Wood's research has found that when learners were given tasks that were within their competence level, less-competent learners were just as able as high performers to regulate and manage their own learning (2003). In Reading Recovery lessons a good self-correction rate can be viewed as one indication of self-management in reading, although later, a skilled reader's self-correction goes 'underground.' This suggests to Reading Recovery teachers that if the task difficulty level has been appropriately established, even the lowest-perform-

ing learners can manage their own learning sufficiently, enabling teachers to make efficient use of lesson time and to complete lessons within the established 30 minutes.

Clearly, there are parallels between Wood's ideas on contingent tutoring and Clay's approach to teaching children in Reading Recovery. I now analyze two transcripts from writing activities and two transcripts from reading activities in one child's Reading Recovery lessons to explore how the interactions are contingent, what challenges were encountered by the teacher, whether the levels of support for the child were appropriate, and whether the teacher faded support as needed.

### Transcript Analysis: Contingent Teaching in One Child's Reading Recovery Lesson

#### *Transcript #1: Writing activity (early lesson)*

The following transcript (see Figure 1) illustrates one instance of contingent teaching during the writing activity of one child's Reading Recovery lesson early in his series of lessons. In Turn 1, the teacher notices that the child is in difficulty. At this point she decides to intervene and the question now becomes how best to support the child. Because the word to be solved, *sat*, has a one-letter to one-sound correspondence and the teacher believes that the child can

**Figure 1. Contingent Teaching: Supporting the Child's Solving of *sat* in the Writing Activity of One Reading Recovery Lesson (early lesson)**

Turn	Time (Sec.)	Level of Help	Teacher Dialogue and Actions	Child Dialogue and Actions
1	2			Hmm... (appears unsure what to do to solve writing <i>sat</i> )
2	3	2	(noticing the child's hesitancy) Say it slowly. What do you hear?	
3	3			(says <i>sat</i> slowly; but neglects to attempt writing <i>sat</i> )
4	5	3	(draws sound boxes; one box for every sound, and says) Say it slowly, what do you hear?	
5	5			(says <i>sat</i> slowly and pushes counters into boxes, but neglects to coordinate the task) <i>s-a-t</i>
6	6	4	Every time you hear a sound, push. (modeling the pushing and coordination task) <i>s-a-t</i> . Now you do it.	
7	6			(following the teacher's model, slowly articulates and coordinates the task by pushing counters, one sound for every box) I hear a <i>t</i> .
8	1	2	Where? (indicating that the order of the placement of the letters is important)	
9	1			Here. (pointing to last box)
10	1	1	Write it.	
11	9			Writes <i>t</i> . (resumes the pushing and coordination task by inserting <i>s</i> in the first box and an incorrectly formed <i>a</i> in the second box)
Total Time: 42 Seconds				

accomplish this task independently, she prompts him to initiate a way of solving with which he is familiar: saying a word slowly to isolate the sounds that could be represented, each with a letter, as illustrated in Turn 2. The level of support in Turn 2 is what Wood has described as a specific verbal intervention in which the teacher specifies what the learner can do relatively independently: search for the specific problem-solving task with which he is familiar and which was demonstrated by the teacher in previous lessons.

In Turn 3, the child responded to his teacher's directive, but failed to record the letters for the sounds that he heard. The teacher immediately offers more support (Level 3) to the child (Turn 4), this time drawing Elkonin boxes, a nonverbal support to accompany the specific verbal intervention that was tried in her previous interaction with the child. This move on the part of the teacher is a form of highlighting, or providing a frame of reference for the child, as to where he should specifically direct his attention. With a Level 3 form of support, additional clues are provided to the child that were not available to him with the Level 2 support provided in Turn 2. Turns 2 and 4 illustrate the increased support on the part of the teacher in response to the child's difficulty.

In Turn 5 the child modeled the teacher's demonstration, but he neglected to coordinate isolating the sounds heard matched with the correct boxes, thus signaling to the teacher that the child will have difficulty knowing where to record the letters that represent the sounds in the word. Therefore, the teacher decides again to increase her support of the child with a clear demonstra-

tion of the task as illustrated in Turn 6 (Level 4) and in Turn 8 fades her support (Level 2) when the child shows that he has taken on the task and is able to indicate where to record one of the letters that he has solved (Turn 9).

The interactions depicted in Figure 1 (Turns 1-11) illustrate contingent teaching: When the learner faced difficulty, the teacher offered help immediately. When she offered help and the learner was still in trouble, she quickly offered more help. When the learner succeeded with the teacher's help, she proceeded to offer

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**If responding contingently to the learner, the teacher's responses and actions will depend on what the child controls and what other opportunities are present within the same lesson activity that will provide optimum challenge and reward for the child.**

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less support until the level of support was faded entirely and the learner encountered a new problem to be solved. While contingent teaching seems quite straightforward, it is, according to Wood, a task that is quite difficult and one that can never truly be mastered. In fact, teachers will often respond to the child's difficulty by offering additional information but "will insist on repeating what they've already said, often

adding more detail, thus increasingly obscuring the message from the learner's point of view" (Wood, 2003, p. 13).

As in any teaching context, where one problem has been resolved—in this case the child's solving how to write the word *sat*—often another problem will present itself. In Turn 11, the child has formed the letter *a* incorrectly. What should the teacher do? Should she respond in some way or withhold comment? If she responds, what should she focus on (domain) and with what level of support? How would you respond if this were your student? What information would you need about the child in order to aim your support at a just right level, taking care not to intervene too soon to undermine his independence or to intervene too late to confuse or discourage the child? Try creating a transcript of a hypothesized interaction with the child centered on this letter formation problem and compare it to the way(s) in which one of your colleagues might respond. Were your responses the same or different and what informed your teaching decisions? If responding contingently to the learner, the teacher's responses and actions will depend on what the child controls and what other opportunities are present within the same lesson activity that will provide optimum challenge and reward for the child (Clay, 2005b; Clay & Cazden, 1990; Lose, 2005; Schwartz, 2005). Obviously no two teacher responses are the same and as is often heard in Reading Recovery: "It all depends!" And it does depend: on the teacher's analysis of the child's learning path up to that point, on her knowledge of what the child can do independently and what he needs help with next. It also depends on how the child

responds to the teacher's first and subsequent moves and the related learning tasks.

*Transcript #2: Writing activity (three lessons later)*

Figure 2 shows another transcript of the interactions between the same teacher and child in the writing activity of the child's lesson 3 days later. Even though the levels of support provided to the child are the same (Levels 1–4) as those provided in the previous transcript (see Figure 1), the changed nature of the task is a domain issue. The teacher wants the child to approach the task not as “write the sounds you hear” but as “make it like another word you know.” Because of the contingent

support provided to the child a few lessons earlier, he has gained greater control over solving; his knowledge has increased and the teacher must now consider how to interpret the task—what level of support to offer, and how to offer it.

This time, the child is trying to write the word *take*. In Turn 1, the teacher reminds the child that the word he wants to write, *take*, sounds like a word that he knows or has written before and suggests that he try writing it on the working page. This form of support is Level 2, or specific verbal intervention, on the part of the teacher. In response to the teacher's reminder, the child neglects to pronounce the word slowly and first

writes *t* followed by *k* and *a*. (See Turn 2). Although the child provides the letters for the sounds heard, he neglects the precise order, so the teacher provides a Level 3 support (Turn 3) and draws Elkonin boxes to support the child's problem solving and invites him to help himself: “Try this.” Although this move (Turn 3) on the part of the teacher is a Level 3 support, it is a little less support than the Level 3 support provided to the same child three lessons earlier (see Figure 1, Turn 4).

There is a wide variety of ways in which a teacher might respond to a child struggling with a literacy task, some responses being more helpful than others. The five levels identified

**Figure 2. Contingent Teaching: Supporting the Child's Solving of *take* in the Writing Activity of One Reading Recovery Lesson (three lessons later)**

Turn	Time (Sec.)	Level of Help	Teacher Dialogue and Actions	Child Dialogue and Actions
1	4	2	It sounds like a word you know (referring to <i>make</i> , a word the child has written before). Try it up here (pointing to the child's practice page).	
2	7			(neglects to say the word slowly; writes <i>t</i> , quickly writes <i>k</i> and <i>a</i> , then pauses indicating some confusion)
3	4	3	(noticing the child's difficulty, draws three sound boxes; one box for each sound and provides counters to the child) Try this.	
4	6			(while articulating slowly and pushing the counters into each box, for every sound) I hear a <i>k</i> .
5	3	2	Yes, and what do you hear first?	
6	6			(writes <i>t</i> in first box, resumes pushing the counters into the remaining boxes; writes <i>a</i> in the second box and <i>k</i> in the last box then pauses...)
7	4	4	And it needs a letter at the end to make it look right.	
8	1			<i>e</i> ?
9	1	1	Try it.	
10	9			(writes <i>e</i> after the <i>k</i> in the final box; checks the word by running his finger beneath the boxes then writes the word in his story) <i>Take!</i>
Total Time: 45 Seconds				



by Wood provide a framework for thinking about levels of support, but each level can vary slightly depending on what the child controls and what he is capable of doing independently based on past learning and teaching. Not all Level 3 supports are identical; the teacher's moves are contingent on her knowledge of the task and what the child currently controls. As Wood describes it, the teacher and child are involved in a delicate dance, each responding to the other.

After pushing the counters into the boxes, the child states that he hears a *k*. Drawing on evidence from the child's attempts in Turns 2 and 4, that he heard *t* first, the teacher is not satisfied with letting the child record a *k* in the final box, and therefore asks him what he hears first (Turn 5). As indicated in Turn 6, this was a good move on the part of the teacher because the child was able to accomplish this task independently. He must now consider what letter to record at the end of the word that can be seen but not heard. The teacher's prompt in this instance (Turn 7) provides a higher level of support (Level 4) than she has provided previously in the word-solving activity although it falls just short of telling the child what is clearly the next letter. The teacher's prompt asks the child to search his knowledge of orthography or what letter would most likely follow this series of letters. In this way, the child is simultaneously learning how to solve the writing of this word, the probability of certain letter patterns which will be useful in helping him increase his control over words he wants to solve in the future, and will be generative to his literacy processing in the future. As indicated in Turn 8, the child selected the correct



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**Figure 3. Contingent Teaching: Supporting the Child’s Reading During First Reading of the New Book**  
(same lesson as in Figure 2)

Text: Our dog Sam likes to help in the garden.

Child: Our dog Sam likes to *dig* in the garden.

Turn	Time (Sec.)	Level of Help	Teacher Dialogue and Actions	Child Dialogue and Actions
1	5			(substitutes <i>dig</i> for <i>help</i> , continues reading to end of sentence, stops, then looks at teacher)
2	3	1	Why did you stop?	
3	4			(no response; looks at picture, neglects to read)
4	4	2	Read it again and make everything look right.	
5	8			(rereads up to <i>help</i> ) No <i>d</i> . (rereads again) Our dog Sam likes to h--have, no can't be.
6	7	3	That (referring to <i>have</i> ) looks right at the beginning (pointing beneath the first letter). What else could it be? (sliding her finger to the end of the word)	
7	4			Hmm... (looks closely but neglects to make another attempt)
8	3	4	Could it be <i>help</i> ?	
9	8			(rereads slowly and without error and placing index finger beneath <i>help</i> to check closely and confirm) Help. Yes! (rereads again rapidly with phrasing and intonation, smiles)
10	5	2	Good noticing; <i>dig</i> made sense but it didn't look right. I'm glad you made it look right.	
Total Time: 51 Seconds				

letter and the teacher, rather than confirming his choice of letters suggests that he write it, an invitation to the child that it is he who can assume the responsibility for checking the accuracy of his attempt.

**Transcript #3: Reading activity**  
(within the same lesson as featured in transcript #2)

Figure 3 illustrates one instance of the same child and teacher interacting during the child’s first reading of the new story following the writing that was described earlier in Transcript #2. In Turn 1 the child has made a meaningful substitution of *dig* for the

correct word *help* and although he noticed that something was not quite right about his substitution, he neglected to take the initiative to make another attempt. In Turn 2 the teacher provides support at Level 1 asking the child “Why did you stop?” to encourage the child to check on himself and use additional sources of information to self-correct. In response to his inaction, the teacher provides additional support at Level 2 (Turn 4) suggesting that he reread and draw on visual sources of information to help him problem solve. He responds by discounting his original attempt, *dig*, and acts on his

teacher’s suggestion to search further. This time he directs his attention to the initial letter *h*, but discounts his attempt, *have*, because it does not fit the structure of language (Turn 5). The teacher notices the child’s difficulty and in Turn 6 provides a higher level of support (Level 3) that includes both verbal and nonverbal information, but the child is still unable to advance his problem solving.

In Turn 8, the teacher provides much higher support to the child asking him to decide whether *help* will or will not fit in this instance. This move shows the teacher exerting

much stronger control over the child's response with help at Level 4 and encouraging him to both search and check on himself to see if this option will make sense, sound right, and also look right using more than just the first letter. While this support is quite high, it falls just short of telling the child the word, a Level 5 support, but helps the child to continue his contribution to the solving process. The teacher concludes this series of interactions by providing specific praise to the child, indicating that this kind of problem solving and strategic processing (self-monitoring, searching, and confirming) can be applied on this text and on other texts of increasing complexity that he will read in the future.

**Transcript #4: Reading activity (later lesson)**

In Figure 4, the child is reading a Level 12 text. He read *started*, for *stopped*, a substitution that utilized meaning, structure, and visual sources of information, but neglected further visual searching beyond the first part. A few pages later, the child made the same type of error when he substituted *played* for the correct word *pulled*. Given the change in the child's pattern of responding, the domain on which the teacher needs to focus has changed. In Figure 3, the child made a substitution that was meaningful but neglected the first letter, whereas in Figure 4, the child is using all sources of information but neglects to search further into the

word. In Figure 4, Turn 2, the teacher provides support at Level 1 and invites the child to reread in order to address what he has overlooked, but her prompt does not tell the child precisely what it is he should examine so that he has an opportunity to problem solve independently. In Turn 3, the child self-corrects indicating that he is able to search for visual information beyond the onset. The teacher wants the child to confirm his response so that he can employ this strategic activity in the future, and so she intervenes again but at the same level (Level 1) asking in Turn 4, "How did you know?" The child does not give evidence of understanding his teacher's question so she increases her support (Level 2), asking the

**Figure 4. Contingent Teaching: Supporting the Child's Reading After the First Reading of the New Book (later lesson)**

Text: Then he stopped to play with his toy car.  
 Child: Then he *started* to play with his toy car.

Turn	Time (Sec.)	Level of Help	Teacher Dialogue and Actions	Child Dialogue and Actions
1	5			(substitutes <i>started</i> for <i>stopped</i> , continues reading)
2	3	1	(at the end of the child's reading turns back to this page) Try this again.	
3	5			Then he <i>st-</i> , <i>star-</i> , <i>st- stopped...</i> (self-corrects and continues reading to end of sentence) It's <i>stopped</i> .
4	2	1	How did you know?	
5	2			This. (pointing to the onset <i>st-</i> )
6	2	2	Yes, and what else did you notice?	
7	2			This. (using his finger to show the onset <i>st-</i> , but neglects to show evidence of further searching)
8	3	3	And look at this. (using her finger to reveal the onset and sliding her finger from left to right to the end of the word to encourage searching beyond the onset)	
9	7			Oh, <i>st-</i> , <i>sto-</i> (shakes head no), <i>st- op-</i> , <i>ped</i> , <i>st-opp-ed</i> , (uses finger to take word apart and runs finger beneath the word to do a slow check) <i>stopped</i> .
10	3	2	Good. Now do that same good work over here. (turning to the page on which the child substituted <i>played</i> for <i>pulled</i> )	

Total Time: 34 Seconds

child to indicate what else he notices (Turn 6). It is the teacher's intention to make clear to the child that it is this further visual searching that will be required now and in the future to problem solve on increasingly complex texts. However, because the child again does not appear to understand (Turn 7), the teacher demonstrates what it is she is asking of the child (Turn 8). As illustrated in Turn 9, the child responds to this demonstration and the teacher can now prompt the child to apply this same strategic activity later in the text to correct his substitution of *played* for the word *pulled* (Turn 10). Although the child in Figure 4 is working at a more complex level than a child in early lessons, the teacher still needs to respond at varying levels as appropriate for the child's level of control over processing. Regardless of the child's competence, it is vital that the teacher continue to interact appropriately with the child with the goal of supporting the child toward becoming an independent strategic reader and writer. All of Wood's five levels may be used in any interaction, in any lesson activity, at any point in the child's literacy development.

It is worth noting that in any literacy teaching-learning context, there are many possible responses the teacher might make in response to the child. The transcripts presented here are not the only alternatives. A key to contingent responding in Reading Recovery is to think about the child's response both in the current lesson and in previous lessons. Changes in the child's learning within one lesson and even within one lesson activity call for astute observation on the part of the teacher and contingent support for the child's learning.

### Implications for Reading Recovery Teaching

I have attempted to clarify Wood's work on contingent tutoring and illustrate how it can provide a useful framework for analyzing and interpreting our work with students. As Reading Recovery teachers we must be careful to make effective use of lesson time and not waste the child's time by teaching him something he already knows or by pushing him to work at tasks that are too difficult and beyond his control. Clay has cautioned that when reading transcripts of Reading Recovery

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lessons, "I notice that teachers often do too much 'supporting'" and advises "make sure that your point has been taken...make your interactions brief and to the point!" (Clay, 2005b, p. 136). When considering what to teach the child, the challenge facing the Reading Recovery teacher is to decide quickly how best to use the 30-minute lesson time within the approximate 12–20 weeks available

for the child's Reading Recovery intervention. By considering Wood's framework of contingent tutoring, and in particular the levels of support for learning, teachers may be able to make better use of the lesson time and modulate the quality and amount of teacher talk to foster efficient and effective learning on the part of the child. Therefore, I recommend that we consider one or more of the following possibilities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our work with children.

#### *Video tape lessons*

Using Wood's framework, create a transcript of the interactions with at least one child during one or two lesson activities. Choose from among lesson activities that have plenty of opportunity for child-teacher interaction, particularly the writing of the story or the orientation of the child to the new story and his first reading of that story. Analyze the teaching interactions in terms of levels of support, timing, or evidence of self-inhibition (from demonstrating, to guiding, to fading). Analyze the clarity of the language used in the interactions; whether an economy of words was used or whether speechless demonstration would have contributed more to the child's learning. Determine whether the comments and the nonverbal signals of support were withheld so as not to interfere with the child's processing and if so whether the teacher's decisions (or actions) were effective.

#### *Enlist the support of a colleague*

Exchange one or two lesson videos and transcripts of one or two lesson activities with a colleague. Analyze the interactions in terms of Wood's levels of support and discuss ways to

improve interactions with students. Ask questions such as: Did the teacher come in too quickly to undermine the child's independence? Was the teacher's language crisp, clear and precise? Did the teacher use an economy of words or could fewer words have been used to provide more helpful support to the child? Were teaching demonstrations followed by guided support and fading of teacher support? Did the teaching provide opportunities for the child's independent practice or independent application? If the child was in trouble or seemed confused did the teacher provide help right away, or did his level of frustration or confusion escalate?

*Do a time and content analysis of lesson activities*

Determine whether there was an efficient use of the child's time. Analyze the pace of interactions within lesson activities and determine whether the pace of the lesson is appropriate. If time for one of the required lesson activities runs too long, consider it a signal that the level of support is insufficient or that the tasks (domain) are beyond the child's reach, requiring too many moves on the part of the teacher or too many interruptions of the child's work. Ask the following questions: What lesson activities seem to take more time? Do the lesson activities run overtime because the tasks are too difficult for the child? Is the timing off because I (teacher) am unsure about what to do next? Have I devoted enough time and attention to analyzing my running records/lesson records so that I can become familiar with what the child controls? Do I know what the learner controls in terms of strategic activity? Teachers who understand

what learners know and how they know it are able to make better decisions about what to teach next and are able to aim the level of support at the just right level. Teachers are advised to take care to gain the child's attention first before demonstration or risk that the demonstration will be ineffective or will have to be repeated for the child, resulting in another waste of lesson time.

*Observe the child's nonverbal behaviors*

For example, if the child takes his eyes off the print or looks away, these behaviors are clear signals to us that the child may not know what to do next. If this occurs, consider whether prompting or teaching combined with demonstration on the part of the teacher is needed. What can be shown without words may free up valuable cognitive capacity on the part of the child for processing. Although our intentions are good, sometimes our words get in the child's way.

*Always focus on teaching in ways that foster and support the child's strategic activity*

Clay has advised that a few items and a powerful strategy are far more effective than attempting to teach the child everything and all at once. She has also observed that too many teachers try to teach the child as if he is the learner he will become, instead of the learner he is today. Therefore, carefully consider the task domain and ask ourselves: "what does the child need to learn how to do next in order to... (self-monitor, search, cross-check, self-correct, discover, etc.)." There is not enough lesson time to focus on all the possible items

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that could be learned, rather it is important to focus on what is generative to support the child's strategic processing.

**In Summary**

If the child is encountering difficulty with literacy learning, it is quite likely that we have not yet found the best way to teach the child (Clay, 1993, 2001, 2005b). If an interaction is not working for a child, we need to be prepared to increase our level of support or reconsider the domain or what we are teaching the child. If the child is able to complete a task, we can fade support and be prepared to get out of his way. If tasks are too easy for the child, we may need to adjust the domain, so that he has only one or two new problems to solve to advance his learning or control over literacy processing. In response to the learner's problem-solving work on literacy tasks—his errors, approximations, and his frustrations—we must always consider his perspective. We can refrain from asking the child to explain his responses unless we are really unsure about what to do next; explanations interfere with the child's reading and writing, confuse the child, and consume cognitive capacity that could be reserved for strategic activity



(Clay, 2005a, p. 41). Instead, we need to be especially observant and infer from the child's behaviors what specifically he has control over and what he doesn't yet seem to grasp. We need to consider the teaching climate; for optimum learning there must be shared joy between teacher and child (Holdaway, 1979; Lose, 1991, 1997, 2005). We can encourage the child and create the conditions that will always foster his success so that he can strike out on his own and take risks. Finally, we must never give up on a child (Lyons, 2003). If we do, who else is there to support him? If we give up, he may give up on himself.

Perhaps Clay states it best (and with an economy of words) in *Literacy Lessons Part One*:

*And in the end  
it is the individual adaptation  
made by the expert teacher  
to that child's idiosyncratic competencies  
and history of past experiences  
that starts him on the upward climb  
to effective literacy performances.*

— Clay (2005a), p. 63

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