

# Implementing the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model in Your Reading Classroom

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## Letting Go One Step at a Time

Through a three-step process that gradually releases responsibility for learning to students, struggling readers can improve comprehension, build vocabulary, and increase self-efficacy.

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Students' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

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## Introduction

Ah, middle school! The beginning of the school year is usually an exciting time for students: a different building or different classrooms, a change in textbooks, new procedures to learn, a chance for a fresh start. There are students, though, that begin the school year resigned to yet another year of frustration and failure—the students who, for any number of reasons, are reading below grade level. This deficiency in the most basic skills needed for academic success transforms the school day from an opportunity to learn into a desperate struggle. When the obstacle finally becomes too big, the students' coping strategies come into play.

As teachers we have all seen “those” kids, and we can divide them into two groups—the *resigned* group and the *designed* group. The *resigned* group admits defeat, remains in the classroom, and copes quietly. Their efforts focus on accepting that they cannot keep up. They quietly sit in the back of the room and do nothing. They appear busy, but turn in no assignments. They never raise their hand or join a class discussion. They spend their time perfecting their sleeping procedures throughout the day. The *designed* group, on the other hand, has a plan. They cope by making themselves a nuisance. They react to assignments by diverting the focus of the class to themselves through overt, negative behavior. They need to go to the nurse every time a new lesson is introduced. They come into class late or disappear during a restroom break. They yell at classmates or the teacher. They throw books across the room or loudly refuse to take a test—anything that might let them escape the embarrassment of not being a competent reader by being removed from the classroom.

We each teach a classroom full of “those” kids. Our school corporation (district) decided that each of our intermediate centers (grades 5-8) would have a seventh- and eighth-grade classroom, which put selected at-risk students together. This was not done in an effort to put all of the “rotten eggs” in one basket, but to create a focused, intensive program to re-teach reading strategies and give success to those used to constant failure. Class size was limited to about 20 (instead of the contract limit of 32) and was self-contained, so the students stayed with the same teacher throughout the day except for “specials,” e.g., art and physical education. Teachers were given ongoing special training in teaching literacy. There was an emphasis for teachers to build a strong personal community within their classroom. Without this unity, students would not feel safe enough to open up and discuss their confusions, questions, or needs as a reader. Addressing those needs in a room where mistakes are accepted as part of the process is one of the steps we take to show the students how people learn. We want to ensure that they experience some form of success—small though it may be—to boost confidence levels. This was neither a quick nor an easy process. We decided on a gradual release model with three steps: THEE to WE to ME, or teacher to groups to self.

## Step One: THEE (Teacher-Directed)

As part of our program we were given a brand new collection of high-interest, age-appropriate novels, each of which was supported by a verbatim reading on CD. The CDs were the key, we thought, because many of our students were stymied by the vocabulary or level of the reading. The students could follow along as the CD was played to the class (Allen, *Never*, 33). Since most people’s auditory comprehension is higher than their reading comprehension, we thought we had found the great equalizer. Surely the students would jump at the chance to read. Instead, they reacted something like this:

- “I HATE reading!”
- “I’m not going to read this stupid thing!”
- David threw his (brand new) book against the wall.
- Vicki put her head down.
- “This is going to be boring.”
- “Is Ricardo still in the restroom?”
- “The inside of my eyelid hurts. Can I go to the nurse?”

And we had not opened the books yet. Old habits die hard. This was going to take some time.

Once the students were all accounted for and settled into their desks, we put a transparency of a graphic organizer on the overhead and began to model our prereading thoughts about the book. Soon some of the students began speaking up and having conversations with one another. The graphic organizer helped students associate the text with what they already knew. By activating this schema, or background knowledge, the students gain a connection to what they are reading (Schoenbach, 100). They have something to talk about, and even though their experiences might be common to the age group, they are unique in the details. Lectures became conversations and the teacher’s role began to change from taskmaster to guide. Increased community was leading to learning!

We modeled our thinking processes on the overhead as we listened to the CD or read aloud from the book. This is not as easy as it might seem. Competent readers are often not aware that they are using a specific strategy to help them understand. Struggling readers are often not willing to do so because it puts them in a vulnerable position. No middle school students want to make fools of themselves, particularly if they doubt their self-efficacy to begin with. With encouragement from the teacher and a class-wide promise of “no put-downs,” the students began to “talk to the text”—voicing the processes and practices of what they do as they read. The students began to listen to one another and compared their habits with their peers. Soon an attitude of “if a strategy works for you, it’s a good strategy” enveloped the class.

This flies in the face of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and state testing, where there tends to be only one answer or one way to do things. Learning is a process of trial and error, and it takes time. We have observed in this world of instant gratification that students expect to always know the correct answer the first time through—almost like a computer comes up with a viable answer simply by clicking “search.” If they don’t grasp a concept immediately, they see themselves as failures and shut down. Reading and then talking about what we read helps to alleviate this sense of failure. In fact, students began to look at upcoming state testing as a challenge instead of an obstacle. They are armed with the strategies they need and look forward to explaining what they do know rather than dwelling on what they do not.

This method of teaching begins the release process. The teacher is no longer the all-knowing being at the front of the room. This method reassures students that there can be more than one answer, and their thoughts are valuable. It gives them the opportunity to share their successes and frustrations with people who feel the same way. Just because they have a different opinion does not mean it is a wrong answer. They begin to realize their need to think about their own thinking, or develop metacognition. The graphic organizers are designed to record the students’ thinking and to encourage discussion about the book.

Once confidence builds—and it takes time—students begin branching off from whole-class readings to reading within a small group, or with partners. Students say they prefer working in the small groups because they are able to talk about the book more than with the whole class. Staid classrooms begin to transform into book clubs and reading rooms.

## Step Two: WE (Small Groups/Literature Circles)

Once community was established (not before) and roles had been modeled in a whole-group setting, it was time to set up literature circles. We would take what we had learned previously and adapt it to small groups. That sounded easy enough. We were wrong.

The blessing of having an age-focused classroom library actually became a roadblock. None of us had read these books before, so we had no idea which book to start with. We teachers did *book talks*, essentially a commercial to “sell” the book. We gave away enough of the plot to interest the students, but did not give a summary. We never gave away the ending. Although we were lucky enough to have these book talks included with our new set of books, it is easy enough to take a quick visit to any number of book sites that offer the reader their own versions. We also teamed with the students to do *book passes*, where we literally passed around a selection of books, spent a few minutes with each title, and then ranked which book we wanted to begin with and so on. Groupings were then based on book titles rather than reading ability. Common student interest led to a feeling of inclusion in the groups. We kept the size to five or fewer per group, partly because we had a limited number of class sets available and partly because that number seemed manageable. We used CD players with multiple headphone jacks so that everyone was able to follow the text at the same pace.

To get off to a successful beginning, it is imperative to create procedures within the group. Time is limited and can easily be wasted in preparation and reflection, instead of actually reading. The first time we tried literature circles, students were soon off task and wandering around even though we had discussed procedures. We realized there were too many jobs to be completed before reading. So we stopped. Students and teachers discussed the confusions and possible solutions to help get the small groups back on track. We asked the students if it would be beneficial to take the time to write down a list of procedures to guide them through the process of running a successful literature circle. Relief crossed all of their faces. Together, we brainstormed the following list of essentials:

Numbers 1–4 were assigned to individuals within the group.

- 1) Find and organize a place for the group (move desks/chairs into a quiet spot).
- 2) Get the CD player & headphones (this person is in charge of starting and pausing the CD during the reading time).
- 3) Get books, tracking folders, role sheets, and CDs.
- 4) Use a clock face graphic organizer to organize time spent on each task.

Numbers 5–10 were group activities.

- 5) Select roles (graphic organizers) in order to discuss text from different viewpoints.
- 6) Review what was read last class period and predict upcoming chapters.
- 7) Record thoughts on role sheet or graphic organizer during reading.
- 8) Stop and discuss the text at an agreed-upon time during the reading (use clock).  
\*Teachers use the clock organizer to gauge progress and audit conversations.
- 9) Continue reading (repeating steps 7 and 8).
- 10) Time's up! Put everything away where you found it and return to your seat.

Did the list make everything run smoothly? Eventually. Learning can be a messy, chaotic beast. Literature circles took the longest to master because they combined structure, organization skills, reading, reflecting, and socializing into a set time period—and the students needed to do these things without direct supervision from the teacher. The teacher's role was a guide, gently moving the groups along while letting go of most of the control. Both the students and we teachers were in unexplored territory!

We used prewritten roles from our reading program to help each student target the purpose for their reading (Allen, *Plugged-in*, 129). The most popular among our students were the discussion leader, the vocabulary word finder, the predictor, and the artist. Many literature circle books and websites have common roles and most assign code words for them. (Note: it is important that the students' background knowledge, or schema, includes understanding the code words).

For example:

- Tour guide – leads discussion
- Interpreter – defines unfamiliar vocabulary
- Forecaster – predicts what may happen next
- Archaeologist – digs for connections
- Photographer – helps students to visualize through pictures
- Journalist – finds main ideas and summarizes them
- Magician – comes up with ways in which the book could be different
- Detective – raises questions found in the text, encourages curiosity
- Teacher – points out possible reading and writing lessons from the text

Put together, these roles comprise what masterful readers do to the text each time they read. By pulling them apart, the roles gave our struggling readers the opportunity to focus their efforts on a single part of the process. As they grew as readers, the various reading strategies became a part of their normal reading habits.

We also needed to address time spent on-task. High-interest books encouraged making connections. Making connections led to good storytelling among group members, but this sharing of schema can easily take away from time on task. This is a natural extension of sharing. We needed to step back and examine how adults have discussions. We used our experience as a model. Tangents are traveled often, but work their way back to the subject. We modeled to our students the opportunity to talk about their lives and how they could relate to the book, but also how to encourage one another to complete their reading goals. Sharing their personal experiences, students took ownership of their reading abilities and strengthened their community in the classroom. They also had the opportunity to become experts in their roles and/or concepts they were learning about in the texts they were reading.

Once these guidelines were established the students could form and organize their literature circles within six minutes and used the majority of the class time reading and discussing their reading. The cooperation and reading strategies they learned and began to master in literature circles carried over into their other subject areas: social studies, science, math, and even elective classes!

### Step Three: ME (Independent Reading)

According to Janet Allen in *Yellow Brick Roads*, “Independent reading is a unique and sometimes challenging approach to reading instruction. Teachers often feel uncomfortable as they realize they have lost some control in terms of book selection and assessment. This

can leave them uncertain about the role they should play during independent reading time” (100).

Getting our students to start reading independently should have been one of the easier tasks for us as teachers, particularly since the class had gone through steps one and two. Students had their choice of texts; they could abandon a book if they lost interest. We were a “no-fault literacy zone.” Struggling readers listened to CDs while they followed along with the text in hand. They blended auditory and reading comprehension to help raise their own reading abilities to meet their grade-level expectations. As seen above, the CDs model fluency and lessen the roadblocks caused by unfamiliar vocabulary. Our experience is that most of the students stopped using the CDs once they became comfortable with their own reading abilities.

The problem here was not with the students, but with the teachers. Our primary role in this step was to let go. We were still involved in the process, but in a supporting role: following through on assessment, journal responses, and mini-conferencing to track progress. We agree with Dr. Janet Allen, who believes “that an assessment measure for the effectiveness of read-aloud, shared reading, and guided reading is whether those approaches led to engaged readers who demand independent reading time in school and choose to read outside school hours. It is this competent and avid reading that is the mark of a life long reader” (*Yellow*, 101). That sounds wonderful, but most parents can relate to how we felt as our students were successful in reading independently. It was a combination of pride and heartbreak as they “left the nest” and needed us less.

## A Selection of Student Successes

We had a myriad of student successes. Over time, the majority of our students began to read independently. The class attitude and behavior changed. Below are a few stories about student progress that really stood out.

### David:

David started out the school year with bursts of anger and temper tantrums. He hated to read and did not keep this opinion to himself. He seemed to enjoy yelling out and letting everyone know that he was not going to participate in whole-group reading. After we handed out the brand-new novels, he threw his across the room. He was angry and almost in tears. He was also on his way to the office.

When he returned to the classroom the next day, David spent the beginning of our reading time pouting, chin planted firmly in his chest, and his arms crossed. He seemed totally uninterested as we modeled our thinking with a graphic organizer. He finally leaned over to a neighbor and asked, “Are you talking about football?” Aha! We had found something he was interested in reading about. Using text supported with the CDs and watching the rest of the class model their thinking, David began to open up and share his experiences with football

and with getting into trouble. His classmates listened and never laughed. He noticed he was no longer the only one in the room who had trouble reading.

He chose his first independent book, *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, by Gennifer Choldenko. One day he respectfully walked up to the desk during reading time and whispered, “Can I use the computer?” When asked why, he mumbled, “Well, I am reading about Al Capone and Alcatraz and I really want to find out more about that place and who Capone was so I can understand the book better. Maybe I can even search for pictures so I can see it better as I read.” Holding back our inclination to do a happy dance, we watched David grow as a reader as he sat down and began a Web search. He became a positive leader, both in literature circles and in the classroom.

### Jamal

Jamal was quiet and respectful in class. He also reminded us of Eeyore because he was so entrenched in the resigned group. Some of his previous teachers had told him that he would never achieve much in life academically and challenged his dreams of becoming a doctor. Jamal shared that his teachers never believed in him and rarely took the time to conference with him about his needs and confusions with the reading process. He desperately needed a classroom community that he could depend on for academic and emotional support. He was willing to give anything a try, but doubted he could ever change.

After using the graphic organizers, engaging in discussions with other students, and listening to stories on CDs while following along with the text, Jamal’s confidence and reading abilities began to blossom. By the end of his seventh-grade year Jamal’s had abandoned the CDs. This massive change culminated in his eighth-grade year after a book talk on *Macbeth*. Jamal’s asked if he could borrow the book. We suggested he get an annotated version and guided him on how to use it. A few days later, he returned it, saying, “This Shakespeare guy isn’t a bad writer. Did he write anything else?” Should we smile or cry? We did both! By the end of the school year he had read five Shakespearean plays and read over 2,500 pages *outside* of class. At the end-of-year celebration Jamal’s received the D.A.R. Award (citizenship, dependability, service, leadership, and patriotism). Not bad for a student who was not going to amount to anything. He is still on his way to a career in the medical profession.

### Ricardo

Ricardo was the most popular kid in the class. He could charm anyone with his smile. He was also the bane of our existence. Ricardo was always out of his seat. He was easily distracted, impulsive, and disorganized. After looking at his cumulative folder for his classroom history, we were not shocked to see he had spent so much time in the assistant principal’s office. What was shocking was the letter that his first-grade teacher had written about him. Each and every word, every concern, every complaint was what we were experiencing in middle school! Ricardo needed serious help.

We kept him from his elective class one day to discuss what we had learned from his previous teachers. Each one of them was concerned about his behaviors and academic success. They all saw him as a charmer, but he did little or nothing in class. We decided we needed to come up with a plan. We all agreed that his struggles with reading were the basis for his behavior. He seemed eager to learn, but had no idea of how to begin. His progress in reading comprehension after a few weeks with CD support was remarkable. He was able to focus on one thing at a time.

We decided to use his personality as a positive and began to use him as a leader in literature circles. This led to leadership roles in other subjects as well. By the end of his eighth-grade year Ricardo was leading literature circle training/modeling sessions within other classrooms. He was eager to share his successes with visiting adults and was seen as a role model. Ricardo received the Turn-Around Award for making the biggest improvement in behavior and academics during his career at our school.

## Conclusion

We truly believe that everyone can learn. We all have obstacles to overcome. The journey is easier if we can overcome them with others. The success of our struggling readers shows that even a shared deficiency can be the launching pad for success. Adding caring, guiding teachers in whom students trust, taking small steps to ensure success, and realizing that mistakes are part of learning can motivate everyone to achieve more than they ever imagined.

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### **Author Biographies:**

**Amy Beyer** has been working in the education field for 14 years. She earned an elementary education degree from Ball State University in 1993, and a Language Arts Endorsement from Indiana University in South Bend in 2008. Amy began her career in Taos, New Mexico as a seventh-grade language arts and science teacher. Five years later, she returned to South Bend, Indiana and taught seventh- and eighth-grade language arts. In 2005, Amy participated in the Explorer program, a pilot program for seventh-grade students who were struggling with their academics. Dr. Janet Allen's Plugged-in to Reading was implemented in her classroom the following year. Amy utilized this program for two years. During that year 2006-07, her coworkers nominated her to represent their school as Teacher of the Year. Amy placed in the top 10 for the entire school corporation.

Amy recently accepted a position at a fine arts academy as a fifth-grade curriculum leader. In this position, she identifies fifth-grade students who are in need of additional support with their literacy skills and works very closely with the students and their teachers. Amy also provides professional development for the staff. The staff at the academy nominated her to represent their school for Teacher of the Year 2008-09.

**Brent Yoder** has been teaching at Jackson Intermediate Center in South Bend, IN since 2006. He earned a BA in History and Religion at Manchester College in 1981 and his BS in Elementary Education with a Social Studies endorsement at Indiana University South Bend in 2005.

Brent is currently an 8<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher that works with the Explorer program, which is an intensive program that focuses on helping at-risk students achieve success. He has been using Dr. Janet Allen's Plugged-in to Reading in his classroom for two years, and has become a team leader who offers his co-workers training and support with Plugged-in. For the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years, Brent has been named by his peers as Teacher of the Year for Jackson Intermediate Center.

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