Reading Recovery: A High Return on Investment for Cost-Conscious and Student Achievement-Oriented Education Systems

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"Perhaps like no other intervention, Reading Recovery has embraced evaluation since its inception and has relied on annual results to support its continuation. The results in its 25th year in United States schools reveal the year-to-year consistency of Reading Recovery in terms of providing struggling first-grade students the opportunity to get back on track toward academic success." So state D'Agostino and Williams (2011, p. 62) in *The Journal of Reading Recovery* article presenting their review of national Reading Recovery results in the U.S. for 2009–2010.

Reading Recovery in North America has three reasons to be proud: 25-plus years of active history; insistence on evidence of success; and, real, actual success with child after child. But why does Reading Recovery face a continuing battle for credibility and acceptance by mainstream educators and local decision makers who are often swayed to choose other, not so evidence-based interventions? The focus of this discussion addresses that question by providing rationales for supporting the academic and economic efficacy of Reading Recovery based on program results observed in Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. We approach these issues as a writing team from Canada with many years of collective experience and the unique perspectives of a curriculum leader, a system leader, a business leader, and a university dean who have worked both locally and internationally. In sharing our perspectives in this article, we draw on reports of our research of related issues detailed in two books by Sharratt and Fullan: *Realization: The Change Imperative for Deepening District-wide Reform* (2009) and the 2012 *Putting FACES on the Data: What Great Leaders Do!*

Identifying Beliefs, Commitments, and Supportive Educational Actions

First, we believe all children can learn and it is our moral imperative to enable all learners to attain optimal levels of performance from the earliest possible time in their educational experience. Second, we believe all teachers can teach effectively given the right tools and training, and we must find the way to narrow the gap between learner-achievement in classrooms at the earliest possible time. Third, we strive to assure that all children have an opportunity to earn a comfortable living as adults and become successful, contributing citizens. To accomplish these goals, we must ensure that learners have the basic tools to achieve early success and therefore the subsequent, potential benefits of a high return on their early learning achievement (Hanson & Farrell, 1995). Reading Recovery is one tool that can create that early start, that fast start, that successful start, provided that it is carried out in a context of whole-system reform strategies.

In regard to system reform strategies, we draw on our field research of the York Region District School Board in Canada to summarize a set of key factors contributing to effective schools — effective literacy programs. Specifically, we have determined that there are 14 parameters that when operating in concert, make a difference to system and school improvement as revealed by observed

increases in student achievement for all learners (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009, pp. 84–89):

1. Shared beliefs and understandings
2. Embedded literacy coaches
3. Time-tabled literacy block focused on high-yield assessment and instructional strategies
4. Principal/instructional leadership
5. Early intervention (Reading Recovery)
6. Case management approach
7. Literacy professional development at school staff meetings
8. In-school grade/subject meetings
9. Book rooms with leveled books and resources
10. Allocation of district and school budgets for literacy learning and resources
11. Action research focused on assessment and instruction for all students
12. Parent and community involvement
13. Crosscurricular literacy connections
14. Shared responsibility and accountability

Our research has revealed that within a program of system reform that addresses these 14 parameters, developed by us over the past 10 years, we can create high-performance opportunities for large numbers of students and teachers, and that equates to creating highly satisfactory environments for students and teachers alike. And the return on the investment for putting such a program in place is very real; it's measurable. Early intervention, provided by Reading Recovery, has been an integral component of this success.

14 Parameters: The Right Things to Do Right in System Improvement

The set of 14 parameters is not presented as academic theory. It is, in fact, an academic analysis of the actual factors that created dramatic student improvement and performance variation among 17 of the lowest-performing schools in York Region District School Board (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). Some schools, which we call *low focus schools*, were unable to sustain a program of student achievement when given the same resources as those we call *high focus schools*. What factors were at play among the high focus schools? The short answer is they were able to exhibit much higher performance on the specific parameters, or variables, listed above. When replicated by all schools in the York Region District as the broad program was rolled out, constant and unrelenting focus on raising the capacity of each school on the 14 parameters did in fact result in the entire region moving from an "also-ran" district in standards-based assessments to the highest-performing district in the province. Among the right things to do right was finding and training a literacy coach within each school and introducing and sustaining Reading Recovery within every elementary school.

Reading Recovery aims to prevent early reading difficulties that often permanently derail student improvement in an educational system. Parameter 5 deals specifically and directly with the critical importance of early and ongoing intervention. Reading Recovery is a bridge between classroom teaching on the one hand, and special needs provisions on the other. It is designed to be proactive and preventative. It delivers student engagement in schooling early on because students become successful early on. It reduces what we all know to be the self-perpetuating, self-perception of students who identify those classmates who "can do" class work and those who cannot. Stopping that can-do/can't-do gap from forming enables all students to begin to learn together sooner, to begin to collaborate more successfully sooner, and to become successful together sooner. It keeps those who may initially be perceived as can't-dos from remaining can't-dos.

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Another parameter, the belief that all teachers can teach, one of four dimensions of parameter 1, led to addressing ways to raise the bar on "good first teaching." After the intervention, many children no longer need ongoing, instructional support and are able to profit from "good first teaching instruction" provided by the regular Grade 1 classroom teacher. So, all teachers were

brought to understand the notions of success criteria and learning expectations through professional development. This not only aided teachers in identifying where they were going with a class and a topic, it aided the students in learning the critically important lessons of self-management — lessons that would not have been possible with a wide gap in learning capacity due to poor reading levels among several students. Teachers find that there is an increase in the achievement of all students because the students are learning from a higher common point of departure. Reading Recovery is a powerful catalyst for change in both student learning and teacher efficacy. It is cost-effective when trained teachers are able to utilize their skills daily in their other teaching assignments, share their practice with colleagues, and cycle back into regular classrooms after 4 or 5 years so that others can be trained. Real achievement gains are made when Reading Recovery-trained teachers move on to become junior or intermediate teachers, as the same skills needed for teaching reading in Grade 1 apply to older students still struggling with literacy.

In the gradual release stage of guided practice (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009), the impossible becomes the possible — a reality. That is to say, in the context of professional development for teachers, we utilized the strengths of the Reading Recovery training model—and in particular the "behind-the-glass" teaching model and resulting 'critical friend' feedback—as an integral strategy to develop shared beliefs, understandings, and teaching expertise across district departments.

It is important to let achievement data tell the story of instruction that works, as in the case of Reading Recovery, in order to build one strong instructional team across regular and special education. These become blended. This will ensure rigor in the use of data and provide all teachers with a deep understanding of how to use daily assessments to teach reading, writing, and mathematical literacy with struggling, young learners.

We believe that no other model of early intervention in reading achieves the results or presents the convincing evidence that Reading Recovery has. An additional finding from our studies is that no one component, or parameter, stands alone (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). Our research suggests that Reading Recovery works successfully because it is not only fully implemented but is also operating in concert with our 13 other parameters.

All Children Can Learn: All Teachers Can Teach

From our vantage point, Reading Recovery is highly successful; an excellent example of what we mean by early intervention. As Dr. Marie Clay, creator of Reading Recovery said, "We must design

- the best available lessons
- for the hardest-to-teach children
- as early as possible."

(Clay, 2005, p. 17)

Reading Recovery teachers identify the lowest-achieving children in every Grade 1 class and provide targeted intervention, with parental support, to move these lowest achievers to read and write at the average level and, therefore, give them the benefits of early success in literacy. Equally important, by providing early intervention, students are able to participate in grade-level classroom programs and continue to learn from good classroom instruction. Additionally, we have discovered that ongoing intervention programs and strategies at every grade level are critical to establish if we really believe that all students can learn and will come to that learning at different times. Key to the success of the Reading Recovery early intervention is teacher training. As one teacher in York Region District School Board said, when being interviewed, "I think having Reading Recovery training is a huge tool for me. The two Reading Recovery teachers in our school are both very highly respected and are always an excellent source of knowledge for all our teachers who are looking to improve their literacy programs…" (M. Sharratt, 2004).

We find that effective teacher training in any context needs to be carefully guided in order to maximize a teacher's capacity for critical thinking and effective action. We refer to this independent, effective teaching performance as *realization* (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). What are the high-yield, guided training experiences that give learners and leaders the knowledge and engagement they need to ultimately reach interdependent practice? We suggest Reading Recovery is a powerful training model that guides practice and leads to teacher realization. Specialized, in-depth Reading Recovery training enables classroom teachers to learn

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the theory and then practice how to teach the lowest-performing Grade 1 students to read and write at average achievement levels within a period of 12 to 20 weeks. In addition to this powerful professional competence, we suggest that their professional knowledge and skills, or realization, have positive spillover effects. In-depth Reading Recovery training equips classroom teachers with theory and skills that they apply to their work in their other teaching assignments. Therefore, their professional knowledge results in more-effective teaching of all students they encounter, and this is a real benefit for children and schools.

We have evidence of the positive impact of Reading Recovery on student achievement in the York Region District School Board, an example of system improvement. In the York Region system, there has been a determined and collective effort to reach and sustain full implementation of Reading Recovery over the last 10 years so that all students can meet the provincial standards in reading and writing (Reading Recovery Site Report, 2004). As a result, the data confirm that this has been achieved in every category, a clear indication of the benefit of this early intervention.

Concomitantly, the York Region system has also observed that Reading Recovery creates important cost benefits for their schools by reducing the need to spend money for assessments and/or interventions that may not be necessary. Intensive, individual diagnostic teaching of students can often reduce unnecessary referrals and special identification of students. York Region's CEO Bill Hogarth and Trustee Chair Bill Crothers went on record long ago declaring that they would protect Reading Recovery from contract strife—it was nonnegotiable—a bold example of not only believing all students can learn but also ensuring that teachers of young children receive the Reading Recovery professional development to make it happen. Their actions resulted from their interpretations of students' achievement data and observations of effective teaching.

International Reports and Evidence of Program Success

Australia: Impacting the Kimberley in Western Australia

Every year we discover new stories about the successful interventions we see when we travel internationally. In addition, we see the valuable instructional skills modeled in Reading Recovery teacher training being transferred as high-yield teaching practices that can benefit all classroom teachers — making this what we think to be a cost-effective model. One example of the power of Reading Recovery is found in the story from a northern region in Western Australia, known as the Kimberley, where the proportion of students identified as indigenous is very high.

In 2006, a research project was undertaken to investigate the implementation of Reading Recovery in Catholic Schools in the Kimberley region (Scull & Bremner, 2007).

This research aimed to examine the effectiveness of the Reading Recovery professional development training model to accommodate teachers living in remote areas. Results (Scull & Bremner, 2007) indicated that the Kimberley Reading Recovery training model had a positive impact on literacy teaching by

- developing teacher knowledge of effective practices to support students in need of early literacy intervention,
- raising the achievement levels of students participating in the intervention, and
- supporting teachers and students beyond the intervention as the Reading Recovery teacher is considered to be a whole school resource. (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2010)

Current data show that over 80% of the students who successfully completed their series of Reading Recovery lessons in 2006 and participated in the Year 3 national testing (NAPLAN) were at or above the

In 2006, a research project was undertaken to investigate the implementation of Reading Recovery in Catholic Schools in the Kimberley, a northern region in Western Australia where the proportion of students identified as indigenous is very high. Here, members of the school community in Djarindjin Lombadina gather for a photo.

(Reprinted with permission from the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia. Please note, this photo may contain images of deceased people.)

Year 3 benchmarks. To be even more precise, 43% were above the national minimum standard and 38% of Year 3 Reading Recovery students were at the national minimum standard for reading and writing (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011). Keep in mind that these students were once at risk of literacy (and school) failure. Failure is just NOT an option for these children!

Such student improvement continues to be observed in the Kimberley as Reading Recovery is introduced and used to support children who are considered to be the most at risk of achieving success. As one teacher reports, "Students who began the year not able to read a simple caption book (Level 1) or write stories finished the year on instructional Level 15. Item knowledge also increased accordingly with the most progress observed in the Clay [2002, Observation Survey] Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words and Writing Vocabulary assessments. Even older students showed considerable progress in all assessment tasks." A parent confirmed her solid support for the intervention, saying that her daughter, Sophie (pseudonym) "never showed much interest in reading by herself and always insisted on a book being read to her. After being part of Reading Recovery, Sophie will ask if she can read a book to me. Her confidence in her ability to read is amazing. She is now confident with her reading which has helped in all areas of her learning. Thank you so much for having Sophie be a part of your program. It is fantastic to hear her read!" But nothing says it better than the young student: "I learned how to spell stuff. I like doing Reading Recovery because it is fun learning how to read. I had fun there. It was so fun. The best part was when I was reading" (Reading Recovery Site Report, 2011).

Due to the success of the 2006 trial, Reading Recovery training has grown in the Kimberley and beyond, and this serves as a testament to the effectiveness of the program for struggling early learners in general, and for children from highly disadvantaged backgrounds in particular. To date, more than 382 students in the Kimberley have been provided with individualized literacy support

through their participation in Reading Recovery; they have been given a second chance! Over 30 teachers have qualified as Reading Recovery teachers and the program is now available in 4 Aboriginal independent community schools, 1 Department of Education school, and 13 Catholic schools.

The implementation of Reading Recovery in the Kimberley offers additional substantiation of the cost-effectiveness of this early intervention for a school system. As observed here, the cost-effectiveness of Reading Recovery lies in having a trained Reading Recovery teacher on staff, one who sees part of her/his responsibility to be spending time working with the primary division colleagues sharing expertise so that the infusion of teacher knowledge impacts all early-learning classrooms. Reading Recovery is a powerful intervention that has proven to be a worthwhile financial investment for many school districts. Not only are the earliest struggling learners brought quickly to reading and writing, but trained Reading Recovery teachers, like in the Kimberley, impact the teaching and learning of the whole staff and often a whole district through the ongoing literacy professional learning that they lead. It builds literacy and leadership capacity across schools, across systems.

United Kingdom: Return on investment in Reading Recovery

In the United Kingdom, Emily Tanner, research director at the National Centre for Social Research and lead author of a recent report, showed impressive results from the Reading Recovery program. In the press release (May 2011), Tanner said: "It's exciting to see how children who were struggling to read benefited from Reading Recovery after such a short time. Mastering the basic skills in literacy and finding *enjoyment* in reading during the early years at school are crucial factors underpinning later academic success."

The annual report revealed that Year [Grade] 1 pupils who took part in the Reading Recovery study had below-average literacy levels at the start of the academic year, and 86% of these pupils attained Level 1 or above by the end of the year, showing that they had made significant improvement and had progressed towards achieving Level 2 (expected level) the following year. By comparison only 60% of similar pupils who did not take part in the Reading Recovery program achieved Level 1, despite receiving other types of literacy support.

The National Curriculum in the United Kingdom states that at the end of Year 2, most children are expected to achieve Level 2 (or be able to read). In comparison, in Ontario, Canada, we contend that all 6-year-olds are capable and can read with fluency and comprehension by the end of Grade 1 (Levels 16–22 in PM Benchmarks). We know this is possible if the literacy focus begins in kindergarten with Reading Recovery as the safety net in Grade 1.

In regard to the effectiveness of Reading Recovery and its return on the investment of educational funds, a very beneficial report examining the cost effectiveness of Reading Recovery in the United Kingdom has been produced. This was a study completed by the KPMG in response to a request to review the impact of then Prime Minister Blair's education policies. This report is a real, undeniable, data-rich, cost-effectiveness story. It allows us to relate convincing data in place of what might be only anecdotal, emotional testaments that lack hard facts.

In their final document entitled, *The Long Term Costs of Literacy Difficulties*, the KPMG Foundation (2006) reports both the long-term costs of illiteracy to society and the benefits possible resulting from the Reading Recovery intervention. They state:

> The total per capita costs to the public purse to age 37 resulting from failure to learn to read in the primary school years are estimated between £44,797 and £53,098 [per student]. The lower-bound estimate excludes the costs of maintaining Statements of special educational need and takes a conservative approach to the costs associated with crime. The upper-bound estimate includes the cost of maintaining Statements and assumes higher crime costs resulting from reading failure. (KPMG, 2006, p. 24)

Based on evidence that the Reading Recovery intervention will lift 79% of children who receive it out of literacy failure, the report shows the present value of savings that would be made to the age of 37 as a result of providing Reading Recovery at the age of 6 to all of the 38,700 pupils per year who currently leave primary school with very low literacy skills. These substantial savings to the age of 37 are estimated at between £1,369,576,578 and £1,623,374,471. Based on the 79% success rate, the return on investment for every

pound sterling spent on Reading Recovery within the Every Child a Reader initiative is estimated to be in the range of £14.81 to £17.56. The long-term return in investment from the £10M spent on the Every Child a Reader initiative can therefore be estimated at between £148.1M and £175.6M over the period between 2006–08 and 2037–2039, when the children currently accessing the program reach the age of 37. These are impressive figures, a convincing use of data.

We need to recognize the successes that Reading Recovery has already delivered. Decision makers must recognize and act on the knowledge that Reading Recovery makes a real difference.

Although the UK researchers do not go further, it is an easy argument to make that the longer-term opportunity cost lost by not using Reading Recovery in Grade 1 is many times larger than the 148.1M to 175.6M pounds sterling simply by adding to the return if these same people work to the age of 60 or 70.

Think again about what KPMG is saying: The present value of the impact in 30 years of every pound sterling invested/spent today on Reading Recovery is between 14.81 and 17.56 pounds sterling. While the actual present value may vary in the United States or Canada, it is clear that a similar, remarkable return on investment is available to every district that chooses to invest in Reading Recovery in each national setting. Indeed, that is a story to tell to elected officials; it is one they can reanalyze with reference to their own contexts, and the analysis will convince them to consider its adoption. Indeed this is not an emotional account, yet it is only part of the story.

Another part of the impact of Reading Recovery is made clear in what occurred in April 2011, when the Australian prime minister announced that 8.5 million adults were unable to be retrained for jobs requiring the ability to read because they simply could not read adequately to be retrained. While they cannot go back, the new national curriculum standards and funding in Australia—including providing interventions like Reading Recovery—will ensure that in 18 years the children currently in Year 1 [Grade 1] in Australia will not face the same economic "life sentence" restricting them from technology or manufacturing jobs on the basis of limited literacy skills.

Summary

We wonder what we are waiting for when we have the clear statistics and costs to our nations of not doing the best for ALL children early enough. With so much research evidence made public, not to act reflects misguided public governance or worse, almost senseless indecision that sentences large numbers of current young students to penalized future lives. Not to act further penalizes society in general because of the dramatically reduced earnings and lost contributions to our nations from those who could make substantial contributions if provided our best educational programs (Sharratt & Fullan, 2012, p. 129).

Reading Recovery, in our opinion, is a must for all school districts who want to make a difference in all students' lives. We know — we've done it in York Regional schools. Results in that district, where we have worked, have improved from 59% of all Grade 1 students reading on grade level (Levels 16–21, PM Benchmarks Tool) at the end of the school year in 1997, to 92% reading on grade level in 2011. An impressive increase of 33%!

So, we need to counter the critics, the naysayers, and those who would choose weak interventions by presenting clear evidence and "putting FACES on the data." We need to recognize the successes that Reading Recovery has already delivered. Decision makers must recognize and act on the knowledge that Reading Recovery makes a real difference. To continue to use less-effective methods for intervening to develop and ensure early reading success is inexcusable and does harm to both the futures of scores of children who miss out and ultimately our society whose vitality relies on a literate citizenry.

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Bill Hogarth, recently retired director of education, was appointed to that position with the York Region District School Board, Toronto, Canada, in 1993, after serving as a superintendent of schools in the former North York Board of Education for over 10 years. He has been active, not only as a teacher, principal, university instructor and educational administrator, but also as a faculty advisor in the faculty of education and member of the senate at York University. He is currently the chair of Seneca Community College, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Bill has dedicated his working life to the teaching profession and is deeply committed to the principle of lifelong learning, and values the use of data. He is passionate about the importance of developing community capacity, not only in education, but in all facets of social service.

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