

INTRODUCTION TO THE READING RECOVERY COUNCIL OF NORTH AMERICA

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THE READING RECOVERY COUNCIL OF NORTH AMERICA IS AN ORGANIZATION of teachers, administrators, and others who are interested in supporting the literacy learning of young children, especially those who are considered to be *at risk* in school achievement. *Literacy, Teaching and Learning* is a key publication of this new professional organization. The journal, published at California State University, San Bernardino, through the leadership of its editors, Stan Swartz and Adria Klein, will bring new research on early literacy learning as well as classic, hard-to-get pieces to the attention of the membership. As the first president, I offer this overview of the work of the Council.

As we enter the second decade with Reading Recovery, we have behind us the success of over 80,000 children who have become independent readers and writers through Reading Recovery. Before us, we have the daunting task of maintaining quality over a growing program that at this time includes more than 2500 sites in four provinces of Canada, 48 states within the U.S., and five U.S. Department of Defense overseas schools. There are close to 10,000 Reading Recovery teachers.

Descubriendo La Lectura/Reading Recovery in Spanish has already established a successful record and is growing to meet the needs of children in many states. As Reading Recovery and Descubriendo La Lectura continue to grow, the Council will work to sustain the capacity to serve more children each year. Membership in the Reading Recovery Council of North America (RRCNA) is a significant way to support and contribute to the professional network that creates, sustains, and generates the future of Reading Recovery in the broader context of early literacy.

One of the hardest tasks for any successful educational effort is *scaling-up*; that is, maintaining quality and consistency through a wide dissemination period. Moreover, the Reading Recovery program is continually under development; it changes all the time with refinements that are related to ongoing research. This constant fine tuning is one of the characteristics of Reading Recovery that keeps it fresh and improves its results. But, it also means that ongoing professional development is essential.

RRCNA offers a way to support continuous learning. The Council will be the nucleus for communication, professional development, and research. In addition to *Literacy, Teaching and Learning*, the Council will publish several newsletters, maintain an America-On-Line bulletin board, and promote institutes, conferences, and other educational opportunities for teachers and children.

All these efforts will help us to communicate regularly across the membership which includes: Reading Recovery teachers, university-based Reading Recovery trainers, teacher leaders, site coordinators, and a very important group called *Partners*. Partners are individuals interested in literacy learning and teaching who wish to support the work of Reading Recovery and collaborate in educational improvement for all children. RRCNA has an elected coordinating board and officers who can initiate programs to enhance continuing contact for Reading Recovery personnel as well as maintain communication among this widely diverse group. Already, in this start-up period, RRCNA has 4,500 members.

The mission of Reading Recovery is literacy for all children. The program's special role is helping young children who are having difficulty achieving success in the early years of school. In addition, Reading Recovery provides a convincing demonstration of learning and teaching that shows that the world can be different. This demonstration has had measured impact in hundreds of school districts across the United States. Reading Recovery provides convincing evidence of the effectiveness of long-term staff development for teachers and a systemic approach.

The successful implementation of Reading Recovery would not have been possible in the U.S. without thoughtful and supportive partnerships with administrators and classroom teachers in every school and school district. After all, Reading Recovery is not a program for classroom use. It is intended to be implemented alongside a sound instructional program; one that provides massive opportunities for children to read and write with sensitive, observant teaching.

The advent of the Reading Recovery Council of North America makes it possible to foster and formalize those partnerships that have been so critical to the initiation of Reading Recovery. The growth of the program has been initiated by local school districts which have led the way in six states to amend state laws providing line-item allocations from state education funds to support Reading Recovery training and implementation. Each implementation at every school has been carefully monitored for program integrity and results in terms of children's achievement.

But, like other successful innovations, the Reading Recovery leadership must be knowledgeable about the problems of *scaling*. Scaling refers to the wide dissemination of a program. That is, it starts small and innovators need only to interface with single groups of teachers or administrators. Moving to wider dissemination requires different structures because local leadership is required, a larger group of innovators must work together, and many different systems and cultures must be accommodated. In addition, management is a difficult process and becomes more complex as the project or program grows. Scaling, then, means enlarging and changing to meet new demands. Compare it to a map in which a legend provides the relationship between a small space and 100 miles. In Reading Recovery, a site with a teacher leader, teachers, buildings, administrators, and children is replicated hundreds of times across 48 states, the District of Columbia, and Canada.

According to *Education Week* author, Lynn Olson (*Learning Their Lessons*, November 2, 1994), many successful programs are "victims of their own success." Olson goes on to say that many of the successful innovations studied "are now struggling with how to get their ideas or practices out to a wider audience with integrity" (p. 43). In the article, Olson compliments Reading Recovery for its success in scaling-up, calling it a "well researched and consistent intervention . . . The most successful reform networks," Olson claims, "are organized around powerful visions of teaching and learning." Reading Recovery is based on powerful visions and its design provides for renewal of teachers' knowledge and skills through continuing contact, regular institutes and conferences, through research and evaluation, and through a network of support. Our delivery systems and organization need constant scrutiny as the scale of operation changes.

In the summer of 1992, a committee representing the RRCNA membership met at Texas Woman's University to discuss the future of Reading Recovery. Their mission was to create a vision for the future that would be extended through discussion among teachers, teacher leaders, and administrators at all Reading Recovery sites in the ensuing year. The result of this consensus process may be summarized under four vision statements, each of which prompts action for the Council. Each statement is summarized, along with examples of some of the ideas envisioned for each.

1. *Sustain the Quality*

Our first objective is to make sure Reading Recovery is delivered to children in a high quality way. We can achieve this goal by high quality training and visible accountability. The experience of the National Alliance for Restructuring Education suggests, “Be clear about what you stand for. No one will rally to your flag if you do not have compelling ideas and represent a set of values with which site partners and nonsite partners can identify” (quoted in Olson). The standard of Reading Recovery is high and its definition is clear: we teach individual, low achieving young children to become independent readers and writers. Reading Recovery is an individual tutorial program for children in their first or second year of school. Teachers are trained in an intensive yearlong program and participate in continuing contact throughout their tenure in the program. Training and continuing contact provide a unique learning context, which we call *talking while observing*, made possible by extensive use of a one-way glass screen. Sustaining quality involves challenges. Deliberations of the visioning process suggest that as we grow larger, we must find new and better ways of enhancing communications among our network of teachers and teacher leaders who are widely distributed geographically.

2. *Move to National Scale*

One of the Council’s top priorities will be to study the implementation of Reading Recovery and design the system that will be needed to accomplish the scaling-up challenge. Research on the process of implementation and accompanying cost-benefit studies will reveal ways for Reading Recovery to become more efficient and deliverable without losing quality. In addition, every innovative effort must develop in ways that serve *vintage* sites. When Reading Recovery is no longer new but traditional, there must be ways to continue growth and change.

3. *Broaden the Vision*

The preschool, primary, and elementary years are critical periods in children’s education and thus, particularly important to our society. Good first teaching in classrooms is essential so that all children have massive opportunities to read and write for real purposes. There is growing recognition that teachers and administrators need the support of research based training and development over time. Although a large number of educational *consultants*, *quick-fix* programs, and entrepreneurial organizations exist, school officials report difficulty in identifying and acquiring the type and variety of help they need in the various stages of the change process. Most settle for piecemeal efforts without comprehensive planning and long-term vision.

Sometimes classroom teachers and administrators turn to Reading Recovery because of its success record and strong staff development design. However, Reading Recovery was intended for extra help, not classroom education. We do not advise direct transfer of procedures for individual, assistance to classroom work, but Reading Recovery does have something to offer general education, including:

- A powerful demonstration that all children can become independent readers and writers,
- A view of children as constructive learners,
- Demonstration of the value of sensitive observation of children’s reading and writing behaviors,
- Examples of effective teaching and learning interactions,
- An example of a dynamic and ongoing professional development for teachers, and
- An example of systemic approach to learning and change.

Based on what we have learned from Reading Recovery, Ohio State University has initiated a professional development project to support classroom teaching. Other universities involved in the effort are California State University, San Bernardino; Lesley College of Cambridge; and the University of Chicago. Other regions, for example, the State of Arkansas, have initiated similar efforts. These literacy initiatives are designed to provide support for classroom teachers in schools that have implemented Reading Recovery. The Council will work to support and coordinate these efforts so that many resources will be available to school personnel.

The Early Literacy Learning Initiative offers long-term relationships with schools. The goal is to restructure primary literacy education so that children are provided massive opportunities to read and write beginning with their entry to school. Ohio State University has designed a training program for literacy coordinators who teach children in classrooms or groups and offer support to other primary teachers at a school site. The project incorporates the following characteristics:

- Long-term collaboration to assure renewal and problem-solving over time,
- Tested curricular approaches,
- Dynamic and intensive teacher development,
- Assessment of effectiveness that is integral to the project and involves participants,
- The development of local expertise and leadership to institutionalize change, and
- Provision of a learning network that would continue to be a source of advice and professional development as well as connecting schools and districts with each other.

4. Influence Teacher Education Through Inquiry

Reading Recovery staff development offers a powerful model for helping teachers construct knowledge. Through participation in the program, teachers become acute observers; experiencing the heart of the inquiry process. In a report from Australia titled, *Changing Lives* (Power & Sawkins, 1992, University of New England—Northern Rivers, Australia), the researchers investigated Reading Recovery for one year in New South Wales, Australia. By the title, they not only meant the changes in lives of children, but also in the lives of teachers. In Reading Recovery, teachers become leaders, and leaders can change the current scene. Again, quoting the *Education Week* article, “The single most important variable is leadership, ‘strong, like-minded people who are willing to stay the course.’ We have never succeeded in any measure where good leadership is lacking.” In Reading Recovery, teachers are there to advocate for children and to lead change. They do this by continuing to learn. Teacher education must be there to support them and all teachers who inquire into the learning of children.

Summary

It is easy and exciting to generate vision statements and goals and they are necessary to guide our efforts. The hard part, though, is the day-to-day work needed to put them into action. Reading Recovery has a cadre of professionals, children, and parents who know that hard work firsthand. Our success is the product of the work they do every moment of the thirty-minute lesson and every moment of professional opportunity. Through strengthened partnerships to support our work, the next decade will see these four visions—and others—made real.

Finally, on behalf of the Council, I invite researchers in schools, universities, and other arenas to share their inquiry with our membership. The interests of the membership are broad ranging; they want to learn about learning and teaching and they invite challenging ideas. We look to this journal to assist us.