From Recovery to Sustainability

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Learning in school is not only about literacy. But little learning of substance or significance can occur without solid foundations in reading and writing. The national and international emphasis on raising standards and closing the achievement gap in literacy learning is therefore entirely warranted. Yet the pressure and sometimes the panic to produce the instant gains in literacy achievement, that will appease public anxiety and enhance political credibility, have too often undermined the quest for authentic improvement in literacy that makes lasting contributions to children’s learning and real differences in their lives.

The pursuit of imposed, short-term achievement targets in the guise of adequate yearly progress with serious sanctions for those who fail, like companies who care only that their reported quarterly profits are always on the rise, led to Enron-like strategies of simulated improvement and fraudulent change. At best, many of these strategies for improving literacy have been questionable quick-fixes; at worst they have descended into downright fraud.

If, for example, you teach only to the test—so that students improve on the state-designed test but show no greater improvement on national literacy tests than those in any other state—you are becoming an Enron of educational change. If you pretest students, then concentrate all improvement and test-taking strategies on those falling just below the passing mark so that the few percentage points which get these individuals across the line will give the misleading appearance of a big improvement school-wide, you are becoming an Enron of educational change.

You are turning into an Enron if your school pushes out or refuses to take children with behavior problems or disabilities whose presence might lower the school’s overall test score (Baker & Foote, 2006); if it arranges for the lowest-performing children to be away on the day of the test; or if it manipulates the school roll so these students do not appear on the books at all. If you narrow the curriculum, if you eliminate social studies and the arts, if you reduce learning to nothing more than the joyless drudgery of reading and counting—you are becoming an Enron. If phonological drills leave no place for children to make meaning from what they read, if the obsession with memorized reading gives children no chance to author their own life through the act of writing, and if more children achieve high reading scores but fewer read for pleasure (as has happened in England and the United States), then you are assuming the Enron identity.

And if, as a principal or superintendent, you see future poor performance numbers lurking among your incoming students and decide to leave before the numbers are up, your conduct is as questionable as a quick-fix corporate executive.

Of all the strategies for improving literacy achievement, one of the most solid and successful has undoubtedly been that of Reading Recovery. Readers of this journal need no reminders of the successes of this distinctive model of intensive early intervention… Few doubt Reading Recovery’s success. The most compelling question now is whether it is and can be sustainable.

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The Quest for Sustainability

The quest for sustainability in education is one of creating long-lasting and widespread improvement and success that benefits the deep learning and real achievement of all students in our
sustainability. Most educational writers trivialize the idea of sustainability. They either equate it with maintainability (how to make things last) or affordability (how to do them on the cheap).

In tune with the deeper ecological roots of the concept and in line with its origins in the Bruntland Commission report (1987) on the environment, my colleague Dean Fink and I define sustainability like this:

Sustainability does not simply mean whether something can last. It addresses how improvements can be developed without compromising the development of others, now and in the future. (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003)

Drawing on our book, Sustainable Leadership, (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006), I will outline four of seven key principles of sustainability and examine their actual and possible implications for the future of Reading Recovery and the improvement of literacy in general.

1. Depth
Sustainable leadership matters: It creates and preserves sustaining learning. To sustain means to nourish. Sustaining learning is therefore learning that matters, that has depth and breadth and that lasts. The prime responsibility of all teachers and educational leaders is to sustain learning. It is this, not delivering the curriculum, implementing the government’s or district’s mandates, or giving a gloss to how the institution’s results appear, that is at the heart of being an educator.

Not anything or everything needs sustaining or maintaining. There is no point in sustaining learning that is trivial or that disappears once it has been tested. In the area of literacy, for example, sustainable improvement does not raise literacy standards by thinking first about how to improve literacy test scores. Rather, it improves literacy scores by concentrating first on the deep needs for literacy learning for all students—even those with little chance of getting above the passing mark in the first year of intervention.

If we care about truly sustainable improvement, teachers and leaders must have the courage to stand together and say that the prevalence of imposed short-term, tested literacy targets in the form of the adequate yearly progress demands of No Child Left Behind are fundamentally unworkable and unsound.

In terms of learning, an important part of Reading Recovery teachers’ professional community is not just being advocates for their program or even for literacy in general, but for meaningful learning and achievement more generally. In a study of 10 very successful schools serving highly disadvantaged communities in Wales, Chris James (James, Connolly, Dunning, & Elliott, in press) has found that the success of these schools is built on the solid foundation of being focused on the basics and getting them right. But the focus is not a fixation, and these schools also have an enriching and engaging curriculum that extends far beyond the basics—raising not only the achievements of students, but also their hopes, aspirations, and sheer enjoyment as lifelong learners. Reading Recovery teachers who care about sustainability will actively advocate for and help bring about these wider and deeper experiences of learning for all.

2. Endurance
Sustainable leadership lasts: It secures enduring success over time.
Sustainability preserves and advances the most valuable aspects of life over time. Sustainable improvements continue year upon year, from one leader to the next. They are not fleeting changes that depend on exemplary leaders’ efforts and that disappear when leaders have left. Sustainable leadership does not reside in charismatic individuals who do everything themselves. It spreads beyond individuals in chains of influence that connect the actions of leaders to their predecessors and successors (Hargreaves, Fink, Moore, Brayman, & White, 2003). Sustainable leadership makes leadership succession central to continuing school improvement.

Reading Recovery teachers are also educational leaders and they too face the challenges of succession. What legacy will they leave on their departure? What capacity do they create among colleagues that will live beyond them? How can and should others build on what has been achieved?

Leadership succession challenges leaders like Reading Recovery advocates to consider how the improvements they have guided or have yet to initiate will live on after their promotion, retirement, or death. This is hard, for there is a dark corner in the soul of most leaders that secretly wants their own brilliance never to be surpassed, that hopes their successors will be a little less excellent, a little less loved than themselves (Saltzberger-Wittenberg,
Leaders and their systems typically put all their energy into what Etienne Wenger calls *inbound knowledge*—the knowledge needed to change an institution, improve it, make one’s mark on it, and turn it around (Wenger, 1998). Little or no attention is devoted to *outbound knowledge*—the knowledge needed to preserve past successes, or keep initiatives going once the originating leader has left. The time to think about leadership succession is when leaders start their leadership, not when they draw it to a close.

If you are a Reading Recovery teacher or teacher leader, how would your program fare if you were in a serious road accident tomorrow? If you went, would the program go with you? Does everything depend completely on you? Instead of being a missionary, do you sometimes feel like a martyr? Can you groom a successor, developing leadership in others? Have you managed to find and form champions of Reading Recovery and literacy more generally, to work passionately beside you?

The most effective legacies—and this is a difficult issue to raise—are not found in buildings, programs or other tangible things. They are found in purposes, principles, practices, and people. As an author, publication of my books can sometimes seduce me into having delusions of immortality, but a letter from my publisher notifying me that one of my books has gone out of print soon reintroduces a necessary note of humility. Fairly recently, I was privileged to be invited by my old primary school where I was a student in England to lay the foundation stone for the new building. But eventually, even this too will be worn away by the ages. Instead, the most important words in *Sustainable Leadership* (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003) are in its dedication to our adult children: “To Stuart, Lucy, Danielle and Tracy—environmentalists, educators and advocates, whose contributions to the public good will live on long after this book and its authors have been forgotten.”

The point is not to defend Reading Recovery to the death, to insist that it should endure forever. Rather, it is to preserve and pass on the fine purposes, principles and practices that Reading Recovery stands for—success and literacy for all students through careful diagnosis and early intervention in the form of intensive attention by well-trained professionals using proven instructional approaches that lead to literacy success.

Other programs have learned from and already employ many of the successful strategies pioneered by Reading Recovery (e.g., Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006). In the future, even better programs may emerge, building on the impressive foundations that Reading Recovery has set. What better legacy could Reading Recovery and its advocates aspire to and leave than this? This is the existentially challenging work of leadership succession.

Few people are more aware of the impact of leadership succession than the teachers who experience processions of principals coming through their schools. For most members of the organization, a leadership succession event is often an emotionally charged one surrounded with feelings of expectation, apprehension, abandonment, loss, relief, or even fear. Will the incoming principal support existing programs like Reading Recovery or establish a new vision and allocate resources elsewhere?

In many schools, however, principal succession is not an episodic event or an unexpected exception. It is a regular and recurring part of the life of the school—especially in urban environments where leadership turnover rates are often disturbingly high. In these circumstances, teachers sometimes develop long-term responses to the repeated and predictable process of succession in general, as well as to specific moments of leadership succession in particular. For these teachers, succession feels more like a procession (MacMillan, 2000). Succession fatigue may lead them to develop cynicism towards change efforts or devise strategies to wait their leaders out. In dealing with these worrying aspects of succession in the principalship or superintendency, Reading Recovery teachers must also confront a third principle of sustainability: breadth.

3. **Breadth**

*Sustainable leadership spreads: It sustains the leadership of others.* In a complex, fast-paced world, innovation and improvement cannot rest on the shoulders of the few. No one leader, institution, or nation can micromanage or control everything without help. The burden is too great. The leader or change champion...
just gets too tired if she takes everything on herself.

In professions like medicine, successful teamwork, open discussion, and distributed leadership are literally matters of life and death (Gawande, 2003). In these professional learning communities, professionals examine the evidence of science and experience together to improve practice. Such professional learning communities also have profound effects in education—where strong communities with distributed leadership yield higher standards in students’ learning (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Newmann & Wohlage, 1995). The promise of sustainable success in education lies in creating cultures of distributed leadership throughout the school community, not in training and developing a tiny elite of change enthusiasts and champions. This quality of leadership includes teachers and advocates of Reading Recovery.

Some people feel that distributed leadership means no leadership. They fear that individual leaders who have exceptional assets will no longer be valued—that it is becoming politically incorrect to be charismatic or strong. Yet paradoxically, distributed leadership requires very strong leadership—especially at the top. However, this strength comes not from title, position, or place in the pecking order but from expertise, from authority and respect that are earned from one’s colleagues, and from the inner security and sense of conviction—the ability to be comfortable in one’s skin—that enables leaders to reach out to others, invite contributions and even challenges, be prepared to admit mistakes and have one’s mind changed, and to develop others so they too grow in strength and competence to the point where they eventually may even surpass their mentor. So when a school loses a leader who practices distributed leadership, the school should miss a beat, the loss should be noticed, the school might even wobble—but it should never collapse. This is because there are others who share the vision, pick up the pieces, and carry things forward.

The threat to Reading Recovery teachers who spend much of their time away from other teachers, working with individual children in another part of the school, is that their work can quickly become lonely. In the worst case scenario, envied and resented by other teachers because of their apparently greater resources and release from the burdens of classroom
teaching and discipline, Reading Recovery teachers can fall prey to becoming Pollyanna professionals who feel they understand their children better than anyone else, or Cinderella resource teachers—akin to ostracized and misunderstood scullery maids—who work self-sacrificially in the basements and cupboards of the building. This is not the general pattern, but with unsympathetic principals or cynical colleagues it does exist and is an ever-present threat.

The answer is to build sustainability through breadth—distributing leadership, becoming an integral part of the community, and interacting effectively and extensively with colleagues. In this respect, it is always worth asking and checking: Does the Reading Recovery teacher

- work as an equal and valued member of the literacy team?
- engage with and show enthusiasm for other teachers’ projects?
- learn from the literacy practices of others?
- demonstrate curiosity about and a preparedness to build, where possible, on the school’s history and memory of literacy teaching?
- work alongside teachers in classes as well as aside from them with individuals?
- without detracting from their Reading Recovery responsibilities (i.e., without losing time with children), willingly substitute for other teachers when they need planning and professional development time—thereby renewing and consolidating their reciprocal collegiality and classroom credibility?

- take their fair share of institutional committee work and responsibilities?
- develop literacy competence and advocacy among parents?
- demonstrate clear but not pious empathy for the many demands that classroom teachers have to meet in addressing the needs of all their students?
- learn to share the role of Reading Recovery with one or more other teachers, assisting with their training in doing so, and exchanging other responsibilities with them as their own capacity and contribution develops?

4. Justice
Sustainable leadership is socially just. It does not merely concentrate improvements in small pockets of innovation. Sustainable leadership benefits all students and schools, not just a few. It does not invest all hope and energy in a small number of charismatic individuals and their innovative schools or programs who draw disproportionate support, attention, and quality staffing at the expense of other schools around them (Fink, 2000). Sustainable improvement is sensitive to how lighthouse schools and their leaders can leave others in the shadows.

Sustainability is therefore not only about maintainability of initiatives in one’s own school or program. It is about being responsible to the schools and the students that one’s own actions affect in the wider environment. Sustainability means more than me and my school or program. It is ultimately and inextricably also about social justice.

Reading Recovery is resource-challenging. Like early childhood education, the benefits are long lasting and the investment is worthwhile, but to principals and superintendents under pressure to allocate scarce resources for immediate gains among the largest numbers of students, Reading Recovery looks like an expendable indulgence, placing its more sustainable and longer-lasting results in jeopardy. Avoiding these temptations is a challenge to the soul and integrity of school and system leaders—a challenge to their capacity to achieve sustainability of all that matters, spreads, and lasts in student learning. But engaging with these issues is also a challenge to Reading Recovery teachers and advocates.

In terms of social justice, the real strategic challenge is to steer clear of win-lose advocacy—younger literacy learners vs. older peers, resources for individual intervention vs. support for classroom instruction, saving children with the most severe learning problems vs. assisting all those who need help and support with literacy. There are no clear right and wrong answers to these alternatives. They pose inherent and ubiquitous dilemmas, and standing incontrovertibly on one side of them will only make their advocates seem self-interested.

So the challenge is not one of either abandoning or defending Reading Recovery. Remember, we stake our careers upon principles and practices that should be our legacy, not the defense of programs. In the context of literacy learning, therefore, the challenge of all teachers with an investment in and responsibility for children’s literacy—which means all teachers, of course—should be the challenge of making the school into an ethical learning community. In
such a community teachers and leaders put aside their program allegiances and stand up courageously to the Enron-like culture of fear and fakery which adequate yearly progress is creating, to discuss and decide together how best to bring about significant and lasting achievements in literacy for the greatest number of and/or most needy groups of students. If early diagnosis and intervention is a significant part of that, then this should be a commitment of the community, whether or not it is specifically secured through Reading Recovery. Reading Recovery should emerge as the best answer (or not) to questions like these, not as the pre-given solution which prejudices them.

Social justice and sustainability are best achieved not through single-minded advocacy but by committing to vital principles of literacy (and other kinds of) learning, within a school or system that behaves as a vibrant, ethical learning community that courageously stands up to the political injustice inflicted on its children, and deliberates together with integrity and sensitivity about the difficult ethical dilemmas that rightly characterize the most morally committed and professionally complex work in our society.

In summary, sustainable educational improvement is characterized by how teachers and leaders approach, commit to, and protect deep and lasting learning as part of the core moral purposes of their schools; by how they sustain themselves and others around them to promote and support that learning; by how they try to ensure the improvements they bring about and the principles and practices (not merely the programs) they stand for last over time, especially after they themselves have gone; by how they share and distribute responsibility for improvement among others in relationships of joint work and mutual engagement; and, in how they support and advocate for the needs of all students’ literacy learning in ethical learning communities where competing needs have to be balanced. In high-need situations, turnaround and recovery are the first challenge. But the last and truly enduring challenge of all in literacy and change is that of sustainability.

References


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Andy Hargreaves is the Thomas More Brennan Chair in Education at Boston College. His latest book, co-authored with Dean Fink, is Sustainable Leadership, published by Jossey Bass/Wiley.