

Reading Recovery: A Social Justice Intervention

Birth, Demise, and Rebirth of an Idea: A Personal Memoir

Jerry Y. Diakiw, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

This is a story of a personal journey of my awakening to a startling discovery of the power of Reading Recovery and its societal impact. It is also a history of this innovation in one school system where it became a part of a reform agenda addressing literacy and poverty.

Schools have been lamenting their dropout rates for decades and administrators at all levels have been searching for better ways to keep our young people in schools until at least high school graduation. The societal costs of early dropouts are staggering: high unemployment and welfare rates; teenage pregnancy; social workers; higher crime rates; and more police, courts, and prisons. The data on life expectations of dropouts are disheartening; the relationship between poverty and dropouts is unequivocal.

In 1989, a Dropout Prevention Conference for school administrators, organized by the Ontario (Canada) Ministry of Education, offered many options of “best practices.” I was a recently appointed area superintendent in a York Region District School Board with just over 100 schools at that time. I was attracted to an option called Reading Recovery, offered by two psychologists from the Hamilton Board of Education. Because of our board’s priority on the role of language in the learning

process, I attended their session. They argued that if students were not reading by the end of Grade 1, that the rate at which they began to lag behind others was exponential. When they hit Grade 7, the psychologists stated, those students were confronted with the wall of “the text-book” at reading levels well above Grades 7 and 8. These students were soon 3 to 5 years behind their peers. This gap widened in secondary school so that, by the time these students were 15 and 16, they experienced frustration, loss of self-esteem, and shortage of credits. They soon become dropouts.

It was a compelling argument, especially since our board had been hearing presentations by Gordon Wells on his seminal work called the Bristol Study (1986). Wells followed the language acquisition of children from the age of 3 through to higher levels of schooling. His study concluded that children of the poor acquired oral language skills at the same rate as children of the wealthy, but that as soon as they attended school, children from higher socioeconomic groups leapt ahead of those from lower socioeconomic levels.

The children from higher socioeconomic families lived in literate environments where most were read to daily and where parents were readers. As well, they traveled more, visited

galleries and museums, and attended concerts and plays at a much higher rate. When they attended school, children knew how books worked; they knew how stories worked and they instantly understood the codes and conventions. They could imagine a different time when they heard, “Long ago when the King of Spain

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...” These more “literate/booky” children understood story language, school language, a sense of history, and an understanding of world geography. They had acquired an important schema or understanding upon which schoolwork could be attached, and they took off academically.

I was predisposed at this workshop to understand how one group of children could rocket ahead and another group struggle. It was a “eureka” experience. It all tumbled together — to understand how that early advantage for some students results in school success while another group slips behind incrementally followed by a declining self-esteem, even shame, before a devastating difference emerges as the student enters the intermediate grades. By the end of Grade 8, these students are “passed on,” sadly, to the high school by elementary school teachers at promotion meetings. They just feel that these students, who are years below their peers, would be better off in a new setting in a high school rather than repeating Grade 8 (often having already repeated 1 or more years). I knew how this happened in school after school. I was involved in other initiatives examining the Grade 7/8 problem, especially boys. It is one of the most-painful experiences Grade 8 teachers undergo in their careers — struggling over what is the best thing to do with a student performing way below his or her grade level.

This is the great narrative of school system failure from the early days of the establishment of the public school system. It has been a chronic failure of the system at every level to address the issues of poverty in our schools, as well as students with special needs. It is a great sweep of failure that clearly begins in kindergarten and Grade 1. The correlation between income and school achievement is overwhelming. The recent report on the reading results in Ontario, for Grades 3 and 6, showed a direct correlation in achievement between income and school achievement (O'Reilly & Yau, 2009).

As Levin (1995) states:

Thirty years of careful social science has provided overwhelming evidence that socioeconomic status has been and continues to be the best predictor of how much schooling students will obtain, how well they will do at their studies and what their life prospects beyond school are. (p. 31)

The Hamilton psychologists offered one proven intervention called Reading Recovery, developed in New Zealand in the mid-1970s by Dr. Marie Clay, a developmental psychologist. It was a viable solution to the problem. I was sold. Reading Recovery fit

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with everything I knew about early learning and early reading and what I knew about adolescent failure in Grades 7, 8, and 9. Teachers provide daily one-to-one lessons which are always based on whole texts in both reading and writing and incorporate all aspects of reading instruction.

I invited the Hamilton Reading Recovery advocates to meet with principals and introduced the feasibility of attaining literacy for all Grade 1 students. Some argued that students should not be pushed; that they would all become readers in

their own time. Others saw how the difference between readers and non-readers at that early age correlated with the eventual achievers and non-achievers at graduation time.

I was eager to push this Reading Recovery narrative forward and accelerate the prospect of widely implementing the Reading Recovery model. I asked if any principal was willing to pilot the Clay methodology. Frank Brathwaite, a new principal, jumped at the idea. At this point, all we had was Marie Clay's 1991 book, *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control*, outlining the process. He happened to have a teacher working on her doctorate in early reading who was keen to try. I remember thumping on Clay's book with my hand as I gave it to Frank and had him assure me that he would stick to the program. Unfortunately, his new teacher did not run a successful pilot. I was very unhappy at the phonics-only presentation to principals on her progress and argued that it was not the Clay model, as Clay was far more holistic with whole texts as central to early reading; not solely a program on phonics, but incorporating all cueing devices.

It is indicative of the difficulty experienced trying to implement a new initiative with limited resources and only a strong feeling of the need to forge ahead. I remember my frustration at not being able to move forward with this initiative as fast as I would like. I experienced how a new innovation is often filled with pitfalls and setbacks.

Robert Dunn, my special education co-coordinator, also became deeply committed to the program after researching the long-term effect of Reading Recovery student success

I felt that, if confronted with my decision, I could justify working on the Reading Recovery program in my little domain of 25 elementary schools in the board, and work toward the goal of all my Grade 1 children reading at grade level. I believed this was a really good idea for students and that Reading Recovery would have its day. Reading Recovery was a social justice issue addressing low achievement and poverty better than anything I knew.

in follow-up years. He was also able to research a longitudinal study of Reading Recovery costs based on the proven reduction of special education classes if students are reading at the end of Grade 1 (Lyons, 1991). Along with Frank, he also became an ardent supporter of Reading Recovery. We began to float the idea that it should be our goal to have all students reading at grade level by the end of Grade 1. It was a central part of our 5-year reform agenda of what we called at the time “The Fifteen Language Development Concerns.” But, it was not just a literacy issue; it was a social justice issue.

In the meantime, the University of Toronto, in partnership with the Scarborough Board of Education, had opened a Reading Recovery Centre. Hazel Dick, a talented and committed special education teacher, took the training to be a Reading Recovery teacher which qualified her to work with struggling Grade 1 students.

But, to reach our goals of full implementation and all Grade 1 students reading at grade level by the end of Grade 1, in all schools in the region, we needed to have a Reading Recovery teacher leader/trainer. This would

allow us to train our own teachers. Hazel was keen to take the next step, but to become a teacher leader she had to take a year off from teaching to take the intensive yearlong coursework. First, I had to obtain the funding to release her to take the training. Robert and Frank pushed me to take the next step, but I was fearful of the response.

Armed with all the research provided by Robert and accompanied by Frank, who was now also a superintendent, I arranged to put our Reading Recovery proposal on the agenda at the weekly Superintendent’s Council. At this regular meeting of 18 superintendents, I simply proposed that one staff equivalent be taken off the total region staff allocation so that the board could send Hazel to be trained as a Reading Recovery teacher leader. I argued that it was consistent with our literacy initiative. We described the Reading Recovery intervention. But as we explained the process, the director immediately bristled at being asked to finance any teacher to work individually with students. His vociferous reaction thwarted further discussion or explanation and conveyed the futility of pursuing the topic further. Immedi-

ately, he exclaimed, “Let’s not waste any more time, let’s vote.” His abrupt dismissal was shocking. There was a cold shudder around the room as it was obvious that this plan was dead.

Crestfallen, I went back to my area and met with Hazel to give her the news. She was disappointed, of course, but still felt committed to taking the training. I looked at my staffing allocation and felt I could get away with taking half a staff member off the top of my own area staff allotment. She thought about it, and felt that she could afford to be on half salary for a year. The deal was struck.

It was a dramatic decision for me to make that move “against the grain,” given the director’s outburst and the vote of colleagues. I felt that it was possible I could have a career-ending reprimand and possibly be terminated for this, but I just had to be true to myself. I felt that, if confronted with my decision, I could justify working on the Reading Recovery program in my little domain of 25 elementary schools in the board, and work toward the goal of all my Grade 1 children reading at grade level. I believed this was a really good idea for students and that Reading Recovery would have its day. Reading Recovery was a social justice issue addressing low achievement and poverty better than anything I knew. I was comforted by the maxim, yet again — it is better to beg forgiveness than it is to seek permission.

Hazel’s study-leave letter in response to her decision to train stated that “there was no commitment to implement Reading Recovery in York Region.” I wondered how this story would end. It was now out of my hands.

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The former director never knew that I took my own area staffing to initiate Reading Recovery. Bill Hogarth became the new director and had visited the Scarborough Board's Reading Recovery program. Upon arrival in York Region Board, this visionary leader was already committed to Reading Recovery and found a trained teacher leader and a large number of principals already knowledgeable and committed to the program! Hazel Dick, Frank Brathwaite, and Robert Dunn, were a formidable team with exceptional implementation skills. All they needed was a supportive director who understood the potential of this intervention. As well, they had a committed and supportive Superintendent of Curriculum, Lyn Sharratt.

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with a range of 85–91% (RRCNA website, 2012). York Region achieved the highest Grades 3 and 6 test results in the province. The Grade 10 literacy test results also rank among the highest in the province, and York's dropout rates are among the lowest.

The Reading Recovery Council of North America (RRCNA) recognized the outstanding work done by the York Region Board as part of their 25th anniversary celebrations in 2009–10. York Region has consistently outperformed the median for all districts in Ontario on the Grades 3 and 6 literacy tests. Bill Hogarth was awarded an honorary doctorate by York University for his contribution to early literacy. Superintendent of Curriculum Lyn Sharratt masterfully implemented Reading Recovery systemwide. She hired Hazel Dick in a new leadership position for implementing Reading Recovery, outside of the federations, so that she could have frank conversations with superintendents and principals about the effectiveness of their teachers. She incorporated Reading Recovery as the essential part of an early intervention component of a comprehensive literacy plan.

The remarkable level of achievement of the York Region District School

Board in provincewide testing at Grades 3, 6, and 10, is attributable, in my opinion, to the implementation of Reading Recovery in every school and taking the lowest achievers in Grade 1 (about 20% of the cohort annually) in the population and providing them with intensive help to attain grade level by year's end. This, despite a remarkably diverse, multicultural population.

Commenting on the independent evaluation of Every Child a Reader (ECaR) in the United Kingdom, Julia Douëttil, a Reading Recovery trainer for the University of London's Institute of Education, writes: "It presents hard evidence of the significant impact of the programme on children who would otherwise be at serious risk of failing in such a central aspect of learning, especially boys and children living in poverty or with a disruptive home life" (2011a).

What is not often discussed are the attributes of those students most in need of assistance in Grade 1. Reading Recovery is centered on the belief that all children can learn to read. Douëttil notes that not only do schools over diagnose special education needs as a solution for children struggling with learning in school, but there is a clear overrepresentation of children in poverty among those listed as having special education needs (2011b, p. 7). These pupils are disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds, are much more likely to be absent or excluded from school and achieve less well than their peers both at any given age and in terms of their progress over time (Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted], 2010).

With over one in five, or 1.7 million children of school age in England identified as having special educational needs, authorities considered it vitally important that both the identification process and the kind of support students receive work in the best interests of all children in the UK. Reading Recovery is clearly the best alternative to this over identification of children with special education needs (Ofsted, 2010).

Douëtil also points out:

Children entitled to free school meals were two and a half times more likely to be identified for the intensive early literacy intervention than their more advantaged peers. . . Children in poverty were also more likely to be at the very bottom of the attainment curve. (2011b, p.7)

Another major report by Harrison, Johnson, & Purdon (2011) recently published in England shows that Reading Recovery, targeting the literacy levels of the lowest-achieving children in primary schools, had a significant impact. It was amongst this low-attaining group, who were disproportionately from low-income families, that the most-significant results were reported. Clearly, poverty need not be a barrier to progress as, once in Reading Recovery, children entitled to free school meals made just as much progress as others.

Most encouraging is that Reading Recovery clearly has long-term positive impact. As Jean Gross, former director of the Every Child a Reader Trust and England's first Communication Champion for Children, stated:

It is fantastic to see the long-term positive effect of Reading Recovery. These are very vulnerable children, with all sorts of ongoing difficulties in and out of school, so the immediate impact of the programme might easily have disappeared over three years. It hasn't, and the children now have a real chance in life. (2010)

It was also found that children provided with Reading Recovery were significantly less likely to be identified at the end of Year 3 as having special educational needs.

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The Reading Recovery program in the UK was delivered to over 23,000 students in approximately 1,600 schools in England in 2009–10. Any study would show a disproportionate number of the lowest achievers in any school come from low-income homes, often with a hard-working single mom, where these children struggle to get a healthy meal and rarely have any books in the home. In Toronto, children with parents earning over \$100,000 per year outperformed students from families earning less than \$30,000, by over 30 percentage points in both Grade 3 and 6 (O'Reilly & Yau, 2009). These

children had at least one of the following demographic characteristics: racial minority, single parent, male, low parental education, English as second language in the home, or recent immigrant status. Reading Recovery has now been proven to erase any or all of these disadvantages to learning to read.

Reading Recovery is not just a reading intervention; it is a social justice and equity intervention. While many argue it is too expensive, one needs to have a longer view and not only compare the cost to school boards for costly special education programs but the long-term costs to society from unemployment, dropout rates, and other societal-related costs like courts, police, and prisons. In the scheme of things, Reading Recovery is cheap. The correlation between poverty and school achievement is inescapable. As Levin stated, "Poverty is such an enormous negative influence that it must be part of the educational reform agenda whether justified on grounds of economic interest or of social justice" (1995, p. 21).

As David Moriarty of the Reading Recovery Council of North America put it:

Reading Recovery steps into a child's life at a critical time — before the cycle of failure begins. It remains worldwide as an example of the most powerful, effective staff development program available, yielding the best-trained teachers of reading in their districts, and compared to other programs that go on for years and never get children reading on grade level, Reading Recovery is a bargain. (RRCNA website, November 2010)

In the great narrative of the historic school systems' failure to address the needs of children in poverty and with special needs, I really do believe that Reading Recovery is one of the best high school dropout prevention programs there is. Reading Recovery is a powerful intervention in the issue of the persistence of child poverty.

This is a personal story of my observations and participation in the journey of the implementation of Reading Recovery in one district. It demonstrates the ways in which ideas can be extinguished and the ways in which ideas can be ignited. It is also about the magic of learning to read, what Alberto Manguel calls “the most human of creative acts” (2010). At a time when one in six Canadians still cannot read a headline, understanding the process of learning to read is still an issue of great concern.

For me, it all started with a workshop option at a high school dropout prevention conference focusing on a Grade 1 reading program! It seemed odd, but it works!

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About the Author



Before returning to school to complete his doctorate at the Ontario Institute of Education, Dr. Jerry Diakiw was superintendent of schools with the Greater Toronto area York Region School Board from 1982–1993. Among his other positions are high school teacher, ESL teacher, elementary school principal, and secondary school principal in Ontario and overseas. Dr. Diakiw is currently teaching a Foundations course on social justice and equity issues in classrooms, schools, and communities at the Faculty of Education in York University. He can be reached by email at jdiakiw@edu.yorku.ca.