Meeting the Twin Challenges of Sustaining and Scaling Up

Emily Rodgers, The Ohio State University
Jerome V. D’Agostino, International Data Evaluation Center

Recently we were asked to participate in a panel presentation at a meeting sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education for all i3 projects: the three other scale-up projects and those that were awarded validation and development grants. The prompt we were given to respond to in our presentation was this: “How does a new project grow to become a sustainable entity with a proven track record of success that widely influences the field?” The goal of the presentation was to provide the newer projects, those planning to scale up, with information and ideas from Reading Recovery’s experience, presumably because Reading Recovery is regarded as a successful innovation with demonstrated sustainability.

We thought it would be a good idea, at this midpoint of the grant, to share some of the ideas that we presented at the i3 meeting about Reading Recovery’s sustainability. We begin with an overview of how we are meeting the challenges of scaling to date, and then discuss the twin challenge of sustainability.

Scaling Up and Addressing the Challenge of Attrition

As we all know, the inopportune start time of the grant meant that Year 1 teacher recruitment could not be encouraged by funding (the grant did not start until October 2010 which meant that teachers were already enrolled for training). As a result, we did not see a funding-related increase in the number of teachers-in-training until Year 2 of the grant.

Despite the fact that Year 1 recruitment was not boosted by the award, as Table 1 displays we are on track to meet our final project goals.

To date, the i3 grant has trained or is training 2,085 teachers across the United States. Those teachers taught 26,584 students in Reading Recovery and an additional 119,628 students during the other part of their day.

The grant also experienced some attrition in teachers trained. There were 1,376 teachers trained by the end of Year 2; but of those, 176 were no longer in the Reading Recovery role as of June 2012. The reasons for their withdrawal from the role were either personal or school-level decisions. Some of those 176 teachers who were trained but then left the role were part-time teachers who accepted full-time positions that

Table 1. Project Goals: Progress to Date

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Yearly Project Goals</th>
<th>Final Project Goals by June 2015 (Year 5)</th>
<th>Accomplished as of Spring 2013 (End of Year 3)</th>
<th>Distance to Go by June 2015 (Years 4 and 5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers trained in Reading Recovery</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>3,675</td>
<td>2,085</td>
<td>1,590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>per year</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children taught in Reading Recovery</td>
<td>8 per teacher</td>
<td>88,200</td>
<td>26,584</td>
<td>61,616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>per year</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children taught by Reading Recovery-trained teachers in their other roles</td>
<td>36 per teacher</td>
<td>485,100</td>
<td>119,628</td>
<td>207,828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>per year</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher leaders trained</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Goal surpassed as of 2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
did not include Reading Recovery. In a few cases, school administrators wanted to train as many staff personnel as they could in Reading Recovery and in those cases, once one teacher was trained, another was nominated as a replacement for training.

These two reasons for attrition, while understandable, potentially have a negative impact on the intervention. Teacher education research and our own evaluation of Reading Recovery outcomes consistently demonstrate that teacher effectiveness increases with experience. Teachers successfully discontinue more interventions after their training year than during, and their effectiveness continues to improve for several years afterwards, no doubt because of the effect of experience and ongoing professional development (D’Agostino, 2012). There is a negative impact on the overall outcome of the program when teachers leave the Reading Recovery role after just 1 or 2 years.

In addition, when a teacher’s only role is to work part-time in Reading Recovery that means they can only teach about 8 students a year. On the other hand, full-time teachers who work in the Reading Recovery role for part of the day and have some other type of instructional role serve approximately 50 students a year.

There are other reasons to use i3 grant funds to train full-time and not part-time teachers in Reading Recovery. The Standards and Guidelines of Reading Recovery in the United States (2011) stress the full-time nature of the role for teachers trained in Reading Recovery:

The Reading Recovery-trained teacher also works closely with administrators, classroom teachers, and the parents of individual students, so teachers selected for Reading Recovery/Descubriendo la Lectura training should be knowledgeable professionals who are able to communicate, cooperate, and negotiate effectively with colleagues and parents. (p. 15)

Clearly the kind of communication and interaction required of a teacher in a Reading Recovery role is most likely to occur when the teacher is in a full-time position at the school. The teacher ought to be fully integrated with the staff and present throughout the day in order to work closely with colleagues in the ways that the standards describe.

Therefore, our analysis of the impact of attrition led us to several decisions that are meant to support the scaling up and sustainability of Reading Recovery, among them:

1. The grant will only fund full-time teachers.
2. Only one replacement teacher will be trained per school when an i3-trained teacher leaves the role.

The careful selection of teachers for training in Reading Recovery has always been important. It would be easy—in this present context with ample funds to train teachers in Reading Recovery—to be less selective and to train as many teachers as possible, even paraprofessionals. If we did, however, we would be what Petroksi (2008) refers to as upscaling without a proportional increase in strength; a factor he identified as being responsible for the failure of good designs.

Sustainability: Factors That Support or Threaten

A key feature about Reading Recovery that supports its sustainability is that it has a design. Having a design means that the intervention has built-in mechanisms to enable innovation when research warrants change, while at the same time, maintain fidelity to practice. (See Wilson & Daviss, 1994, for a discussion of design and its important role in innovating educational practices.) What are the built-in mechanisms of Reading Recovery’s design that support the twin goals of fidelity and innovation?

1. faculty networks
2. teacher leaders who act as redirecting agents
3. ongoing evaluation of outcomes
4. standards and guidelines connected to a licensing process

All trainers in Reading Recovery belong to at least two trainer networks: one at their national level and the other an international group of trainers in all countries with Reading Recovery. The North American Trainers Group (NATG) consists of trainers in the United States and Canada and it meets twice a year. The International Reading Recovery Trainers Organization (IRRTO) meets every 18 months. The trainers in North America divide their efforts around four principal areas of study: research, implementation, technology, and teaching. They work together to solve implementation problems across the United States and Canada, to support research and development, and to improve teacher leader and teacher training.
Teacher leaders are pivotal to the design of Reading Recovery and therefore its sustainability. Clay, (1994) using Goodlad’s term, referred to the teacher leader role as that of a “redirecting agent” because, she said, teacher leaders are responsible for change at every level of the system:

They teach children, train teachers, educate the local educators, negotiate the implementation of the program, act as advocates for whatever cannot be compromised in the interests of effective results, and talk to the public and media, correcting misconceptions. (Clay, 1994, p. 127)

Clay (2000) noted that the same tenets that account for Reading Recovery’s success in children’s accelerated literacy learning, also account for its ability to scale up internationally: tentativeness, flexibility, and problem solving. Trainers, teacher leaders, and teachers apply these tenets not only to their thinking about teaching children but also to implementing the intervention in schools, school districts, states, and nationally.

Another key feature of Reading Recovery’s design that supports sustainability is that it has a design. Having a design means that the intervention has built-in mechanisms to enable innovation when research warrants change, while at the same time, maintain fidelity to practice.

A key feature about Reading Recovery that supports its sustainability is that it has a design. Having a design means that the intervention has built-in mechanisms to enable innovation when research warrants change, while at the same time, maintain fidelity to practice.

Finally, we encouraged the new projects to license their innovations and to quickly develop standards and guidelines to monitor fidelity to them. In the United States the license for Reading Recovery is upheld at The Ohio State University. The royalty-free license is issued on an annual basis to sites that are registered by their affiliated trainers as meeting the standards of Reading Recovery. Licenses are also sent annually to universities that are identified by the executive committee of NATG as being active university training centers in good standing.

These features of Reading Recovery’s design—and the very fact that Reading Recovery has a design—might seem obvious to many who are involved in implementing Reading Recovery. The elegance and complexity of the design becomes clear when discussing with new projects what features they might want to consider incorporating in their designs to support sustainability.

What matters most for sustainability then is having a design that can be monitored and changed as needed. Under the research control of NATG and IRRTO, changes to Reading Recovery can be made because of its design. The structure of the network of professionals involved with implementing and monitoring the intervention allows for discussion about change and provides a mechanism to put change in to place.

We also discussed with the newer projects factors that threaten sustainability. These factors come from the literature on design in engineering, but we believe that anyone who has been involved with Reading Recovery will relate to them in terms of maintaining Reading Recovery in schools. Those factors, as identified by Petroski (2008) include (a) doing away with the things that seem superfluous, and (b) cheating (substituting for something inferior).

Petroski recognized that there is a tendency to pare down good, proven designs in engineering; and we think the same is true of education. Good designs for bridges or buildings, for example, are sometimes tinkered with by substituting cheaper or inferior materials in an effort to make the design more cost-effective. Sometimes features are removed or changed because they are regarded as being superfluous to the design. Petroski warned, “The cumulative effect of such paring down of strength is a product that can more readily fail. If the trend continues indefinitely, failure is sure to occur” (p. 171).
In conclusion, there has always been pressure to change Reading Recovery’s design, to substitute, for example a summer workshop for the year-long graduate level training that teachers complete or to remove features of the design such as not supporting teacher leaders to participate in their required professional development. Change has occurred to Reading Recovery and will continue to do so in the future, but it is managed not by tinkering but by careful consideration of evidence. The trainers and teacher leaders—through their networks of communication and through their combined focus on professional development, research, learning, and technology—have a measured way to consider and take up change. The tension to be managed is guarding against the paring down of a good design with adapting the design to new situations so it will not fail. The i3 grant to scale-up Reading Recovery operates through these implementation principles and will continue to do so for the remaining 2 years of the grant with attention to the twin challenges of scaling up and sustainability.

References


About the Authors

Dr. Emily Rodgers is an associate professor in the College of Education and Human Ecology at The Ohio State University and a Reading Recovery trainer. Dr. Rodgers is co-director of the i3 project to scale up Reading Recovery.

Dr. Jerome D’Agostino is a professor in the Quantitative Research, Evaluation, and Measurement program at The Ohio State University. He specializes in assessment, measurement, and intervention evaluation. Dr. D’Agostino is director of the i3 project to scale up Reading Recovery.