President’s Message

Sustaining and Growing Our Work Requires A New Lens

RRCNA President Jeffery Williams

As the Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons teacher leader of a large site in northeastern Ohio, I have had the privilege and honor to see the important work of a variety of Reading Recovery teachers — urban, suburban, and rural teachers in high- and low-socioeconomic districts; teachers with years of experience and brand-new teachers in their first year. Teachers who only teach Reading Recovery during their day and others who serve children as special education teachers, small-group instructors, ELL teachers, literacy coaches, and even classroom teachers. Across these settings, the work I see is transformative: for children, for teachers, for schools. It is profound and meaningful work. The work I see is going on in settings all across Canada and the United States. This humbles and energizes me.

But this work also troubles me. I wonder why some districts or schools choose to function without Reading Recovery. I wonder why state departments of education choose to showcase and support programs other than Reading Recovery. I wonder why critics choose to spend time writing articles or producing websites to attack our work. I wonder why we are in fewer schools today than at any time in the last 20 years. And, if truth be told, I sometimes even wonder if we can survive the problems before us.

As with many puzzles, I turn to reflection on the work of Marie Clay. Clay always said that you cannot bring a simple theory to that which is complex. Reading Recovery is complex. We work in complex settings, have complex relationships, engage in complex thinking and do complex work with children and teachers and schools and universities. These complexities need to be lifted up, examined, refined, and made more elegant, less expensive, more far-reaching, less variable. To accomplish this, we need the help of a new network, a new way of thinking.

For some, this might feel uncomfortable and that’s expected. Clay also felt unsure when she set out to solve the problems she saw before her. At first, she was puzzled by why some children have difficulty learning to read and write and challenged herself to look “with an unusual lens.” This led her to create the Observation Survey and ultimately, Reading Recovery. Once Reading Recovery was established in New Zealand, she puzzled over how to take this beyond her native setting to scale-up across other countries like Australia, Britain, the United States, and Canada. She then puzzled over how to help children learning other languages and developed versions of Reading Recovery for Spanish and French. Later, she looked again at contemporary problems for children with learning disabilities and those learning English as a second language which set Literacy Lessons in motion. Each puzzle was different. Each puzzle required a new lens. Each took resolve, time, resources. And lots of problem solving. Marie Clay showed us the way, and now it is our turn to create a new lens to solve the puzzles we face today.

The puzzle of how to sustain and grow our work is before us and requires yet another, unusual lens. Together WE can do this. WE know Reading Recovery is transformative. WE have had impact on schools, districts, systems. On universities, research, and on society. WE have more data—and better data—than any early literacy intervention on the planet. WE get replicability in research results. Educational studies don’t usually work that way. The collective 2.4 million children taught in the last 30 years who come largely from marginalized groups—economically challenged or who represent racial and linguistic diversity—have been transformed. WE brought them to literacy. To opportunity. To freedom. WE must not let our work end. Thank you for the time and resources I know you will commit to help improve what we know and love — our transformative model of teaching and learning.