# A Palette of Excellence: Contextualizing the Reported Benefits of Reading Recovery Training to Canadian Primary Classroom Teachers

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*Editor's note:*
*All names are pseudonyms.*

Amidst charges that too many children are failing to achieve a satisfactory level of literacy development (Canadian Language & Literacy Research Network, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lacina & Collins-Block, 2011), there remains concerns surrounding the effectiveness of teachers. As well, debates of what is 'ideal' instruction that fosters reading and writing success for children (Pearson, 2004), all beg answer to the question, "What do we mean by an exemplary primary literacy teacher?"

To add to this ongoing discussion, I examined if and how the professional learning offered in the training of Reading Recovery® teachers held any potential for application in Canadian kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 classrooms (Stouffer, 2015). Throughout my findings, the majority of participants reported Reading Recovery was a positive influence on their classroom practice. Two overarching themes were common across the teachers' commentaries:

1. Reading Recovery training had significant value and application to their classroom context.
2. Incorporating procedures, language, knowledge, and beliefs they developed in Reading Recovery training made them more 'effective' literacy instructors (e.g., "My students are far more successful in reading and writing than they were before I was trained." Grade 1 teacher, urban Manitoba).

To contextualize participants' comments that Reading Recovery training made them more effective, I will compare my findings of reported transferred aspects of Reading Recovery to a synthesis of how exemplary primary literacy teachers (EPLTs) are profiled within recent studies.

Clay designed Reading Recovery as a one-to-one style literacy intervention, and vigorously defended its one-to-one instruction (2005a) and standardized implementations of the intervention (Canadian Institute of Reading Recovery [CIRR], 2014; Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2015). She believed that the intensity of Reading Recovery instruction was not required for most children, nor should classroom programs be designed based upon the needs of the most-struggling children. However, Clay's theories and the Reading Recovery intervention itself were born from her seminal *classroom* observations of 100 New Zealand children (of varying abilities) learning to read throughout their Grade 1 year (Ballantyne, 2009). From these observations, Clay developed her theory of children's construction of a literacy processing system (2001), which applied to both average and non-average learners.

Additionally, because Reading Recovery has been positioned as a highly effective literacy intervention (D'Agostino & Murphy, 2004; Pinnell, 1989; Wasik & Slavin, 1993; What Works Clearinghouse, 2013), it seemed worthwhile to investigate if there were any mineable aspects of its professional development including Clay's theories (1991, 2001) that could potentially benefit classroom teachers. While there has been interest in exploring the classroom impact of Reading Recovery training, (Herman & Stringfield, 1997; Pressley & Roehrig, 2005), only a few studies have investigated the connection between Reading Recovery and classroom literacy instruction (Cox & Hopkins, 2006; Pressley, Roehrig, & Sloup, 2001; Smith, 2011). Cox and Hopkins found that Reading Recovery training provides teachers with "a conceptual understanding of the literacy process as it develops for diverse children" (p. 263). In their view, this

understanding comprised a critical element to successful intervention but also held potential transferability to classroom literacy instruction. Pressley, Roehrig, and Sloup observed Reading Recovery-trained kindergarten through Grade 2 teachers in their classrooms. They noted that all of the 10 observed teachers replaced teaching procedures with instructional procedures and teaching strategies that were typical of Reading Recovery. Similarly, Smith conducted case studies of Reading Recovery-trained teachers in the context of teaching guided reading in their classrooms. She found that those teachers used assessments, materials, and discourse similar to those employed in Reading Recovery. As well, she noted that the teachers planned and carried out instruction in a manner responsive to their students' immediate needs. However, questions of potential transfer to whole-class settings or in other types of literacy instruction were left unexplored.

Konstanellou pointed to a need for further investigation of the potential impact of Reading Recovery teacher training on classroom instruction:

> In my 17 years as a university trainer for Reading Recovery I have had numerous opportunities to discuss with colleagues how Reading Recovery may have influenced classroom teaching practices. There are a few articles and studies and much anecdotal information that have made the connection between Reading Recovery training and its impact on classroom instruction. However, there has never been extensive research that makes a clear case for the connection between Reading Recovery training and classroom teaching. (E. Konstanellou, personal communication, April 17, 2015)

## The Classroom Impact of Reading Recovery: Inquiry Overview

To answer my questions as to if and how aspects of Reading Recovery teacher learning could be applied within classroom contexts, I surveyed 53 teachers across Canada who had completed the year-long Reading Recovery training within 3 years prior to the study. Additionally, three teachers from the survey respondents in western Canada volunteered for the case study phase of the research: Barb, a Grade 1 teacher in an urban school with 13 years experience; Laurie, a Grade 2 teacher in an urban school with 17 years experience; and Sarah, a Grade 1–2 teacher in a rural school with 25 years experience. I composed three case studies from weekly observations of classroom teaching conducted from March through May 2013 and semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2006), which typically followed each classroom teaching observation.

I coded incidents of reported or observed transfers of Reading Recovery learning from the survey responses (N = 1,312) and case studies (N = 1,330) using ATLAS.ti (Muhr, 2007) categorizing each in terms of the classroom activity, the number of students the teacher was working with (i.e., one, two, small group, whole class), the modality of literacy (i.e., reading or writing or both), and the Reading Recovery concept/principle of instruction that was transferred, and if the transfer affected a participant's classroom procedures, language, knowledge, or beliefs.

The participants reported and I observed how teachers had incorporated aspects of Reading Recovery learning when teaching reading and writing in classroom settings, during whole-class, small-group, and one-to-one instruction. Because I did not compare teachers' practice pre- and post-Reading Recovery training, the findings are dependent upon the accuracy of the participants' reporting and perception of their learning. Additionally, it is possible that some participants provided classroom instruction similar to Reading Recovery prior to training and the training only reinforced or provided them language to better articulate the nature of their practice.

From my analysis, a particular finding interested me. Mainly based on their assessments of their own students and comparing their students' progress pre- and post-Reading Recovery teacher training, the participants often reported that post-training, they felt more confident teaching literacy and judged themselves as more effective:

> Yes, I feel I am a much more effective literacy teacher. I am more thoughtful about what is important and I take a closer look at the student and what they can do. (Grade 1–2 teacher, rural Manitoba).

The participants frequently referred to the apprenticeship and collaborative style of learning hallmark to Reading Recovery training as factors that led to growth in classroom practice:

> I think that training in Reading Recovery has only made me a better classroom teacher. It has really changed the way I think

about teaching students to read and write, as well as how I deliver my instruction in the classroom. Reading Recovery meetings continually challenge my thinking and help me to better understand the way students learn. (Grade 1–2 teacher, rural Manitoba)

At first, I was overwhelmed but as the [training] year progressed and we met in our contact group, it became easier as we all had our own experiences and difficulties we were trying to work through. It was so beneficial to watch other teachers complete lessons with their students. (Barb)

Because many of the participants stated the position that Reading Recovery training somehow made them a 'more-effective' literacy teacher, I offer the reader a review of recent research to operationalize what research has deemed more effective when describing literacy teachers. Through this lens, I will explore if and how the participants reported that Reading Recovery training influenced their classroom literacy instruction in similar ways to research that has depicted the characteristics of EPLTs.

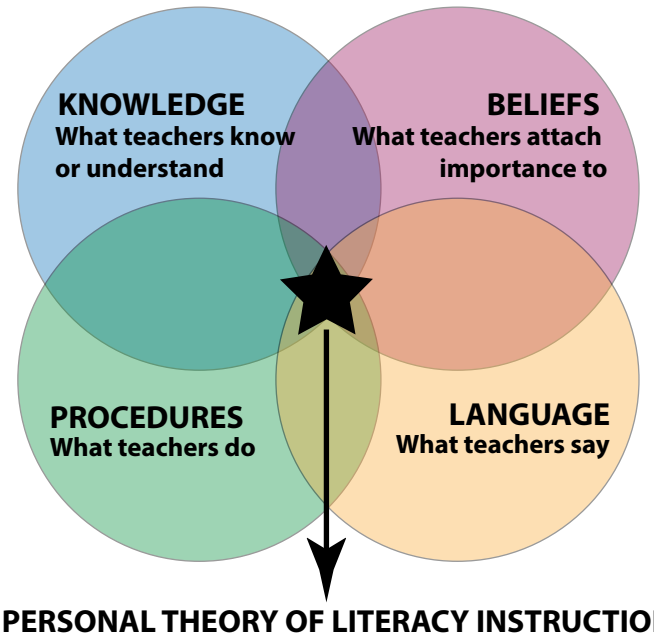
## Research on the Characteristics of Exemplary Primary Literacy Teachers

Foundational work by Michael Pressley and his colleagues (1996, 1998) pointed to a lack of research that described effective literacy instruction. I reviewed 24 recent studies since Pressley's call that were focused on describing characteristics of highly successful primary teachers (Allington, 2002; Baker, Allington, & Brooks, 2001; Block, Oakar, & Hurt, 2002; Bogner, Raphael, & Pressley, 2002; Bohn, Roehrig, & Pressley, 2004; Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich, & Stanovich, 2004; Day, 2001; Lyons, 2003; Mather, Bos, & Babur, 2001; McCutchen et al., 2002; Medwell, Wray, Poulson, & Fox, 1998; Metsala et al., 1997; Morrow & Asbury, 2001; Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley, 1999; Pressley, 2001; Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996; Pressley, Roehrig, & Sloup, 2001; Pressley et al., 1998; Ruddell, 1995; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000; Taylor, Peterson, Pearson, & Rodriguez, 2002; Wharton-McDonald, 2001; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998).

In these studies, *effectiveness* or *success* as a literacy teacher are consistently defined, either explicitly or implicitly, as the teacher's capacity to lift their students' literacy outcomes above those of other teachers. Interchangeably used terms such as *effective, best, excellent, good, high-quality*, etc., are somewhat problematic. These terms, when applied to teachers, I argue, are always defined relatively within specific contexts. They also seem to imply that there is a checklist-like, archetypal ranking system for literacy teachers, with 'best' implying an achievable, uniform, and static state of a master teacher. I gravitate towards using the term exemplary in this review and for my discussion, built from the examination of many successful teachers, each contributing a piece to a larger, multifaceted construct.

As I culled through the findings and discussions, it seemed as though the researchers seemed to talk about the exemplary teachers from three viewpoints: what they did, what they knew, and what they believed was most important in literacy instruction. To organize my profile

**Figure 1. Four Components of a Personal Theory of Literacy Instruction**



of EPLTs, I proposed three broad categories of description: procedures, knowledge, and beliefs. While none of the reviewed studies focused on teachers' discourse, in my study, I also examined if and how the case study teachers imported particular language (i.e., prompts, Clay's terminology, or teaching procedures/principles) from Reading Recovery (Clay, 2005b) into their classroom instruction. I conceptualize these four dimensions: procedures, knowledge, beliefs, and language as interactive components of what I term a teacher's personal theory of literacy instruction (Figure 1). Over time, drawing from their training and experience, teachers construct knowledge and form beliefs about how literacy develops and how it should be taught. Teachers enact their personal theories through the procedures they select and language they incorporate into their instruction. Or, teachers' habitual practices, over time, may shape what they understand or believe about how reading and writing should be taught.

I used these three overarching categories as a means of sorting through various conceptualizations of EPLTs. Seeing no singular profile for an EPLT in my analysis, I was drawn towards the analogy of a painter's palette — in which EPLTs' teaching can be described as individual hues drawing from a range of effective procedures, knowledge, and beliefs. Using this palette analogy, I offer the most commonly reported characteristics of EPLTs in the reviewed research (Figure 2). Within this analogy, EPLTs may be seen as possessing some common traits but also having degrees of individuality, reflected within their own personal theories of literacy instruction, which grow and adapt over time.

## Comparing Reading Recovery-Based Learning to the Characteristics of Exemplary Primary Literacy Teachers

***Exemplary primary literacy teachers' instructional procedures***

Teachers' actions—what EPLTs did in the course of teaching literacy—was the most-reported aspect within the studies I reviewed. The most-frequently described instructional procedures of EPLTs follow:

- Balancing whole texts and isolated skills – Teachers were described as purposefully dividing instructional time between working with whole texts or teaching isolated skills in reading and writing, recognizing advantages and disadvantages of either context.
- Connecting literacy skills across curriculum – The EPLTs made deliberate efforts to link literacy skills to other content areas across the school day.
- Differentiating teaching purposeful literacy and tools – Teachers made it clear to students when they were reading or writing for a larger purpose (e.g., to research a topic, to communicate a message to someone) versus when they were learning a skill or component of the reading or writing process.
- Managing classrooms effectively – Many of the researchers referred generally to the EPLTs as being excellent classroom managers, justifying such a label by noting students were typically engaged in their work, or the classroom environments seemed well organized.
- Encouraging self-regulation – EPLTs made efforts to foster their students' capacity to self-monitor, self-correct, and to increase their independence initiating and completing literacy tasks.
- Providing engaging activities – Teachers offered literacy instructional tasks that students found highly interesting and promoted active participation.
- Instructing reading and writing explicitly – EPLTs gave deliberate, clear directions and explanations of components of reading and writing processes focused on immediate tasks at hand.
- Arranging for extensive student reading and writing – Teachers provided their classes with large amounts of time and opportunity to practice reading and writing in a variety of formats.
- Modelling extensively – EPLTs provided numerous demonstrations of how and what they wanted their students to do in reading and writing.
- Applying formative assessment – Teachers based instructional decisions on the observed competencies of their students. As opposed to following a preset instructional sequence, they followed the lead of their stu-

**Figure 2. A Pallette of Excellence: Research-Based Characteristics of Exemplary Primary Literacy Teachers**

## PRIMARY CLASSROOMS

### TEACHER BELIEFS

**ELPTs place importance on …**

- Encouraging all students, having positive attitudes
- Holding high expectations for all students
- Having personal interest in continuing their own education
- Reflecting on their own teaching

### TEACHER KNOWLEDGE

**ELPTs know or understand …**

- Purposes behind their teaching actions
- Literacy development theory
- Literacy instructional methods
- Awareness of their literacy theoretical orientation
- Diagnostic viewpoints
- English phonology/phonics
- English grammar
- A wide scope of children's literature
- Curriculum/content expectations

### TEACHER PROCEDURES

**ELPTs practice …**

- Balancing whole texts and isolated skills
- Connecting literacy skills across curriculum
- Differentiating teaching purposeful literacy and "tools"
- Managing classrooms effectively
- Encouraging self-regulation
- Providing engaging activities
- Instructing reading and writing explicitly
- Arranging for extensive student reading and writing
- Modelling extensively
- Applying formative assessment
- Asking higher-level questions
- Integrating reading and writing
- Maintaining instructional density
- Matching texts to reading ability
- Scaffolding varying levels of support
- Stressing the creation of meaning in literacy
- Varying group sizes
- Applying a variety of instructional methods
- Offering a variety of texts

dents, providing next logical steps based on their students' immediate needs.

- Asking higher-level questions – Teachers asked deeper questions about texts beyond the literal. They invited children to make inferences and think critically.
- Integrating reading and writing – EPLTs viewed reading and writing as reciprocally developing processes and often drew links between them. They clarified how knowledge in writing could assist reading and vice versa.
- Maintaining instructional density – Teachers provided children a steady diet of rich instruction. They were

seen frequently giving clarification and instruction in both group and individual settings. They were opportunistic and took advantage of teachable moments.

- Matching text to reading ability – EPLTs deliberately gave children frequent occasion to read texts that fell within their instructional reading level.
- Scaffolding varying levels of support – Teachers were described as masterfully adjusting the level of assistance needed between individual students, and withdrawing support as students become more independent.
- Stressing the creation of meaning in literacy – Strong emphasis was placed on reading and writing as message-getting and message-sending events. Comprehension and clear communication were portrayed as the defining outcomes of successful reading and writing.
- Varying group sizes – Throughout a school year as well as during a teaching day, teachers constantly reorganized the group size according to the instructional purpose and the matching needs of children in the class.
- Applying a variety of instructional methods – EPLTs deployed a large repertoire of instructional methods and were able to selectively switch to alternate approaches to accommodate a broad range of learners.
- Offering a variety of texts – Teachers gave children access to a wide variety of genres, authors, and forms. The classrooms showed diversity of texts in reading and writing.

***Common instructional procedures***

Looking at the instructional procedures that researchers associated with EPLTs, I found that many of the survey participants and all of the case study teachers deployed some similar procedures in their classrooms, which they directly attributed to Reading Recovery teacher training (see Table 1). For some procedures, (i.e., providing engaging activities, connecting literacy skills across curriculum, varying group sizes, and asking higher-level questions) I saw those kinds of activities in play in all of the case study teachers' classrooms, but did not have evidence that they attributed those procedures to Reading Recovery training.

Post-Reading Recovery training, the participants described their classroom as more intense and explicit. For example, a survey participant from urban Alberta stated:

> Efficiency and urgency are necessary in Reading Recovery given the limited amount of time you have with these students. This urgency has come with me into the classroom. The activities we do are purposeful, since we cannot waste time with activities that are not directly supporting our literacy goals.

Barb reported now being focused on teaching concepts of English print more explicitly early in the Grade 1 year. "Other years I haven't worried so much about it really being that clear. But they need to know that we start on the left, we go to the right."

Laurie had adopted the practice of drawing on a conversation with a student to generate ideas for writing from Reading Recovery:

> That's definitely from my Reading Recovery training because [Reading Recovery students] do that little piece of writing and you have to talk first and get a conversation started so that they'll say something that they want to write. And that's definitely something that I do with all the kids. Even the kids before they leave the carpet, they have to tell me what [they] are going to write about.

Sarah felt that the language and procedures she had adopted from Reading Recovery enabled her to more clearly prompt and explain literacy concepts to her class:

> I've taught a lot of kids how to read, but the end goal was just they need to be able to read, right? And I never – it's not that I didn't understand but I wasn't specific on what they need to do to be able to read. You know, I gave them lots of opportunities and – but I never used the vocabulary. And I think that's the biggest thing, is the vocabulary that I now use.

***Exemplary primary literacy teachers' knowledge***

The most-common EPLT understanding was having an awareness of the underlying purpose of their instructional actions. Lyons (2003) found EPLTs "building case knowledge about how to teach a specific process to a specific child for a spe-

**Table 1. Comparison of Research-Based Characteristics of EPLTs to Reading Recovery Instructional Procedures**

| EPLT Procedures (What EPLTs Do) | Reading Recovery-Influenced Classroom Teachers | | Sample Comments from Participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Survey Responses | Case Studies | |
| Instructing reading and writing explicitly | • Early teaching of concepts of print<br>• Encouraging phrasing and fluent reading<br>• Practicing a word so that is added to known vocabulary<br>• Using Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words | • Early teaching of concepts of print<br>• Encouraging phrasing and fluent reading<br>• Practicing a word so that is added to known vocabulary<br>• Referring to strategic activity when discussing children's literacy ability<br>• Teaching a variety of approaches to solve words<br>• Using Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words | I teach all of the pre-reading skills much more explicitly such as what is a letter/word/number, left to right, return sweep, etc. (Kindergarten teacher, urban British Columbia)<br>Mind you we always did punctuation, but [now] I think it's just making them more aware of why the punctuation is there. (Barb) |
| Arranging for extensive student reading and writing | • Providing a large number of experiences with text | • Providing a large number of experiences with text<br>• Providing opportunities for rereading of familiar texts | More guided reading, more reading overall. (Grade 1 teacher, urban Manitoba)<br>We write every day. (Barb) |
| Maintaining instructional density | • Referring to urgency/ persistence in teaching | • Referring to urgency/ persistence in teaching | I think time is the big thing and to utilize the time the best way that I can. (Barb) |
| Scaffolding varying levels of support | • Matching teaching decisions to observed behaviors | • Adjusting the level of support when children are solving words<br>• Matching teaching decisions to observed behaviors | I scaffold each child as much as possible toward increased independent problem solving. (Grade 1 teacher, urban British Columbia)<br>And I find too that working one-on-one you just have to be on the ball the whole time. Even in a small group, you're changing and you do need to, but with a child sitting right there right beside you, you have to respond quickly to whatever he's doing. (Sarah) |
| Encouraging self-regulation | • Fostering learner's independence | • Fostering learner's independence<br>• Fostering self-monitoring | I gear my reading lessons toward developing strategic activity and independent problem-solving. (Grade 1 teacher, urban British Columbia)<br>Just putting the responsibility on the child. You know, prompting them to solve problems independently and on their own, and giving them those skills so that they can do it independently when no one's there. (Sarah) |

*continues*

| EPLT Procedures (What EPLTs Do) | Reading Recovery-Influenced Classroom Teachers | | Sample Comments from Participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Survey Responses | Case Studies | |
| Applying formative assessment | • Basing forthcoming instruction on running record analysis | • Basing forthcoming instruction on running record analysis<br>• Basing forthcoming instruction on the child's present performance with a text<br>• Spending time to get to know child as a learner | Whereas before I did running records, but I knew their reading level. I knew if they could understand it or not, but I didn't break it down more into what I needed to do. So, I think for me that was a big part, where do I go from here? (Barb)<br><br>You were giving them worksheets and you were doing guided reading, but I just wasn't looking for those kind of things all the time, and now I am. (Sarah)<br><br>And so I will after he's a new EAL [English as an additional language learner] student has had a chance to settle in, then I'll come and I'll do some individual reading with him. I'll start with some simple books, level one books, just with some simple vocabulary and then to see if he has any of that. (Laurie) |
| Balancing whole texts and isolated skills | • Referring to strategic activity when discussing children's ability to read and write<br>• Using Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words | • Teaching items of knowledge drawn from the texts being read or written<br>• Using Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words<br>• Referring to strategic activity when discussing children's ability to read and write<br>• Building on the known<br>• Teaching features of text<br>• Teaching items of knowledge drawn from the texts being read or written<br>• Teaching structures of language found in text | I focus on strategies they are using, not necessarily the level of the text. (Grade 2 teacher, urban Manitoba)<br><br>So, starting with something that they can do and helping them to work on the things that they're developing is another strategy that I picked up from Reading Recovery that I think is key, and not just in reading and writing, but that transfers to math. It transfers to things that we're doing in science, all the things that we're doing. (Laurie)<br><br>Sarah: You're [teaching] it all though manipulatives and through literature.<br>Author: Do you mean working with books, reading and writing texts?<br>Sarah: Exactly, not in isolation. And through poetry, and then I was more confident. Then I was like, "Yeah, we can, we can cover all of this without having to go, everybody today we're doing [the letter] 'B'."<br><br>Author: So, have you always thought about structure and language so carefully, or is that something that's changed?<br>Laurie: No, that's something that changed when I was doing the Reading Recovery training, especially because I am dealing with more of the EAL* kids. And I think before I did the Reading Recovery I didn't really think much about the type of text that they had in the book.<br>* *English as an additional language learner* |

*continues*

| EPLT Procedures (What EPLTs Do) | Reading Recovery-Influenced Classroom Teachers | | Sample Comments from Participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Survey Responses | Case Studies | |
| Offering a variety of texts | | • Using texts from the Reading Recovery Book List | I don't use them as much for the kids that don't, that just sail and find reading easy but for your struggling readers those are the ones that I prefer. (Sarah) |
| Modeling extensively | • Using prompts from Reading Recovery | • Modeling the scanning of words left to right | I use specific language when modeling reading and writing strategies. (Grade 2 teacher, urban Manitoba)<br><br>When I model writing, I think out loud to show the various strategies such as clapping syllables and pushing sounds in boxes. (Kindergarten teacher, rural New Brunswick) |
| Stressing the creation of meaning in literacy | • Orienting children to the new story before reading | • Orienting children to the new story before reading<br>• Referring to Clay's definition of reading/writing | I spend more time building a background and language prior to reading a story. (Grade 1–2 teacher, rural Manitoba)<br><br>Author: Do you find [Reading Recovery] is transferring when you're teaching in front of the whole class?<br>Laurie: Absolutely, it does. Especially if we're doing reading at the carpet, reading stories and things. One of the things I'm careful to do is talk about the meaning of the story. |
| Matching texts to reading ability | • Designing individual instruction<br>• Selecting texts based on children's instructional need and knowledge | • Designing individual instruction<br>• Selecting texts based on children's instructional need and knowledge<br>• Arranging for success<br>• Basing forthcoming instruction on the child's present performance with a text | I noticed that not all children learn to read the same way. I have to change things around for the struggling readers. (K–4 teacher, rural Manitoba)<br><br>I sometimes do small-group instruction based on strategy needs as opposed to levelled groups. I also look for opportunities to read more frequently with those students requiring additional help. (Grade 2 teacher, urban Alberta)<br><br>I try to make sure that my students that are not as strong get a chance to respond to some of those things too and get a chance to participate in that. (Laurie) |

cific reason" (p. 163). The researchers described EPLTs as very consciously making choices, anticipating their decisions' outcomes, and able to articulate why they selected one approach over another.

Several studies indicated EPLTs held a strong knowledge of literacy development theory. Morrow and Asbury (2001) described an EPLT as "well acquainted with the developmental processes of reading and writing. She knew what her students had to learn in order to become better readers and writers, and she purposefully created many opportunities for discovery and explicit teaching of those necessary skills and strategies" (p. 192). The EPLTs were aware of typical developmental sequences in reading and writing development and used those expectations as a general guide for some of their instructional decisions.

Related to their purposefulness and literacy developmental knowledge, some studies described EPLTs as aware and able to articulate their theoretical orientation. The exemplary teachers knew the ground upon which they stood well, or knew what they knew. These studies seem to argue that the EPLTs' metacognitive self-awareness was foundational to their purposeful teaching.

Other types of knowledge were discussed in fewer studies, which claimed EPLTs had knowledge of diagnosing reading and writing performance, English phonology/phonics, English grammar, curriculum content/expectations, and a wide range of children's literature.

### *Common knowledge*

I also found some ways in which the participants described how their knowledge had shifted as a result of Reading Recovery teacher training was similar to knowledge presumably held by EPLTs (Table 2). Similar to EPLTs, the Reading Recovery-trained teachers reported developing knowledge in developmental theory. They frequently referred to Clay's literacy processing theory (1998, 2001) and drew on her work to explain the purpose behind many of their teaching decisions. "I feel I now have knowledge and a foundation that I can confidently draw on to help me instruct reading and guide new and struggling readers that I didn't have before Reading Recovery" (kindergarten teacher, urban British Columbia).

Reading Recovery has been positioned as a bridge between opposing top-down and bottom-up views of reading development (Jones, 1995). Sarah described earlier in her teaching career feeling less certain that she would be able to effectively teach students to become readers. As well, she did not see how explicit instruction fit into a top-down approach to literacy instruction:

> But I don't think, I don't think anybody really understood, "OK, so what do you do?" . . .You know, we were never really – at least I was never really given the specifics that you – so that I could feel confident that kids were going to learn.

Sarah went on to describe how her Reading Recovery training helped her more confidently navigate tensions between teaching skills in the context of continuous text and teaching skills in isolation and arrive at a more-balanced approach to her literacy instruction:

> Unless I teach it all in isolation, how are they ever going to learn all this? It's scary because you think . . . if it's not in worksheet format, they're not going to get it, but they do.

Sarah felt that there were skills she needed to teach explicitly to her students, but through her Reading Recovery training, better understood how to identify and capitalize on opportunities to teach skills in the context of the texts being read and written in her classroom. She had shifted to seeing teaching reading and writing skills in context not only effective, but more efficient:

> Sarah: I never had time. [to see guided reading groups more frequently]
>
> Author: So how do you have time now?
>
> Sarah: Because . . .we're doing the sight word program and the phonics within what we're doing as whole class. Like, if we read a poem, that's when we do our phonics rather than worksheets.

The participants also described themselves taking a diagnostic viewpoint, drawing upon a better understanding of how to assess formatively and match teaching decisions to observed behaviors in their students. A Grade 2–3 teacher from urban British Columbia stated, "I think that I can make much quicker assessment of how children are learning to read and adjust their lessons on the spot in order to help them grasp new reading skills."

Barb felt not only more competent in taking a running record, but that she better understood how to analyze running records and infer a student's current strengths and weakness in problem solving when reading a

**Table 2. Comparison of Research-Based Characteristics of EPLTs to Reading Recovery-Influenced Knowledge**

| EPLT Knowledge (What EPLTs Know or Understand) | Reading Recovery-Influenced Classroom Teachers | | Sample Comments from Participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Survey Responses | Case Studies | |
| Purposes behind their teaching actions | • Matching teaching decisions to observed behaviours | • Matching teaching decisions to observed behaviours | Yes, I think I know more clearly what to look for in students who are struggling and can more adeptly choose a teaching direction to support those children. (Grade 2 teacher, urban Manitoba)<br><br>I hate to even admit that, [before training in Reading Recovery], when you're trying to do four guided reading groups in 45 minutes, often I would just give the kids the words because, first of all, time, and second, I didn't really know what kind of prompts to give them. (Sarah) |
| Literacy development theory | • Referring to Clay's general theory of literacy processing | • Referring to Clay's general theory of literacy processing | I have a better understanding of how the reading process works and how a child learns to read. (Grade 1–2 teacher, rural Manitoba)<br><br>I have a better understanding of how to teach students reading skills. . . It breaks it down so much, and it's so structured – exactly what you have to do. (Barb) |
| Literacy instructional methods | • Using Reading Recovery activities (unspecified)<br>• Designing individual instruction<br>• Basing forthcoming instruction with child's present performance with text | • Designing individual instruction<br>• Basing forthcoming instruction with child's present performance with text<br>• Building on the known<br>• Using Reading Recovery instructional activities (unspecified)<br>• Teaching structures of language found in text | I think I have a greater repertoire of ideas to help students to read. (Kindergarten teacher, urban Alberta)<br><br>I feel I have more effective strategies to share with the students. (Kindergarten teacher, rural New Brunswick)<br><br>I am getting my kids farther, but I think because I know more what to do with them, and when they are stuck in one spot, then I'm able to get them further, help them to figure out a strategy. (Barb)<br><br>Author: So, have you always thought about structure and language so carefully, or is that something that's changed?<br>Laurie: No, that's something that changed when I was doing the Reading Recovery training, especially because I am dealing with more of the EAL* kids. And I think before I did the Reading Recovery I didn't really think much about the type of text that they had in the book.<br>**English as an additional language learner* |

*continues*

| EPLT Knowledge (What EPLTs Know or Understand) | Reading Recovery-Influenced Classroom Teachers | | Sample Comments from Participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Survey Responses | Case Studies | |
| Diagnostic viewpoints | • Designing individual instruction<br>• Basing forthcoming instruction on child's present performance with text<br>• Analyzing a running record<br>• Basing forthcoming instruction on running record analysis | • Designing individual instruction<br>• Basing forthcoming instruction on child's present performance with text<br>• Analyzing a running record<br>• Basing forthcoming instruction on running record analysis<br>• Discussing children/practice with other Reading Recovery-trained teachers | Knowing how they made their mistakes helps guide me to what to teach them and where to go next. (Kindergarten teacher, urban British Columbia)<br><br>You have to be listening and anticipating. And it takes, first of all, I think it takes experience – because I've listened to a lot of kids read before through my teaching career. But it's also interpreting what they're doing in a different way. When do you step in? When do you not? What prompt should I be giving them? I know this child uses lots of visual information but doesn't necessarily always use the meaning and structure of the language. And you just have to know that and you just have to be listening in those terms. (Sarah) |
| Curriculum/content expectations | • Stating a belief that they are a more-effective teacher after Reading Recovery training | • Stating a belief that they are a more-effective teacher after Reading Recovery training | I have a master's degree in elementary literacy and feel very strongly that I learned more from my Reading Recovery training than I did in the entirety of my after-degree. (Grade 2 teacher, urban Alberta)<br><br>I am much more confident in my ability to help all students learn to read. There is a lot of pressure on Grade 1 teachers to get their students to an end of Grade 1 level and I feel that Reading Recovery training will assist me in getting more of my students to that level. (Barb) |

text. "Because before, I mean, MSV [meaning, structure, and visual information sources available to readers], it's like confusing and sometimes still you have to really think, 'What are they using and where are they going?' Reading Recovery really helped with that."

In both their case studies, Laurie and Sarah described having developed an automatic, continuous analysis of children's reading that steered their instruction:

> I mean I sort of do that in my head as I'm going along anyway, but because I'm noticing, "Oh yeah she self-corrected here, oh she's just looking at the beginning of the text here, she's using meaning here but not those other things." So I kind of do that in my head all the time just as a regular habit even if I'm not writing it down. (Laurie)

> I think that's one of the most tiring things with this job is that you're constantly thinking. You're constantly observing and you're constantly processing what you see and then making the next steps and doing it immediately. And you can't stop, so you go into a whole class you keep doing it. It just becomes one of these things you do. (Sarah)

Both teachers seemed to attribute what they considered an improvement to prompt readers more appropriately on-the-spot based on an increased understanding of Clay's (2005b) strategic processing theory. Sarah further described noticing how her Reading Recovery-born knowledge drew the attention of some nontrained colleagues:

> When I talk to other people who haven't had the training and then

> you're talking about all of these like the zone [zone of proximal development] or all the strategic activity and they are sitting there looking at you like, "Oh, OK wow! I got to write this down." Then you realize, I do know what I'm talking about.

### *Exemplary primary literacy teachers' beliefs*

While teacher actions can be observed, and teacher knowledge measured in various forms, it is important to consider what other qualities successful teachers are bringing to the task of literacy instruction. A majority of the studies described EPLTs as holding visibly positive and encouraging attitudes towards children. "Georgia's belief in a learning environment that encourages respect, kindness, tolerance, sharing, and growth produces a community of learners where virtually all children are engaged in productive academic work all day" (Baker, Allington, & Brooks, 2001, p. 155). The positive attitude expressed by EPLTs was perceived as highly motivational for their students and was credited towards the high degree of student engagement often observed in the EPLTs' classrooms.

The EPLTs were also often portrayed as holding high expectations for all of their students. Lyons (2003) described this as an intangible quality, saying "They convey through their actions and words that these very low-achieving children can and will learn and that they will find a way to teach them" (p. 168). Overall, researchers implied two related benefits of the EPLTs' high standards: (a) The teachers worked harder to ensure that every child met their goals; and (b) Children came to see themselves through the teacher's eyes as being capable and, as a result, approached literacy tasks with more confidence and enthusiasm. Bohn, Roehrig, and Pressley (2004) capture this viewpoint in one such teacher's comment, "If you set the bar high, they can reach it. If you set it even higher, they can still reach it." (pp. 280–281).

EPLTs were also frequently described as continuing, active learners. They expressed interest in or had completed graduate education, and they regularly self-assessed their needs and attended professional development to enhance their teaching practices (Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley, 1999). Allington (2002) described EPLTs as highly motivated to better craft their practice and empowered to make professional judgments versus following scripted programs. "These teachers accepted the professional responsibility for developing high levels of reading proficiency but insisted on the autonomy to act on their expertise" (p. 746).

The EPLTs were also described as being reflective of their teaching. They were critical of themselves and identified their strengths and weaknesses as literacy teachers.

### *Common beliefs*

I also found commonality between the beliefs of EPLTs and changes in attitude that many of the participants attributed to training in Reading Recovery (Table 3). Both the survey and case study teachers described becoming more encouraging and carrying a positive attitude towards all of their students — not only towards the students who were successful in reading and writing. For example, a Grade 1–2 teacher in rural Manitoba reported, "[My attitude] has changed because now I see all children as being capable of reading and writing."

Laurie added that her Reading Recovery training had brought her to look at student difficulties in a new light:

> I think it's more of a mindset thing because one of the key things of Reading Recovery, of course, is that every child can learn more than they know right now, and I don't think I really thought about things that way before I had the Reading Recovery training. . . Because you always identify kids that have problems, you know, kids that are struggling. But, you sort of view it from being a problem. It's a different thing from saying, OK, now what can this child do and how can I help him move on to the next part? That's, it's like a different, a different view of how to address things, and I think that's a crucial thing in everything that we do with our kids. . . . and not just in reading and writing, but that transfers to math. It transfers to things that we're doing in science, all the things that we're doing.

As well, the participants described having a higher set of expectations for their students, in particular, that they expected children as young as kindergarten and Grade 1 to develop independence in their learning. Barb described having raised her expectations for all her students: "I've put more into my writing with the kids and to expect they can do more."

Sarah felt that she had become more deliberate in fostering her class' independence. Something she had gleaned in Reading Recovery was being more mindful in how to bring students' independence to fruition:

> I think independence was there, but I think it was more, "I've

**Table 3. Comparison of Research-Based Characteristics of EPLTs to Reading Recovery-Influenced Beliefs**

| EPLT Beliefs (What EPLTs Place Importance on) | Reading Recovery-Influenced Classroom Teachers | | Sample Comments from Participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Survey Responses | Case Studies | |
| Encouraging all students, having positive attitudes | • Stating a belief that all children will learn to read and write | • Stating a belief that all children will learn to read and write<br>• Referring to an emergent literacy theory versus a reading readiness theory<br>• Stating a belief teaching quality outweighs deficits of child | I used to think some students were not ready to learn to read or write but now I know they can be assisted no matter what level they are at. (Barb)<br>Yes, I feel I am a much more effective literacy teacher. I am more thoughtful about what is important and I take a closer look at the student and what they can do. (Grade 1–2 teacher, rural Manitoba) |
| Holding high expectations for all students | • Fostering learner's independence | • Fostering learner's independence<br>• Stating a belief teaching quality outweighs deficits of child<br>• Stating raised or high expectations<br>• Referring to letting go of assumptions | I don't even know if the word 'independence' ever entered in my brain before the Reading Recovery. I don't think, it was just, I think it was there but I don't really think was a goal and now it's definitely a goal to just keep fostering. (Sarah)<br>I gear my reading lessons toward developing strategic activity and independent problem-solving. (Grade 1 teacher, urban British Columbia) |
| Reflecting on their own teaching | • Reflecting on own practice after teaching | • Reflecting on own practice after teaching | But I mean all my students just looking at them and think, okay, what can I do to help them be successful, and then try to change the way I teach. (Barb)<br>Just very intense, a lot of learning, and over a longer period of time. So you're constantly going back and reflecting on what you've done in the classroom. (Sarah) |

> told you what to do now do it." I didn't foster the behavior of independence. I just expected it, out of the blue, here, now.

All of the teachers reflected on their teaching and reported seeing improvement post-Reading Recovery training. Some of the participants questioned how they had delivered literacy instruction in the past, feeling that they had shifted significantly in their knowledge and practice. For example, Sarah described looking back on her practice before training in Reading Recovery:

> . . . but I know definitely you would not have seen this kind of guided reading 5 years ago. In fact, I know I was doing round robin 5 years ago, one would read and [they would take turns] now I look back at that and go, "Oh, what was I thinking?"

## Discussion

While classroom instruction was not Clay's intended benefactor, there are strong suggestions from this inquiry that imply Reading Recovery training could enhance some teachers' classroom practice in many positive ways, similar to the researched-based descriptions of exemplary teachers. According to participants, Reading Recovery training expanded or reorganized their personal theories of literacy instruction and, in their minds, improved their classroom instruction more than other types of professional development. Some participants also reported that Reading Recovery training filled gaps in their pre-service education making them more-confident teachers of reading and writing.

I temper this comparison of my findings with the research-described qualities of EPLTs with the statement that to attribute causation or correlation of the appearance of these characteristics to Reading Recovery training goes well beyond the scope of my inquiry. Because I did not observe the teachers' classroom literacy instruction prior to Reading Recovery training, I cannot make claim that Reading Recovery conclusively fosters the attributes research has claimed common to EPLTs.

However, citing research that describes EPLTs to contextualize comments made by the participants (i.e., that Reading Recovery 'improved' the quality of their classroom instruction) may assist the reader in assessing if and how there are benefits of Reading Recovery training to school systems beyond the intervention itself. For this study's participants, training in Reading Recovery reportedly enhanced their classroom practices in ways that research has deemed more effective.

If other Reading Recovery-trained teachers apply their learning in ways mirroring how research has described exemplary instructors, then perhaps questions towards the cost-effectiveness of implementing Reading Recovery (Iversen, Tunmer, & Chapman, 2005; Tunmer, Chapman, Greaney, Prochnow, & Arrow, 2013) could be addressed considering students in classrooms being instructed by Reading Recovery-trained teachers. The participants regularly reported and I observed how Reading Recovery learning was applied in classroom literacy instruction, serving a far greater number of students than Grade 1 children taken into Reading Recovery lessons.

This finding adds needed credence to the statement in the Canadian Standards and Guidelines that teachers should "return to regular classroom teaching after 4 to 5 years teaching Reading Recovery" (CIRR, 2014, p. 16). While this guideline has long suggested that school systems should incorporate cycles of Reading Recovery training as an apparent measure towards increasing the effectiveness of classroom literacy instruction, sparse research has been previously undertaken to justify such action.

## Conclusions

The participants reported that in their view, Reading Recovery had enhanced their classroom literacy instruction. The professional learning that teachers reported seemed to extend well beyond a set of instructional tips and tricks, and for some, deeply influenced their personal theories of literacy instruction in terms of their knowledge and beliefs in addition to the procedures and language they used in their classroom instruction. By their reports, the participants felt Reading Recovery had improved the quality of their classroom literacy instruction by adding or enhancing their capacity to

- understand how children construct systems of literacy processing,
- match teaching decisions to observed behaviors,
- foster independence and self-monitoring,
- provide explicit instruction,
- teach for problem solving in a variety of ways,
- interrelate reading and writing, and
- teach with a sense of urgency and raised expectations for all students.

Arguably, these exemplary qualities that the participants reportedly gained from Reading Recovery are not professional learning that can be lifted out of a kit or a 1-day seminar. The participants seemed to come away from Reading Recovery training with a greater teaching repertoire and vocabulary, but more importantly, had a deeper understanding of literacy development that they used diagnostically to make instructional decisions. The Reading Recovery-trained teachers reported becoming more confident — they felt they had improved in their capacity to design and deliver literacy instruction that was more effective and that they could and would reach a wider range of learners in their classrooms. Despite individual differences in how they organized their classroom literacy instruction and the variety of materials they used, the participants adapted Reading Recovery learning to assist many children beyond those served in the one-to-one intervention. The participants described how the apprenticeship and collaborative style of learning of Reading Recovery professional development influenced their personal theories of literacy instruction—not only to serve children in Reading Recovery—but in a far wider circle when they considered how they had applied their learning in classroom settings.

With this article, I am not suggesting that Reading Recovery training be seen as a panacea to ongoing concerns over the quality of classroom instruction or that every teacher could or should be trained in Reading Recovery. However, this study suggests Reading Recovery's rich potential to model and contribute to the training and professional development of literacy teachers. Additional research is still needed to investigate and describe approaches to pre-service primary literacy education programs and their effectiveness and what in-service teachers are bringing to the task of teaching children how to read and write (Falkenberg, 2010; Purcell-Gates & Tierney, 2009). But, to continue to improve how we prepare and empower literacy teachers to become knowledgeable decision makers who can meet the needs of all the students in their classrooms seems a very worthwhile cause.

The Reading Recovery-trained teachers reported becoming more confident — they felt they had improved in their capacity to design and deliver literacy instruction that was more effective and that they could and would reach a wider range of learners in their classrooms.

> I know that I am a much more competent teacher.
>
> I am a more knowledgeable teacher.
>
> I am a teacher always learning. (K–Grade 1 teacher, rural Manitoba)

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