Patterns of Promise for Sustaining Implementation

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with contributions from the Implementation Committtee of the North American Trainers Group

While skilled teachers have the greatest impact on student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1996, 2000), regrettably, most often it is not the skilled teachers who make legislative decisions impacting students far and wide. Education is political, and even more political is reading education. The so-called "reading wars" have impacted teachers, students, and schools for decades, and just when one thinks the conflict over the most effective way to teach reading has resolved, a new version breaks the surface, often more problematic than the last. While most experienced education professionals may recall the days of Reading First and No Child Left Behind as volatile and misguided, today's media version of the Science of Reading (SOR) movement mirrors that time of the early 2000s, including some of the same key players and many of the same ill-considered decision making happening once again.

Reinking et al. (2023) report since 2015, 47 states have enacted or are considering legislation that addresses reading and reading instruction in public schools. Although some legislation remains minor, many states have mandated specific training for teachers focused on SOR. Others go as far as mandating specific screening for students, and/or identifying a select list of curriculum materials/interventions that may be used to teach children to read. This strong-fisted legislation is happening even in states where school districts are said to be protected under local control, meaning each district has the right to choose the curriculum being used in their schools. Ironically, and most unfortunately, this is no longer the case.

These strong shifts in legislation have undoubtedly affected Reading Recovery® implementations across the United States and internationally. Some sites and schools have cut Reading Recovery completely while others have seen the numbers of trained teachers dwindle rapidly. Even more, Reading Recovery teachers who retire are often not being replaced and small training class sizes have become more the norm than the exception. Despite the ongoing and consistent data demonstrating the positive impact Reading Recovery has on student achievement (International Data Evaluation Center; IDEC, 2024), the impact of the misguided media and forceful legislation continues to have a negative impact on implementation.

What Matters Most?

In the fall of 2023, the Implementation Committee of the North American Trainers Group (IC-NATG) began looking closely at those states reported to have the highest levels of SOR legislation currently being implemented (ExcelinEd, 2024a; Olson, 2023). The resources examined define states with examples of a comprehensive literacy policy as those with required "fundamental principles" which consist of (a) supports for teachers, (b) assessment and parent notification, (c) instructions and intervention, and (d) retention and intervention. These principles are tightly wound and identified as consistent with the SOR movement (ExcelinEd, 2024b). For identified Canadian implementations, IC-NATG looked for those provinces most directly impacted by SOR legislation. Specifically, IC-NATG aimed to understand what patterns of implementation exist within sites in these specific locations that are both "surviving and thriving" even in the current extreme educational climate. In essence, what matters most for Reading Recovery implementations in times of challenge?

Once states were identified, IC-NATG contacted trainers affiliated with those states to determine which sites are both surviving and thriving. From there, site names and teacher leader contacts were acquired. IC-NATG

requested interviews with the teacher leaders within these sites to ask the following decided upon questions:

- How has the current SOR/literacy legislation in your state affected Reading Recovery/Literacy Lessons®/Descubriendo la Lectura in your site?
- Who is your primary advocate supporting continued implementation of Reading Recovery/Literacy Lessons/Descubriendo la Lectura in your site?
- What are some specific steps you have taken to successfully maintain/grow your Reading Recovery/Literacy Lessons/Descubriendo la Lectura implementation?

Implementation Vignettes

Summary vignettes of five teacher leader interviews are highlighted throughout the remainder of this article. Each vignette is reported anonymously, removing all references to specific sites, schools, administrators, university training centers, teacher leaders, and teachers. For clarity, within the vignettes the word "site" is used to encompass schools, districts, and sites.

Each vignette tells a promising story of implementation strength, even during the most challenging times in education. It will be important to consider common patterns discovered across the vignettes.

While reading the vignettes, consider these important questions:

- What are you noticing?
- What patterns of promise exist?
- What matters most for implementation during times of extreme challenge?

Site A

Site A reports legislation in their state has been highly publicized and influenced by the media. Currently, Site A is facing a state initiative to create a list of acceptable interventions based on SOR legislation. Site A has an especially supportive site coordinator who is regarded as the sole reason Reading Recovery is still thriving. This site coordinator is open in her beliefs and understandings of best practice literacy instruction and has witnessed the power of Reading Recovery. Currently, Site A is operating in "maintenance mode" where they are working hard to maintain all the teachers they have serving Reading Recovery students.

There has been a clear message for many years that the data and results must be strong for Reading Recovery to survive. Site A continuously shows strong data results, with 76% of students exiting the intervention in the accelerated category. Reading Recovery teachers meet in teams monthly to discuss their students outside of professional development time. In Site A, Reading Recovery teachers (who serve as interventionists for the second half of their day) are seen as literacy leaders within their school and site and as part of the larger team. The teachers work to focus on what is within their control: attitude, leadership, and student growth.

Additionally, Reading Recovery teachers in Site A collaborate with classroom teachers to support implementation and bridge the intervention. They commit to being good listeners and having open dialogue. A Reading Recovery representative attends every board meeting in Site A. Here they serve as listeners and remain a constant presence within the site.

Site B

Site B is a state where bills have been newly introduced into the legislature. Although this state has a small group of very loud voices supporting the legislation and influencing school board members, the site specifically has yet to be affected due to the strong leadership existing there. Even still, district leaders remain very supportive of Reading Recovery. Leadership, along with the teacher leader of Site B, meet with new principals at the beginning of the year to discuss the power of Reading Recovery. Even some members of district leadership are Reading Recovery trained. Teachers feel empowered in

Site B, largely because the Reading Recovery teachers are embedded within their buildings, and all have a leadership role.

Reading Recovery teachers within Site B continuously work to expand their learning. Site B relies heavily on IDEC data as a resource for following building-level data. Grade-level band data are used to share growth. Leadership recognizes that accelerated learning is achieved due to the intensity of the individualized instruction despite the minimal hours of intervention students receive in Reading Recovery, i.e., 20 weeks of instruction is essentially 50 hours of instruction. Toward the end of the first round, teachers meet in small groups with the teacher leader to collaboratively problem solve around those students finding learning difficult. Site B also recognizes the ongoing importance of building relationships at all levels to maintain and expand advocacy. In addition, Site B reports feeling uplifted and empowered by their leadership, including the support they receive from their university trainers.

Site C

Site C is an independent site serving students and teachers in that specific school district. Although no current legislation affects Site C at the time of these interviews, the teacher leader reports some very vocal groups are beginning to question the site's current instructional practices. This line of questioning is strongly related to the media version of SOR. Site C is a longstanding site where Reading Recovery has been a part of the landscape for over 30 years. When a new superintendent was hired within the last decade, this person did an excellent job listening and asking questions to better understand the intervention. Because of this, the positive impact Reading Recovery teachers can have has been recognized and principal support remains strong. This superintendent has helped to identify values within the district such as deep learning and teacher expertise.

Site C has expanded the role of the Reading Recovery teacher. All Reading Recovery teachers work with four students daily. The other portion of their day varies depending on current and ever-changing needs within the site, including coaching and small-group interventions. This site has also spent a considerable amount of time analyzing their data to better understand what supports for students were needed. In response, literacy specialists (Reading Recovery teachers) were added as needed. Site C's board of education studied Reading Recovery data to confirm the effectiveness within the site. Reading Recovery became "more than an intervention" and is now considered part of the fabric of the site. Additionally reported, this site believes strongly in the power of investing in teachers.

In Site C, the role of the teacher leader is fiercely protected. The teacher leader is able to teach two students daily while reserving the remainder of each day for coaching and ongoing work with teachers. The teacher leader has an active voice in district literacy conversations with administrators. Site C also actively trains Literacy Lessons teachers as well as classroom teachers. The variety of staff members knowledgeable of literacy processing theory has helped to reduce silos and ensure collaboration between teachers. Further, many formerly trained Reading Recovery teachers have taken administrative roles within the district, ensuring that understanding and support exist within leadership positions.

Site D

Site D consists of a large consortium of school districts in the state. This site has been impacted by current legislation. They report having lost several schools already, however, not to the extent of most sites nearby. The schools who have done away with Reading Recovery have done so out of fear of legislation mandates and threats of lost funding, not due to unhappiness with the progress of their students. This longstanding site serves teachers and schools within a vast geographical range. Teachers come together, despite the distance, and engage in ongoing professional development that is uniquely tailored to their current needs and students.

The schools that they are maintaining have a strong connection to Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons, which supports their decision to remain true to interventions that they know positively impact children. This ensures the interventions exist beyond simply being part of the schools. In many cases, the schools within the site have personal connections to the work of Reading Recovery as administrators, board members, and others have children and grandchildren who have received the intervention. These important stakeholders have a first-hand understanding of the power of Reading Recovery.

Two influential people supporting this site are the site coordinator and the teacher education chair at the university. Both recognize the power of different paths to common outcomes. Teachers within this site feel empowered as they do have a 'seat at the table' when it comes to important literacy discussions and decision making. Teachers communicate frequently with administrators about student progress. Reading Recovery teachers are considered their own strongest advocates and remain true to an open-door policy while working to engage with professionals at all levels. They fully understand their rationale and theory behind the work they do and can vocalize this with ease.

Uniquely, this site continues to train teachers annually, not missing a year since the inception of the site over 25 years ago. There is a large and overarching focus on Predictions of Progress within the site, initiated by the teacher leaders and carried over by the teachers. Articulating these common goals with teachers and administrators with shared efforts to support students has helped to continue this site as one that is thriving despite challenges. Teachers within this site engage in colleague visits each year to strengthen their networking and support with each other while problem solving their students together.

Moreover, behind-the-glass opportunities are well utilized as a way to bring awareness to the work being done in Reading Recovery. Administrators, board members, fellow teachers, and beyond are always invited to behind-the-glass opportunities, and each time those invitations are accepted by someone outside of Reading Recovery. This adds an impactful layer to the discussions at the glass, and teacher leaders of Site D feel this strongly supports the intervention to continue to grow. Finally, the teacher leaders in Site D communicate in a regular and ongoing manner with their teachers and work to keep them informed on all new happenings. Teachers are empowered to be proactive rather than reactive through the support of understanding what is happening around them at all times.

Site E

Outside of the United States, Site E remembers the legislative push beginning back in 2019, being largely driven by speech and language pathologists soliciting schools with SOR presentations that insinuated teachers were teaching literacy incorrectly. Proponents of SOR were largely described as taking an attacking approach, often attempting to bully or shame those not in agreement. Reading Recovery was specifically targeted within these attacks. Thankfully, teacher leaders in Site E recognize the strength of their teacher's union as they continue to work diligently to protect teacher autonomy.

Site E has a strong curriculum aligned with their literacy framework. In addition, a well-informed literacy team includes the Reading Recovery teacher leaders within the site. Reading Recovery teacher leaders remain part of a four-member literacy team under the supervision of two district principals who work together supporting learning services in elementary and secondary schools. A director of instruction serves between the district principals and the superintendent. The ongoing and collaborative conversations between all parties remains critical for implementation within Site E. Seemingly most important, the collaboration between teacher leaders and principals has ensured principals are advocates of the intervention.

Site E recognizes the importance of being part of the conversations surrounding SOR ideas and approaches. Reading Recovery professionals and advocates in Site E are skilled at listening and asking questions about what proponents are NOT saying, how the message does or does not align with the current curriculum and Indigenous ways of learning as well as English language learning. Site E tends to engage in professional development opportunities from those authorities with more comprehensive approaches to literacy development. Teacher leaders support teachers with selection of curriculum materials and work to identify both strengths and limitations of the resources, keeping the focus on the big ideas.

Keeping emotions out of discussions remains a priority for Site E. Discussions with the director of instruction exist to clarify and support the principal's understanding. Ultimately, the misguided SOR discussions remain held under scrutiny against the current literacy framework as the site works to determine how SOR ideas may fit without overtaking the entire focus. Reading Recovery professionals continue to remain firm in the face of bullying behavior and false accusations, heavily relying on the integrity of long and varied educational experiences and evidence of student success.

Looking Within for Patterns of Promise

As you may have discovered, each vignette tells a promising story of implementation strength, even during the most challenging times in education. It will be important to consider common patterns discovered across the vignettes. Ultimately, sites must consider the following questions:

- What are the strengths of our current implementation?
- How does our site's current implementation compare to those highlighted within the vignettes?
- What is needed to ensure a thriving implementation within our site?

May et al. (2016) defined schemas of integration (see Figures 1–4) revealed through the study of the 4-year i3 scale-up in Reading Recovery (pp. 117–146). What are the similarities and differences that exist between the schemas identified in 2016 and the implementation scenarios described throughout the six vignettes in this article? More importantly, how may these similarities and differences support your site to strengthen implementation?

Discussions with building administrators, site coordinators, school and district leadership such as curriculum directors, superintendents, and beyond may center around problem solving implementation barriers and ways to ensure the necessary "patterns of promise" exist within your own sites. These discussions may lead to stronger understandings of what is necessary for Reading Recovery sites to not only survive, but thrive, even when faced with the most challenging legislation. As the old adage goes, "It gets worse before it gets

Figure 1. Schema of Implementation: Isolation

LOW UNDERSTANDING/LOW COMMITMENT

"Reading Recovery is its own island."

- Little or no shared understanding of Reading Recovery
- Little or no problem-solving to ensure program fidelity
- Principal not engaged in Reading Recovery implementation
- No emphasis on school-wide impact of Reading Recovery
- Reading Recovery instructional time not well protected
- Little Reading Recovery teacher/classroom teacher communication
- Reading Recovery teacher not positioned as literacy leader or resource in the building
- Classroom instruction generally not supportive of Reading Recovery

Figure 2. Schema of Implementation: Obstruction

VARIABLE UNDERSTANDING/VARIABLE COMMITMENT

"Reading Recovery does not fit our needs."

- Variable understanding of Reading Recovery
- Variable commitment to program fidelity
- Limited principal engagement with Reading Recovery
- No emphasis on school-wide impact of Reading Recovery
- Reading Recovery instructional time not generally protected
- Variable Reading Recovery teacher/classroom teacher communication
- Reading Recovery teacher not positioned as literacy leader or resource in the building
- Classroom instruction variably supportive of Reading Recovery
- Classroom instruction generally not supportive of Reading Recovery

Figure 3. Schema of Implementation: Endorsement

VARIABLE UNDERSTANDING/HIGH COMMITMENT

"We don't necessarily know what goes on in Reading Recovery, but we are glad to have it."

- Variable understanding of Reading Recovery
- Active school-wide problem-solving to ensure program fidelity
- Principal passively engaged with Reading Recovery
- Little emphasis on school-wide impact of Reading Recovery
- Reading Recovery instructional time protected
- Frequent Reading Recovery teacher/classroom teacher communication
- Reading Recovery teacher positioned as literacy leader or resource in the building
- Classroom instruction variably supportive of Reading Recovery

Figure 4. Schema of Implementation: Integration

HIGH UNDERSTANDING/HIGH COMMITMENT

"Reading Recovery is part of the way we do things here."

- School-wide shared understanding of Reading Recovery
- School-wide active problem-solving to ensure program fidelity
- Principal actively engaged with Reading Recovery
- Highly emphasize school-wide impact of Reading Recovery
- Reading Recovery instructional time protected
- Frequent Reading Recovery teacher/classroom teacher communication
- Reading Recovery teacher positioned as literacy leader or resource in the building
- Classroom instruction generally supportive of Reading Recovery

better." This may very well be the case for any form of instruction falling outside of the media version's label of SOR. Ultimately, when the focus remains, without falter, on the best interests of children, eventually positive outcomes will prevail.

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About the Cover

Meet future chef Brady! Brady's personality and confidence light up every room he enters. After writing his own book, *Chef Brady*, he was invited to his district's student-led Academy Grill as a guest chef for the day. His new classmates signed his masterpiece after a day of cooking everything from omelets to hamburgers. He enjoys his Reading Recovery lessons because they are fun, and he gets to practice reading. When he grows up, he wants to be a cook. We can't wait to see what you do next, Brady!