Reflections from a Two-Decade Association with Reading Recovery

Anthony S. Bryk, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

I first encountered Reading Recovery some 20 years ago. Gay Pinnell called me up one day, introduced herself, and asked if I would come to Columbus to meet at the Reading Center at The Ohio State University. She asked if I'd be willing to offer technical advice on the design and analysis of a study of the efficacy of Reading Recovery in comparison to prevailing remedial education practices, including both small group and individual tutoring options. After spending a day in Columbus being introduced to the program, I agreed. In the course of conducting this first independent randomized field trial for Reading Recovery, it's safe to say that I may have learned more than anyone else.

Here it's important to note that the opportunity to work with Gay and her colleagues came just as I was beginning my work on school reform in the city of Chicago. This early work took me into many primary classrooms, where I saw scores of young children who were obviously bright and eager to learn, and yet also at risk for not learning to read. What I was learning about Reading Recovery, both through my encounters with program staff at Ohio State and the efficacy results from our analyses, helped me think about the needs of these youngsters. The more I focused on them, the more I became convinced that Reading Recovery was indeed a special program — even if I could not easily characterize its distinctive qualities at the time.

Looking back now, I see a program whose organizational design was way ahead of its time. Much of what many now view as core principles for advancing more-ambitious instruction at scale existed two decades ago in the Reading Recovery initiative as it built on and extended the extraordinary developments 'down under' by Marie Clay and her colleagues.

At base here were three big ideas:

- A complex but also extensively detailed and supported instructional system;
- Grounded in a clinically based, professional education program that is explicitly designed to help large numbers of ordinary teachers become effective Reading Recovery instructors; and
- Organized as a professional learning association that seeks continuous improvement by routinely collecting and analyzing data on student learning.

Let me expand a bit on each of these core ideas as I first saw them in Reading Recovery and as I reflect on them now in the context of current needs to improve teaching and learning more broadly in our nation's schools.

A Complex, Detailed, and Supported Instructional System

First, Reading Recovery posits teaching is intellectual work. The dynamism of instruction requires an interplay of understanding around students' background knowledge, skills, and interests; the immediate goals for instruction; the command of a set of pedagogical tools and resources; and a learned capacity to be continuously responsive and adjust on the fly. This is ambitious teaching that defies simple scripting. The practice is appropriately characterized as an organized complexity.

Reading Recovery also recognized early on that achieving such ambitious teaching reliably at scale represents a major organizational design challenge. As a partial response, they developed a detailed and integrated instructional system for guiding ambitious teaching. While decision making in the moment of instruction would always remain context-bound to some degree, Reading Recovery leaders posited that this cognitive activity could and should be situated within detailed and specific pedagogic practices and social routines. Learning to practice as a Reading Recovery teacher meant developing automaticity in the use of these instructional protocols. In addition, there was a notion that teachers' thinking about instruction should be framed within a common language that detailed immediate goals for student learning and how these

cumulate over time within a larger working theory about how students learn to read and write. Further undergirding teachers' decision making was instrumentation for assessing student learning. The regular collection of running records and the Observation Survey data provides a common evidence base to inform both individual teachers' day-to-day instruction as well as collective efforts at continuous improvement of the instructional system over time.

Grounded in a Clinically Based, Professional Education Program

Even with all of these advances, achieving efficacious teaching at scale remained problematic. How could the tutorial be made to work reliably in the hands of many different teachers over many diverse contexts and circumstances? This concern about reliability in performance led Reading Recovery leaders to a second major consideration: how to prepare Reading Recovery professionals so that ordinary teachers could become effective instructional decision makers. This meant developing a second set of processes and routines (closely linked to the Reading Recovery instructional system) for preparing and socializing each new member into the community and for organizing social learning among its practitioners.

As you know, entry into the Reading Recovery professional community begins with an intensive, yearlong, practice-based training program. Novices are introduced immediately to a systematic reading tutorial built around a common set of pedagogical practices and materials that are conceptually integrated around a working theory of how students learn to read. The practices and theory are revised over time, informed by evidence from Reading Recovery activity as well as emerging findings from more-basic research.

Beginning in Week 1, a key activity for a Reading Recovery teacher-in-training is the behind-the-glass session. Within a community of mentors they observe a lesson in progress, engage in a debrief with the teacher about her instruction, and prepare to teach on the other side of the glass as well. In this context, Reading Recovery teachers are introduced to two critical norms that define community membership: The first is that individual practice is public to one's colleagues. The second is that critical dialogue with colleagues about the specifics of practice is how we learn to improve.

The teacher educators leading this professional education program have previously demonstrated their skill in the classroom as Reading Recovery teachers and receive additional professional education of their own to take on their new role as adult educators. Reading Recovery teacher leaders continue a tutorial practice with students even as they assume responsibility for the professional education of novice Reading Recovery teachers. This is a model for teacher learning that is much more detailed, thought out, and strategically delivered than commonly found in most preservice education programs today.

Behind-the-glass instruction like this session at Anderson School District Five in South Carolina introduces Reading Recovery teachers to two critical norms that define community membership: The first is that individual practice is public to one's colleagues. The second is that critical dialogue with colleagues about the specifics of practice is how we learn to improve.

Organized as an Evidence-Based, Professional Learning Association

A third big idea that guided the development of Reading Recovery was the understanding that you cannot improve practice at scale unless you measure both its core processes and outcomes. Undergirding this empirical system was a working theory about how various instructional processes, organizing routines, materials, and cultural norms interact to affect the desired student outcomes. The efficacy trial that I designed and carried out for Reading Recovery 20 years ago was one small part of a larger integrated inquiry in the cause-and-effect logic that undergirded the program. In an ongoing fashion, the Reading Recovery network has routinely collected and analyzed data on student progress and the core processes thought to contribute to this learning in order to continuously improve instruction across the professional community. These data create an evidence base that can guide refinements over time in the cause-and-effect logic that disciplines the shared work of Reading Recovery.

This inquiring orientation—learning from direct evidence on practice and integrating these observations with more general findings from basic research—is the essence of a learning organization. It is important to recognize in this regard that Reading Recovery was not a finished product two decades ago, nor is it today. Rather, a key strength of Reading Recovery, in its inception and in its organizational life today, is in its openness to continuous learning and in being prepared to challenge its working theory based on new data. Ongoing empirical evidence about efficacy in action is the only sure assurance that we "know what works." Maintaining student learning in the first position, and constantly scrutinizing what is and is not happening for different children who are being educated under different sets of circumstances and instructional contexts, is the essential check and balance for a professional community.

These are just some of the lessons that I've learned through my extensive collaboration with Reading Recovery. That first trip to the Reading Recovery Center in Columbus catalyzed for me an extraordinary learning journey that has informed, disciplined, and greatly enhanced my subsequent work. I consider myself truly privileged for this ongoing association with your community.

Thank you.

About the Author

Dr. Anthony S. Bryk is the ninth president of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. He held the Spencer Chair in Organizational Studies in the School of Education and the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University from 2004 until assuming Carnegie's presidency in September 2008. His current research and practice interests focus on the organizational redesign of schools and school systems and the integration of technology into schooling to enhance teaching and learning.

The recipient of numerous awards, Dr. Bryk's books include *Hierarchical Linear Models* (with Stephen Raudenbush), *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (with Valerie Lee and Peter Holland), *Chartering Chicago School Reform: Democratic Localism as a Lever for Change* (with Penny Bender Sebring et al.), and *Trust in Schools* (with Barbara Schneider).