Education in Rural Canada

L’éducation dans les régions rurales du Canada
Robert O'Reilly, in a 1999 article in *Education Canada,* challenged Canadians to "examine closely" a model to enhance literacy development in young learners developed by Dr. Peter Hill, University of Melbourne. He was unaware that at the time an initiative was already in place in the Calgary Board of Education to replicate the Australian model. Since 1998, Alberta Learning (the Alberta Ministry of Education) has provided yearly funding for the Whole School Approach to Early Literacy, Kindergarten to Grade 2, in 56 high-needs schools, involving approximately 6000 regular class students and 550 students requiring special intervention. The Calgary project, like the Australian project, was titled the Early Literacy Research Project (ELRP) and included three components: prevention of reading difficulties, intervention, and research. The Whole School Approach is also being replicated in high-needs schools in Boston, New York, Elgin (Illinois), and most recently in Toronto.

The Whole School Approach is a comprehensive literacy initiative that focuses first on good teaching in the regular classroom (K-2 in Calgary) - with effective early intervention for those students who experience difficulty in literacy acquisition despite best teaching practice in the regular classroom; and second on research - not only in the interests of fiscal accountability, but also as a way to study the effect of comprehensive literacy initiatives. In Australia, substantial improvements by students in meeting and exceeding early literacy standards has resulted in a mushrooming of the Whole School Approach from 27 schools in 1995 to an "early years initiative" of 1365 schools in 2001, involving 223, 536 students and 18,783 teachers and administrators. More than 1100 of those schools implemented Reading Recovery™ as the intervention component for 9000 students who needed one-on-one intervention.

The research component of the Calgary program, involving both independent university researchers and a private consultant, has focused not only on the level of achievement for all students in the project, but also on the effect of a variety of factors - relating to students, teachers, site literacy coordinators, principals, school environment and parents - on student achievement. This article will briefly describe the philosophy and principles underpinning the Whole School Approach, outline the literacy program in this Canadian context, present three-year findings in literacy achievement for both regular class and intervention students, and comment on the success of the Whole School Approach to Literacy Development in the Calgary Board of Education.
Philosophy and Principles

The Whole School Approach is a way to change the culture of each school so that teachers, administrators, parents, specialists, and students are all working in synergy to meet high expectations for student achievement.

What elements contribute to improved learning in the Whole School Approach to Early Literacy Development? Hill and Crévolà (1998b) write that a commitment to high expectations needs to be reflected in very explicit standards. In addition, to the extent that there are in each school “assessment literate teachers” and assessment becomes part of instruction and part of the teaching culture, teaching for all students should be directed at meeting their specific learning needs. Other elements contributing to the success of the Whole School Approach include: the organization of each classroom and each school for maximum engagement in learning, with an uninterrupted block of time for teaching/learning the language arts; on-going and system wide professional learning opportunities for teachers and principals, and insured that regular meetings and additional professional development occurred at the school level.

The 56 schools that “came on board” applied to participate in the ELRP, indicating the intervention program of their choice: Reading Recovery (RR); a modified program called Early Reading Intervention (ERI), or a site-based program proposed by individual schools. Each school signed a letter of commitment to abide by the basic principles in the program. Twenty-four schools chose RR, 30 chose ERI and 2 schools each proposed a site-based program. In accordance with the Whole School Approach, each school committed to meeting the following requirements:

- Allocating a minimum of 2 hours uninterrupted time per day to language arts in individual and small group settings;

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For children identified as needing assistance beyond that provided in the regular classroom, RR trained teachers provided one-on-one literacy intervention or, in the case of ERI, a modified type of intervention program, generally in small groups. Thus, in all 56 high-needs schools, one-on-one or small group instruction, improvement in classroom instruction, teacher professional development, and school improvement were systematically linked.

The Results
The results have been most encouraging. As part of the ELRP, Grade 1 and 2 students were administered the Canadian Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) (2000) word attack, passage comprehension and story reading at the end of Grade 1, passage comprehension and story reading at the end of Grade 2) and a standardized group test, as well as an individually administered informal reading inventory, the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). Since the results on the DRA correlated highly with the CTBS results (r = .82 in 1999-2000, r = .81 in 2000-2001, and r = .77 in 2001-2002), DRA results are not reported here.

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Regular class students
The CTBS results of regular classroom students are presented here in terms of the students' ability to achieve acceptable grade level standards in reading according to CTBS norms.

For regular classroom Grade 1 students, year-end CTBS results continued to show consistent improvement in each year of the three years of ELRP. In 1999-2000, 88.8% of the Grade 1 students were reading at or beyond grade level at year end. At the end of 2000-2001, 89.6% of the regular Grade 1 students were reading at or beyond grade level, with 17.7% reading at or above the Grade 2 level. In 2001-2002, 92.4% of the Grade 1 students were reading at grade level or beyond, with 16.3% already reading at or above the Grade 2 level at year end. These results show a consistent pattern of growth in reading achievement on the CTBS every year the program was in place for Grade 1 students.

While the Grade 2 results for all regular classroom students on the year end CTBS are not nearly as dramatic as the Grade 1 results, they show that 80.0% of Grade 2 students were reading at a Grade 2 level or beyond at the end of 1999-2000 (with 12.0% of these students reading at the Grade 3 level), 81.7% at the end of 2000-2001, and 82.7% at the end of 2001-2002 (with 14.4% of these students reading at or above the Grade 3 level in June, 2001-2002). Furthermore Alberta Learning noted with interest the improvement in all students' literacy achievement in the 56 high-risk schools on the 2001 Grade 3 Provincial English Language Arts Achievement Test, a test that is administered yearly in June.

Intervention Students
The results of the intervention students are presented in terms of the students' ability to meet Alberta Learning grade level standards by the end of the school year.
Grade 1 students receiving RR met the acceptable standard of achievement in reading, and 12.9% were approaching it (for a total of 82.8%). With respect to students receiving ERI, 37.6% of Grade 1 students met the acceptable standard, and 32.1% approached it, for a total percentage of 69.7%. In Grade 2, 41.0% of the students receiving ERI (there is no RR for Grade 2) met the acceptable standard, with 36.3% approaching it (for a total of 77.5%).

In the second year of the project (2000-2001), children in all intervention programs continued to make measurable gains on the CTBS. In 2000-2001, 67.7% of Grade 1 RR students and 43.6% of the ERI students achieved at an acceptable grade level standard and beyond. Fifty-five percent (55.2%) of the Grade 2 intervention students receiving ERI also achieved acceptable Alberta Learning grade level standards in reading in that school term.

In 2001-2002, the final year of the project, a similar pattern of gains by each type of intervention by grade was evident: 60.7% of Grade 1 students receiving RR and 54.5% receiving ERI achieved Alberta Learning grade levels in reading by the end of that school year. Further, 43.4% of Grade 2 students attained Grade 2 level standards according to Alberta Learning’s criteria.

We consider it significant that, in 2001-2002, students receiving ERI were approaching achievement levels similar to those receiving RR intervention. This effect may be due to the fact that several former RR teachers were now providing ERI instruction to students, and two new RR teacher leaders were training the RR teachers. This combination of circumstances may have increased the results in one group of students while depressing them in another.

**Final Comments**

Qualitative data from students, teachers, parents, site literacy coordinators and principals overwhelmingly support the quantitative findings reported.

"Students have been exposed to rich intentional teaching, and there has been a cultural shift in our school."  — Principal

"My child was unable to read at the beginning of Grade 1 and is now reading above grade level and more fluently than my child in Grade 3.”  — Parent of Regular Class Student

"I understand the importance of intentional teaching and differentiating instruction to meet individual student needs in my small groups during literacy time. I know how to use a strategic approach to strengthen the children’s use of reading and writing strategies they already know.”  — Reading Recovery teacher

"I am so thankful that our son was able to access such high quality one-on-one instruction so early on – before the gap in his learning was noticeable to him and before it became an insurmountable hurdle. I remember him coming home and talking about helping others with reading. He saw himself as a reader and I know we have reached a milestone in his journey to literacy.”  — Parent of Student Receiving RR Intervention

"I can read and spell words better: I can read charts and write stories better: I can read longer, chapter books."  — Grade 1 Students

"The ELRP has made an incredible difference in all areas (reading abilities, academics, behavior, parent knowledge, and motivation), and it can only get better.”  — Site Literacy Coordinator

"This program has proven invaluable to our school. We are beginning to see the results of our work in students’ communication skills and provincial exam results. The extra teacher is crucial to the successful operation of the Whole School Approach. The resources provided are essential and we see an on-going need for more.”  — Site Literacy Coordinator

"The opportunity for in-service has extended my understanding, knowledge and skills. Because of what I have learned, I have a better understanding of teaching and learning. I am more focused and purposeful in the kind of conversations that I have with children.”  — Gr.1/2 Teacher

In 1999, at the conclusion of his discussion to the Whole School Approach to literacy development in Australia, Bob O’Reilly (1999) wrote, “It is a model that Canadians should examine closely.” Based on our data from this three-year study, which shows remarkable success in student literacy achievement, an overwhelming change in school culture, and noticeable growth in teacher professional development, we can rephrase his words to say, “It is a model that Canadians should consider seriously.”

5. Crevalo and Hill.

Christine J. Gordon, Ph.D., is Professor and former Associate Dean (Research and Resources) in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary. Her specialization is literacy education. While on sabbatical leave in fall, 2002, she visited several Australian universities, met with personnel from the government in Victoria, Australia, and visited Australian elementary and secondary schools involved in a number of successful literacy initiatives.

Tyrone Donnon has been associated with the University of Calgary as an academic instructor and a collaborative researcher for the last 5 years. As President of Resiliency Canada and in his work as an independent research consultant, Dr. Donnon has focused his primary research interests in the field of education and psychometric assessment.