

The Journey to Implementation: Reading Recovery for Manitoba First Nations Students

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In the autumn of 2014, the first Reading Recovery Training Centre in a First Nations community in Canada opened. Staffed by a First Nations teacher leader, the centre currently provides support to Grade 1 students in Manitoba's First Nations Schools as well as professional development to teachers from Peguis and other nearby Manitoba communities. The journey to launch this new implementation is a story of importance for Canada's indigenous children, teachers, and families, and the story is told here.

Planning the implementation of Reading Recovery® is a complex undertaking. Educators and administrators often consider how to fund the work of teachers who work with individual students in Reading Recovery lessons. Very quickly in the planning process it becomes clear that there are multiple perspectives to consider related to implementing an innovation within a school system and that some adjustments will be necessary in order to assure quality.

One of the primary considerations in implementation is the training of trainers and teacher leaders. These

professionals are key to the implementation as they provide quality control in the school and school system. Trainers train the Reading Recovery teacher leaders who train and support the Reading Recovery teachers who work with students. Teachers become problem solvers. They plan a series of lessons to support each student to construct effective literacy processing systems so that he is able to grow each time he reads and writes, while also benefitting from classroom experiences.

In Manitoba, Canada, trainers support the 28 public school divisions



The training centre logo is derived from First Nations symbolism. The circle of life is surrounded by the protecting wings of the eagle and represents the role and responsibility of parents, extended family, community, elders, staff, and teachers in the process of education.

implementing Reading Recovery, helping each implementation to manage staffing, scheduling, professional development requirements, required materials, data collection, and analysis. The trainers also provide guidance to school division leaders and teacher leaders by monitoring the effectiveness of the implementation of Reading Recovery through data reporting and planning to improve results for students. Some independent First Nations schools have established formal affiliations with local public school divisions and are included in student support initiatives. Other First Nations schools have been able to access Reading Recovery and implement the intervention through an informal arrangement with a nearby public school training centre at no cost to the community.

Canadian First Nations' Education

First Nations treaties in Canada are constitutionally recognized agreements between the government of Canada and the First Nations people. In Manitoba, most communities are part of one of seven treaties, while five communities have not signed any treaty. These treaties describe exchanges where First Nations groups agree to share some of their interests in their ancestral lands in return for services from the federal government. In Manitoba there are five language groups: Cree, Dene, Oji-Cree, Ojibway, and Dakota. Peguis is the largest First Nation community in Manitoba with a population of approximately 10,000 people of Ojibway and Cree descent, and it is a part of Treaty Number One. It is important to recognize that within each of the treaty areas, the communities are indepen-

dent and the education administrative structure varies from place to place.

There are more than 110,000 registered First Nations people in Manitoba, or about 17% of the province's total population. About 60% of First Nations people live in First Nations communities. Approximately 14,500 First Nations students attend Grade 1 in their home communities, and if we were able to provide Reading Recovery to 20% of these children, we would provide service to 2,700 students. Another 18,400 attend public schools in Manitoba either through agreements with the communities or because the family has moved into urban or another nontreaty location.

Manitoba's First Nations population is very young. This is evident when compared to the non-indigenous population of Manitoba. According to the Statistics Canada 2011 census for Manitoba, 56% of the First Nations population is age 25 or younger, compared to 30% of the non-indigenous population in that age group. If we look specifically at the age 6 population, projections show the number of 6-year-old First Nations children will increase every year by 5.7%, while the same age group within the non-indigenous population will increase by approximately 2% per year. This profile suggests that Reading Recovery could be an important addition to the intervention needs of the First Nations population.

Unquamisin

An Ojibway word that means to be focused, determined, with a goal; a vision

There are many First Nations schools in Manitoba that do not access public school support but do access support services through an organi-

zation called the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre (MFNERC). Established in 1998 by the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, MFNERC provides consultant services to First Nations schools in the areas of education, administration, technology, language, and culture. The funding for MFNERC services is provided by the government of Canada through the Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs established MFNERC through a resolution to provide coordinated education services to 58 Manitoba First Nations schools from 49 out of 63 Manitoba First Nations communities. Many (23) of these communities are located in remote areas of the province with no all-season roads and are accessed only by plane or winter ice-roads. A provincial organization such as MFNERC that provides professional services for educators in independent First Nations schools is unique to Manitoba.

At an MFNERC school administrators' meeting in May 2013, a principal from one of the First Nations schools inquired about the possibility of having a First Nations teacher trained as a Reading Recovery teacher leader and having a training centre established. The school wanted to implement Reading Recovery and requested support from MFNERC and from Service Delivery Unit Director Rab Subedar. As a result of this request, Gloria Sinclair, an MFNERC literacy facilitator, was selected and participated in teacher leader training in 2013–2014 at the Canadian Institute of Reading Recovery (CIRR) Western Region in Winnipeg, Manitoba. During Sinclair's training year, Peguis Central School was identified through a consulta-

tive process with administrators of multiple possible facilities as the location for construction of the Reading Recovery Training Centre. Criteria for identification of the best location included the needs within the region, road accessibility, and the distance from Grade 1 classrooms.

The shared vision was to support First Nation children in their home communities by the teachers in those communities where the teacher leader and the training centre would be operating with First Nation leadership. The MFNERC Board of Directors, executive director, associate executive director, director of programs, Peguis education director, and Peguis Central School principal worked collaboratively with trainers from the CIRR Western Region to begin the first steps on the path towards the goal of Reading Recovery service for students. While professional services from MFNERC had

always included support in literacy, math, school planning, and language, Reading Recovery would be included beginning in 2014.

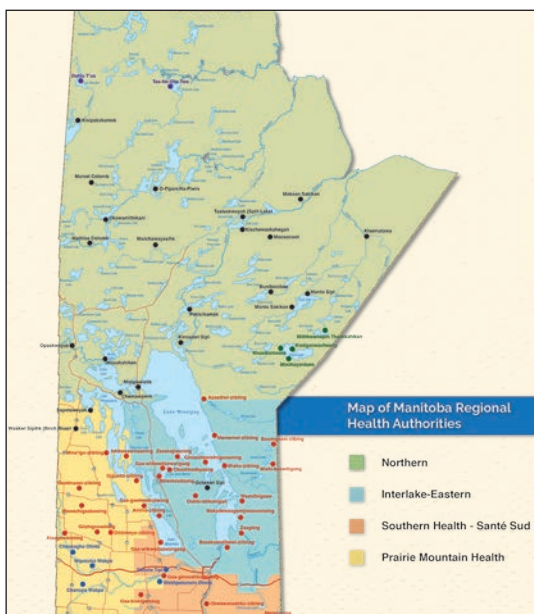
Several schools within a 3-hour drive of Peguis Central School sponsored teachers for Reading Recovery training during the 2014–2015 school year. Prior to this time, achieving the necessary instruction for the students was not always easy or convenient

Achieving this goal took partnership, collaboration, time, commitment, and determination. The local Early Years Vice Principal Sharon Bear was an integral part of a committed team of education professionals who never gave up hope that the centre would become a reality, despite the challenges of building a facility in a rural community. She was the individual who worked to build the bridge between vision and reality. A former Reading Recovery teacher,

she organized and guided efforts to find space, hire a construction team, and source furniture and equipment. At the same time, she assigned four teaching staff within her own school to train in Reading Recovery to ensure Peguis students would be able to access literacy support.

Teachers-in-training visited the Reading Recovery centre every 2 weeks for the in-service course. In the case of Peguis, there were nine teachers from communities including Fisher River, Jackhead, and Riverton enrolled in the first year of operation.

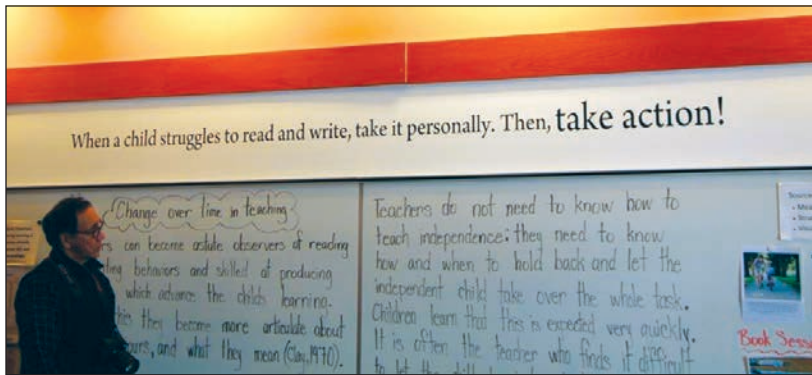
At the centre's grand opening, many community members joined chiefs from Peguis and other communities in Treaty One territory, education leaders from Peguis, and leaders from Manitoba Education and Training of the Province of Manitoba, including Deputy Minister Gerald Farthing.



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Formal portions of the program included a blessing from the elders, a meal of thanks, messages from the leaders, and a ribbon-cutting ceremony led by two Reading Recovery students.



Local elders, teachers, and Reading Recovery students came together for a day of thanks and celebration. The sound of Mother Earth’s heartbeat through traditional drumming opened and closed the event, connecting all guests, staff, and students. Formal portions of the program included a blessing from the elders, a meal of thanks, messages from the First Nations and education leaders, and a ribbon-cutting ceremony led by two Reading Recovery students.

Amid such auspicious formalities, one event stood out for everyone. Guests were given the opportunity to observe a live Reading Recovery lesson with one of the students. Observers were told that the student they were about to see, Ray, knew seven letters prior to his enrollment in the one-to-one intervention and could write his full name, although he could not yet tell which word was his first name or which was his last. He was falling behind and was often in the principal’s office for behavior concerns.

To see Ray in action on that day was described as nothing short of extraordinary. After only 12 lessons this remarkable Grade 1 student read little books, wrote in full sentences with the correct sequence of words to recreate his message, and answered questions about what he was doing — all with confidence and all while staying focused and engaged. The local newspaper exclaimed it “truly was amazing to see.” Following the lesson, the teacher leader was very quick to transfer any praise she received onto the student. “It’s all him!” Glo-

Local elders, teachers, students and their parents came together for a day of thanks and celebration. The sound of Mother Earth’s heartbeat through traditional drumming opened and closed the event. And visitors were given the opportunity to view a behind-the-glass lesson with one of the Reading Recovery students; described by the local newspaper as “truly amazing.”

ria said. “I just encourage and guide him. He does all the work.” And just like that, a student who may have fallen through the cracks now has a chance to reach his full potential.

Gradual Expansion

As time has passed, the number of teachers accessing the centre has increased and there are currently both training and continuing teachers delivering lessons and participating in professional development in Peguis. Outcomes for students, enthusiasm from teachers, and interest in Reading Recovery by other communities have resulted in the training of a second teacher leader, Evannah Braun, who this fall opened a second training centre in the northern community of Thompson, Manitoba.

The question now is, “What is possible?” How many First Nations students can Reading Recovery teaching help to become successful readers and

writers? The answers will become clear in the future.

When leaders asked how Reading Recovery could possibly be connected to First Nations, teacher leader Gloria saw the “fingerprints” of the indigenous people reflected in Reading Recovery practices: The helping circle in Reading Recovery is similar to the traditional circle of life. That circle is always learning and supporting. *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 2013) and *Roaming Around the Known* lessons are similar contextually to traditional ways of knowing that each child is gifted with strengths. But, more importantly, it is the individual child who must be considered when providing lessons.

With persistence, insistence, and additional hands, every effort is being made to provide First Nations students with high-quality instruction in the classroom along with the

extra support provided in Reading Recovery. The support of the broader Reading Recovery community, careful expansion, and support to sensitively monitor the results for students will help identify areas that require more attention in the teaching of children and work with the teachers. These efforts promise to result in greater success for First Nations students; indeed, all students, to achieve self-actualization and “Mino Pimatisiwin” — the good life.

References

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*Photos courtesy of “The Arrow”
MFNERC Newsletter, Spring 2014*

About the Authors



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