

MARY GORDON AND DONNA LETCHFORD

# Program Integrity, Controlled Growth Spell Success for **Roots of Empathy**

**INNOVATION SELDOM IS AN EASY ROAD. MANY CLASSROOM PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN GET STARTED, RUN FOR A FEW YEARS, AND THEN FADE AS QUICKLY AS THEY BEGAN. WHY HAS ROOTS OF EMPATHY BEEN DIFFERENT?**



Roots of Empathy  
Racines de l'empathie

CHILDHOOD IS A UNIVERSAL ASPECT of the human condition. Yet the landscape of childhood is changing rapidly – we witness this daily in our schools. On our playgrounds we see young children carrying cell phones, and in our classrooms we see children who are more sophisticated in their use of computers and digital media than the adults in their lives. Most young adolescents are prolific communicators via text and instant message. They assemble rich and complex interrelationships with peers through social networking.

This changing landscape is what author and innovation theorist Clayton Christensen is alerting us to with his theory of disruptive innovation applied to the field of education. A disruptive innovation is one that improves or supplants a product or service in ways the market does not expect. Applying this idea to education, Christensen suggests that by 2019 half of class time in all schools will involve children doing customized learning on computers.

It is certainly a possibility that children will be taught differently a decade from now in a way that makes greater use of the tools and possibilities that technology offers. Should it be the case that Christensen's theory comes to fruition, we need to remember that children's developmental needs are not going to change. They are still going to require the same level of emotional support they have always required. If children spend half of their classroom time on computers, it is important to look carefully at what happens the other half of the time. In the future, under this possible model, children are going to need social and emotional learning (SEL) – the exact competencies that the Roots of Empathy (ROE) program fosters – more than ever.

We feel that ROE is a disruptive innovation in its own right. Our program is disruptive because it challenges the norm that educating for success means educating the intellect. In today's education system, we have paid scant attention to the role of SEL. We know now that the biggest predictor of later success in life is social and emotional competency. Adults who do not possess these skills are more likely to face mental illness and addiction, incarceration, unemployment or underemployment, and other negative life consequences. ROE addresses the great need for SEL in the classroom – using babies as teachers, another disruptive innovation, certainly – and improves upon the idea of education in a way no one expected.

**EN BREF** Le programme *Racines de l'empathie* a touché des milliers d'écopiers par son approche du développement social et émotionnel, où un bébé est « enseignant ». Bien que le programme soit livré dans des écoles, il ne fait pas partie du curriculum et continue d'être présenté par des instructrices externes attentivement formées par *Racines de l'empathie*. Comment un organisme extérieur devient-il un élément estimé de l'expérience d'apprentissage à l'école? L'équipe de gestion accepte autant de demandes d'exposés que possible, obtenant ainsi de nouveaux partisans, dont certains font activement valoir l'approche. Des responsables (181 maintenant au Canada) font du réseautage avec les intéressés et coordonnent la prestation du programme. Des gestionnaires provinciaux organisent pour les instructrices une formation valorisée par les collectivités et les gens. La certification est souvent ajoutée à leur curriculum vitae. L'intégrité de mise en œuvre du programme est attentivement suivie et évaluée.

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## WHEN DECISIONS ARE MADE TO CUT EVIDENCE-BASED UNIVERSAL PREVENTION PROGRAMS

SUCH AS ROOTS OF EMPATHY, THERE MAY (OR MAY NOT) BE SHORT TERM SAVINGS,

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But if ROE is so different from the status quo in our education system, why has it been so successful? We are often asked how we get established in schools, because schools typically do not welcome external programs during instructional time. Innovation seldom is an easy road. Many classroom programs for children get started, run for a few years, and then fade as quickly as they began. Why has ROE been different? We believe we have beaten the odds for several reasons.

### LIMITING GROWTH TO OUR CAPACITY

Since ROE began in 1996, we have grown from a pilot in six classrooms to a program that has now reached more than 270,000 students in Canada and runs in three other countries as well.

From the beginning, we have grown the program only to the extent our capacity would allow. We regularly turn down requests for ROE because we are not yet able, as an organization, to deal with the demand. We have also turned down international requests for ROE because our organizational value is to meet Canadian needs first (and within that we have a commitment to closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children). By ensuring we always have sufficient human and financial resources to maintain our program integrity, we may lose opportunities in the short term, but we believe our chances of thriving in the long term are much greater – and experience seems to bear this out. And most of the time when we tell someone we cannot yet accommodate their request for the program, they are willing to wait for another year.

It is true, however, that resources are an issue. Seventy percent of our funding is from government – most of the rest come from foundations, although school and parenting associations and communities also make important contributions. With the downturn in the economy and many of our provincial governments going into deficit, the resulting cutbacks are causing us to look for ways to diversify our funding.

There are other challenges that come with government funding too. Because we are delivering programs to children and addressing their social and emotional well being, they should, one would argue, be funded under a health portfolio as well as education. But Health Canada does not have a mandate to fund anything in a classroom. Nevertheless, what takes place in classrooms is nothing short of the development of our nation's human capital. Paying attention to this should be on the agenda of every ministry in every government department.

Prevention is always hard to fund when economies shrink. When decisions are made to cut evidence-based universal prevention programs such as ROE, there may (or may not) be short-term savings, depending on what targeted or clinical programs for children are needed to compensate. But long term, the cost to society is tremendous.

### GROWING ORGANICALLY

ROE also pursues an expansion model that is organic. We do not proselytize or advertise. We go only where we are invited.

The president accepts as many speaking engagements as she can each year, often as a part of teacher-based conferences. We have a strong record of developing in areas where people hear presentations and bring the message to colleagues. Through a community development model, these people become local champions for our mission and cause. When there is no local champion, we do not go into a community. There are enough people who want our program that we can spend our time trying to make it happen for them.

Once a community has decided to work towards establishing a program, a key point person (KPP) is chosen to coordinate delivery. Last year, ROE had 181 KPPs across Canada whose time was generously donated by the organizations they work for because they believe in the program.

Ultimately, we have found our programs are more likely to become well established when people become engaged within communities first.

### THE ISSUE OF ATTRITION

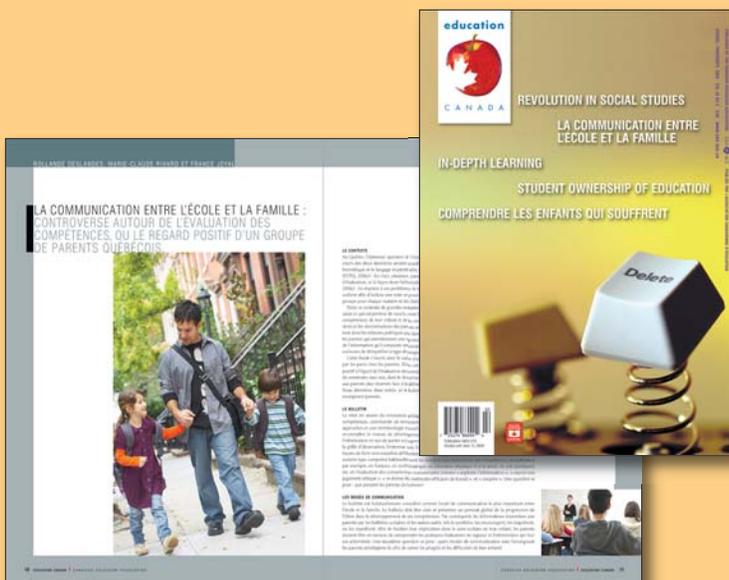
People often ask us about attrition and how it affects our growth. Losing classroom teachers and principals who are supportive of our program is not usually an issue. When they move on to another job, they often want to introduce ROE into their new school anyway. If a teacher who had an ROE class leaves their position, the teacher who takes their place usually offers the program. Educators often talk to one another about things that are having an impact on their children, and so awareness about our work tends to spread by word of mouth. This again is part of our organic growth.

Training new ROE instructors to account for attrition, however, does make our program more expensive. Normally governments fund us to hire a provincial manager who organizes training for our ROE instructors – people who are not the classroom teacher but who deliver the ROE program. Typically our attrition rate for instructors is about

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30 percent, although we have many instructors who have been with us for many years.

The good news is there is a high value placed upon ROE certification. We have communities who ask to pay the costs of training ROE instructors just so they can have as many of their staff trained as possible. Many agencies boast about how many ROE graduates they have working for them. People put our training on their resumes when applying for positions in education, health and related fields. Our training is seen as personally and professionally useful, and it is an important way to build capacity in communities.

## IMPLEMENTATION INTEGRITY

The biggest factor in our success is our implementation integrity. Because the program is evidence-based and has been shown to work, and a program delivered in a PEI classroom is the same as one delivered in Prince Rupert, B.C. (or in Auckland, New Zealand, for that matter), funders, school boards, and other stakeholders usually welcome ROE and consider us the gold standard in quality assurance.

Implementation integrity has many components. The first is curriculum standardization and expertise. Our 638-page curriculum contains a complete lesson plan for 27 different classes, and we have four versions targeted to different age levels. We also have an instructor manual to explain the knowledge base and philosophy of the program and dedicated manuals for mentors and trainers. We have curriculum support for English, French, and Aboriginal programs and multi-grade classrooms, as well as adaptations for children with special needs, children diagnosed with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder or children who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. We provide free curriculum upgrades whenever they become available.

Decades of thinking and personal experience have gone into these materials, along with study in relevant fields (child and infant development, neuroscience, theory of mind, etc.). Peer-reviewed, independently conducted research and our own evaluation process are also important in curriculum and program delivery. We do not sell our copyrighted manuals. Our instructors receive essentially a lease to use them. They sign contractual agreements promising they will not make copies of them or teach our program without a connection to ROE's national office.

Training is another key component. Our standardized delivery model includes high-quality training and mentoring for instructors based on best practices. All instructors must deliver one year of the program successfully before being certified.

At the beginning of their first year, they receive a three-day training session, and they receive a fourth day a few months later. Unlike many adult-learning courses that are laced with competition, ours employ a supportive learning environment. Our experiential training is critical and allows the potential instructor to internalize the sophistication of how we can work with children and guide their observations around the natural interactions of an infant and parent. Training involves extensive role-play; demonstrations with actual babies and parents; information about the program's history and philosophy; information about child and infant development, temperament and milestones; education about neuroscience (through videos developed specifically for ROE by child trauma expert Dr. Bruce Perry); and



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training on communication and interaction skills for different audiences (children in classrooms, volunteer parents, classroom teachers). Typically, training also involves the first in-person contact an instructor will have with their mentor.

While many other programs for children have a training component, they are not generally as involved as ours, nor do they necessarily involve mentoring. Our mentors have regular telephone contact with new instructors. They visit them in the classroom and help them to work on any skills that need strengthening. At the end of the year, mentors must approve new instructors for certification. After that, ROE has a lifelong learning relationship with instructors, and we provide professional development opportunities at every stage. Every instructor has a file with a growth plan and a record of all they have done with the program. Many go on to become mentors, and some may eventually train new instructors. In the 2008-09 school year, we had 1,792 instructors across Canada, supported by 115 mentors and 29 trainers.

### COMING AT THINGS FROM THE OUTSIDE

One final reason we believe our disruptive innovation has turned out so successfully is the very fact that we are not part of the regular school curriculum.

We set up an ROE classroom as an observation session – an opportunity children rarely have in school. This is the same as the effective social learning children experience on the playground. When a class and its teacher sit together and watch a baby, there's a shared sense of impactful, no-pressure discovery. We often call this the "field trip on the green blanket." This would be impossible if ROE were simply another subject in school, with expectations (Pass or fail? Am I good at this or not?) and responsibilities for children.

Finally, in formalized school subjects, teachers cannot step out of their role. In our program both teachers and children experience each other in a new light. Children get a glimpse into their teachers as emotional beings, with the same hopes, joys, and vulnerabilities as everyone else. Teachers have the opportunity to see their students in a way they may not have been able to before, and they are usually grateful for this rare window into their student's emotional lives. This can be a valuable learning experience, and it is one of the many reasons teachers tend to request the program year after year. |

MARY GORDON is the Founder/President of Roots of Empathy and founder of the Parenting and Family Literacy Centres at the Toronto District School Board. Recognized nationally and internationally as an educator, child advocate and parenting expert, she speaks and consults to governments, educational organizations, and public institutions.

DONNA LETCHFORD has a wide-ranging background working with families and children as a teacher and early childhood educator. Donna has delivered 19 ROE programs and worked extensively as a trainer and mentor. After 11 years with the organization, Donna is now the Director of Curriculum and Program Integrity for both Roots of Empathy and Seeds of Empathy.

For more information about the ROE program, see "Roots of Empathy: Changing the World, Child by Child" in the Spring 2008 issue of *Education Canada*.

Link to Roots of Empathy website: [www.rootsofempathy.org](http://www.rootsofempathy.org)

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