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## Implementing a Reading Recovery shared classroom : good first-grade reading instruction for all

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## Implementing a Reading Recovery shared classroom : good first-grade reading instruction for all

### Abstract

Reading Recovery is an early intervention designed by Marie Clay (1985) to be implemented in an educational system for the purpose of providing a second chance for success for first grade children who are at risk of failing to learn to read. Reading Recovery is preventive rather than a remedial intervention. Early intervention to deal with reading difficulties is much more powerful than remediation at a later time. Good teaching of reading skills, early in a child's formal education, will help create the foundation needed for continued learning throughout their lives.

Implementing a Reading Recovery Shared Classroom:  
Good First-Grade Reading Instruction For All

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## Implementing a Reading Recovery Shared Classroom: Good First-Grade Reading Instruction For All

Reading Recovery is an early intervention designed by Marie Clay (1985) to be implemented in an educational system for the purpose of providing a second chance for success for first grade children who are at risk of failing to learn to read. Reading Recovery is preventive rather than a remedial intervention.

“The preferred model is that two grade 1 teachers equally share responsibility for classroom instruction. Each teacher works in the first-grade classroom for half of the day and works in Reading Recovery for the other half day “ (Clay, 1987, pg. 36).

“Traditionally a child has been considered worthy of special help only if his achievement falls more than two years below the average for his class or age group. That criterion had more to do with the reliability of our achievement test instruments than with any particular learning needs of the children” (Clay, 1993a, pg. 13).

After teaching in a self-contained lower elementary classroom and then being trained in Reading Recovery, I wanted to be able to use my expertise from my Reading Recovery training in a setting that would benefit all students. I previously had taught third grade self-contained. Four years ago, due to budget constraints, I had been displaced as a classroom teacher and began teaching Title 1 reading. At that time, our Title 1 program was a pull-out format and I was being trained in Reading Recovery. Half of my day I taught small group reading for first and second-grade students that were not at grade level, and the other half I taught one-to-one Reading Recovery. I missed the variety of students one has with a full classroom. I had many successes with individual students, but wondered what the impact would be for all first-grade

students, with their various learning levels, to use my Reading Recovery training to base teaching decisions for an entire class.

Teaching third grade, I had seen many students who had developed reading processes that stifled their continued learning of reading and writing. Students had developed poor reading strategies when working on unknown words in text. Often they would use sounding out as their only strategy for unknown words. They were not thinking about the meaning of the story or using syntax to help themselves. By third grade these poor habits were well established, and I did not see many positive results, even with additional remedial instruction. I realized that what we needed to do was teach the appropriate reading skills early in a students' formal learning vs. trying to change bad habits that had been practiced for two to three years. Clay also had seen this in her observations of children over the years. "The key point to bear in mind is that children must not be left practicing inappropriate procedures for too long, but on the other hand, they cannot be pressured and hurried into learning the fundamental complexities of reading and writing" (Clay, 1993a, pg. 17).

It was always a concern of mine that we did not have the opportunity in our school to help every first-grade child that needed additional reading instruction. With restricted Title 1 funding and many student needs in grades kindergarten through five, we had never been able to fully implement Reading Recovery. We always had students in our first-grade classrooms who went on to second-grade unprepared to be successful in their reading and writing. These were the second-grade students who we then started to see in our Title 1 pull-out groups, trying to change the poor habits that had been formed. Most of these students were already frustrated and not liking reading or writing. I always felt we, as professionals, were setting these students up

for failure. We needed to change our delivery of reading instruction early on so more students could benefit in the acquisition of reading and writing skills.

## **Creating Opportunities for Students**

During the 1998-99 school year, I was teaching Reading Recovery in the morning and small group pull-out instruction for two first-grade groups and two second-grade groups during the afternoon. I was teaching in a mid-western, urban school with 87% minority, mostly African American, and 93% of our students qualified for free and reduced lunches. We had a 63% mobility rate. This mobility rate was a great concern of mine. Many of our students moved during the year or had previously been in our school and were moving back into our attendance area. Many students moved more than once during any given school year. Even though these students often scored very low on the Observation Survey test (Clay, 1993a) given to all first graders, Reading Recovery was not available to them because we had already started students in the program with no additional time-slots available until later in the year. We needed instructional practices that could be used whole class for all our first-graders to be successful in learning to read and write.

At the beginning of the school year Michele, one of the first grade teachers, and I collaborated about reading and writing instruction. Since my four Reading Recovery students were from her classroom and I also had one of my first-grade pull-out groups from her classroom, we started talking about me coming into the classroom (push-in program) during guided reading time vs. pulling students out (pull-out program). We felt that all students would then have more opportunities for small group and individual instruction in reading and writing. After convincing our administrator of the benefits we felt all students would receive from me coming into the classroom, we began our

push-in program. As the year progressed, so did our students in reading and writing. Michele, a ten year veteran first grade teacher, became more and more interested in Reading Recovery. She had seen some great results over the past five years from her students participating in the Reading Recovery program. She was always asking ways that she might be able to use some of the lesson components of Reading Recovery in the classroom to benefit all students. We were using small group instruction to match students to their appropriate instructional level, teaching letter and word work during these sessions to help students expand word knowledge, and allowing time daily for students to reread books to an adult. We also worked at having students do more writing for their own purposes. We were allowing students to choose their own topics when writing, as well as connecting writing in all content areas. As time went on, we realized how compatible we were in classroom management, what we felt was important for first grade curriculum, and the commitment we had for each and every student from this classroom to be strong readers and writers when they went on to second grade.

During spring 1999, we approached our administration and staff with the idea of developing a shared Reading Recovery classroom for the 1999-2000 school year. We convinced our staff that early intervention, using Reading Recovery as preventive, rather than a remedial intervention later (Clay, 1985), was more beneficial for students. "Some have suggested that Reading Recovery is an expensive program. However, the effectiveness of the short-term intervention combined with the reported reduction in retentions in grade and referrals to special education seem to make it substantially more cost effective than many other more commonly tried options for addressing the needs of low-achieving students" (Allington & Cunningham, 1996, pg. 33). Our staff also felt that this classroom format would enhance the learning of all students. We

agreed that all students would benefit with two well qualified teachers working together to design a plan of instruction for teaching reading and writing and increasing the amount of time spent daily in these activities.

## **Getting Started**

In April, 1999, Michele and I started developing a schedule for the fall that would allow consistent daily classroom teaching time for both of us. We wanted to use some of the lesson components from Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993b) that would focus on individual needs in our classroom setting. We wanted our schedule to include a 30 minute time-period daily when both teachers would be in the classroom instructing guided reading groups (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). This would allow small group reading instruction for all students a minimum of three days per week. During this small group time, we wanted to be able to work at meeting the individual reading needs of our students. We intentionally scheduled large blocks of time for reading and writing activities throughout our daily schedule to allow for flexibility. We approached all subject areas from a literature based point of view and incorporated reading and writing in all curricular areas. Students also had daily independent reading and writing time and checked out books for continued reading practice at home. With this routine, we felt all students had access to a print-rich environment (Cunningham, 1995) which fosters growth in both reading and writing.

Utilizing our strengths, my four years of experience teaching Reading Recovery and Michele's ten years experience teaching first-grade, we expected to have success in working with the students in our classroom with reading difficulties. We had both formed strong beliefs about how students learn. This came from extensive training in our Masters in Reading Education Program at our local university.

We both felt that all children can learn. Providing a learning environment where high expectations were in place for all students was important. We knew children learned much from each other, and sharing ideas with one another was crucial for continued learning. We felt providing lots of time for reading and writing daily, with both teacher directed and independent activities, was crucial for student learning. We also felt it was important to provide an atmosphere where students felt accepted and part of a community of learners, where all could take risks and were expected to learn. We knew students needed to view themselves as readers and writers to help develop confidence and continued success in their reading. We had seen first-hand how important it was for students to make connections between their reading and writing and to use that knowledge for continued learning. We wanted to provide students with an abundance of materials that would allow them choices and help motivate them to read and write.

We decided to read as much as possible about Clay's views on implementing a shared Reading Recovery Classroom. "Over the years, the procedures I designed have been adapted for classroom teachers who want to ask questions about particular children. What processes is this reader or writer using? Knowing what the pupil does leads to more significant teaching because the teacher poses a question designed to bring a new aspect of the process into prominence for a particular pupil" (Clay, 1998, pg. 105). Although Clay felt teaching Reading Recovery as a shared classroom was the preferred way of implementing Reading Recovery (Clay, 1985) there were few articles available to help us. We had knowledge of a shared Reading Recovery classroom in a community about 70 miles from our town. This classroom had been taught with the same two teachers as a Reading Recovery shared classroom for six years. We made a site visit and based much of our start-up on their routine. We also

did extensive reading about developing words on the wall and providing a print-rich classroom (Cunningham, 1995). We believed that to help our students make learning meaningful and permanent, teaching words in context would be more useful.

“Associative learning is always more permanent than rote learning. Since these frequent words have no meaning in and of themselves, we must help the children associate them with something meaningful” (Cunningham, 1995, pg. 98). Daily writing that encouraged invented spelling was also an important component. Research on invented spelling shows us that children who are reading, writing, and noticing how spelling patterns work will move through stages toward conventional spelling (Henderson, 1990).

## **Classroom Setting**

Beginning fall 1999, we had three first-grade classrooms in our building. Each classroom had a similar balance of low, average, and high academic students. Initial Observation Survey testing indicated a need for Reading Recovery in all three first-grade classrooms. The Observation Survey has a set of six instruments used to determine emergent literacy knowledge. They include letter identification, concepts about print, word tests, writing, hearing and recording sounds in words, and text level reading (Clay, 1993a). We compiled a stanine total score for each first-grade student. With a total stanine possible of 54, we looked at the scores of all first-graders within our building. We followed Reading Recovery selection guidelines by choosing the students with the lowest stanine totals from the three first-grade classrooms as our first round Reading Recovery students. Michele had four students, required because she was in her year of Reading Recovery training, and I (with special permission from Ohio State University) had three because we could not fit eight thirty minute time-slots within

the instructional day. Two of the seven students who qualified for first round Reading Recovery Program were from our classroom. We had several other students in our classroom that had scored very low on the fall testing, but there were not enough time-slots available for them to enter the Reading Recovery Program. We had to adjust our classroom teaching to better meet the needs of all our students.

Our classroom routine was set early on. Michele taught shared/interactive reading and writing activities every morning. We had a large block of time, fifty minutes daily, for our guided reading groups and reading and writing centers. To effectively teach the high-frequency words that children see daily in their reading and writing, we developed words on the wall (Cunningham, Moore, Cunningham, and Moore, 1989). We incorporated time, ten minutes daily, to review, rewrite, and work with these high frequency words. These words were first used as weekly spelling words and then added to the word wall. Students were held accountable for spelling correctly any words that were up on the wall. In addition, theme charts were developed during shared writing when students were asked to brainstorm all the words they knew related to a particular theme. These charts were then posted on the wall as a resource for words, helping to create a print-rich classroom. Students learned early on to search the wall and other charts within the classroom before asking for help in spelling a word. We too believed as Cunningham shared in Phonics They Use, that associative learning is always more permanent (Cunningham, 1995). For students to be able to connect their new learning of words to previous learning, we showed them how to think about what they knew and then search the word wall or theme charts to help find what they needed. An example of this was when students learned the th blend and needed to search the th words on the word wall to find the correct ending for a word they were using in their writing. The word wall and theme

charts decorated our classroom throughout the school year, and served as a useful writing resource for our students.

During guided reading groups, we focused on individual reading needs. With two teachers working with three or four students at similar reading levels, we were able to focus on individual needs. We allowed an hour daily for guided reading and learning centers. Michelle and I both would have groups for the first 30 minutes, and while she taught a Reading Recovery lesson the last 30 minutes, I would instruct another guided reading group. It was during this guided reading time that we were able to incorporate some of the Reading Recovery lesson components (Clay, 1993b) based on individual student needs. Every student had the opportunity to reread familiar books of their choice. This helped students to be fluent readers and gain confidence in their reading ability. We took a running record (Clay, 1993b) of an individual student during each session to assess strategies they were using and help determine our instruction. Michele and I used this on-going assessment information to base both individual and whole group instruction. Working within context, we helped students practice letter and word work using magnetic letters on individual boards to increase word knowledge. Some sessions also included individual sentence writing about a familiar book and we used Clay's format for assembling these cut-up sentences (Clay, 1993b) to help monitor student growth. Every guided reading session included a new book at the students' instructional level.

While both teachers were instructing guided reading groups, the other students were working in reading and writing activity centers. The activity centers were used as independent time for students to be working on reading and writing skills. We provided a writing center where students could create their own stories or choose a topic from our group ideas, based on current themes being used in our classroom.

Students also had the choice of writing a letter to someone in our school. We had implemented a school-wide postal service, *Wee Deliver*, throughout our school. It was set up with each classroom in the building having a street address, town, and zip code. Older students within the building did the processing of the mail and the delivery twice per week. This program is available through the local United States Post Office and encourages writing. Students were eager to write letters because it was meaningful and had a self-determined purpose. Another center focused on working with words using magnetic letters on a free standing chalkboard easel. This reinforced what was taught during guided reading groups. Students worked individually or in pairs practicing making words. They used words from the word wall, words from theme charts throughout the classroom, and often practiced spelling words. This was a great opportunity for students to discover the way words work in our written language. We often used this center when teaching analogies, word chunking, and word patterns. It was exciting to see students discover new things about words on their own. Working and manipulating the letters helped our students to look closely at print and apply what they knew towards new learning.

We also provided a classroom library reading corner where students could read at their independent level. We stocked our library from personal collections and books from our local public library. To help keep students motivated, we rotated these books monthly. A listening center of previously shared big books and tapes gave students practice on fluency and expression. These were beginning pattern books that students loved to reread and could feel success with (Fielding & Roller, 1992).

Michele and I observed the successful growth of all our students as they progressed through emergent literacy reading levels to become independent readers. During individual and partner reading time, we saw students utilize the early book

behavior skills modeled during shared and interactive reading. Early on, students used one-to-one pointing to match spoken words to print and were duplicating the expressive, fluent reading Michele taught daily.

The daily word wall and theme chart activities showed positive results in the increased amount of words spelled correctly by students in their writing. Spelling scores steadily improved throughout the year as students were able to use their acquired knowledge of word patterns, analogies, and word chunking to help themselves learn new words. At the end of the first week of school during fall 1999, sixteen first-grade students averaged 67% correct on a five word spelling list. By mid-year, January 2000, students correct responses had increased to 88%. In May of 2000, end of the year results indicated an average correct spelling score of 93%. Conversations among students, helping each other find words throughout the classroom for use in their daily writing, assured us that having a print-rich classroom fostered student independence.

All students showed consistent growth in their reading levels by mid-year. Our classroom average growth was 7.3 levels on the Observation Survey test (Clay, 1993a) given in January. Students were steadily progressing towards our goal of having all first-grade students read at level 14 by the end of the school year.

The running records taken consistently on all students helped Michele and me assess and challenge all students at their instructional level. On-going assessment information obtained from the running records was the key for us to develop appropriate instruction for students, assuring continued growth in their reading and writing.

The reading and writing activity centers allowed us to observe students independently applying the strategies that had been taught. Students were observed

rereading text, using chunking and word parts, and checking the picture for meaning to help themselves with unknown words. Students applying these literacy skills to their independent reading was the key to their continued growth in reading and writing.

The *Wee Deliver* program motivated our students to write. By mid-year our classroom mailbox was never empty on delivery days. Our students had written many letters to other students and were receiving letters in return. When students had free time, they often used it to write letters. This kept our students writing and expanding their word knowledge.

## **The Future Of Our Shared Classroom**

The future of our shared classroom looks promising. We feel confident that all our current students have formed a solid foundation in reading and writing and are ready to enter second-grade in the fall. Michele and I feel many factors contributed to our first successful year in a shared classroom.

A significant factor for student success is having well qualified teachers. We both felt our extensive professional training in teaching reading through graduate course work and Reading Recovery training gave us the tools needed to assess and effectively teach beginning literacy skills. We felt it was beneficial to be able to talk about individual student needs and share options for instruction that would best meet these needs. Two teachers in the classroom together daily, for small group reading instruction, allowed for additional individual and small group instruction for all students.

Working directly with students in the classroom allowed me to better assess student needs in the area of reading and writing. The traditional pull-out program

limited the amount of time spent with students and the knowledge I had of their reading needs.

Providing a print-rich environment, including words that our students used daily in their reading and writing, helped our students expand their word knowledge and usage. Giving students the opportunity to utilize this word knowledge throughout the day in many different activities, students were able to make connections between known words in reading and writing, and use them for their own purposeful learning. Allowing students time to practice their literacy skills daily fostered confidence and continued growth.

There is no doubt in my mind that a Reading Recovery shared classroom was extremely important in the success of all our students. All students were able to receive more direct instruction in the areas of reading and writing. In addition, our students received more individual attention based on their needs than a student could receive in a traditional one teacher classroom setting. I firmly believe this program would help many students that otherwise might be at risk for developing reading problems.

As we look to next year in planning our Title 1 schedule for our building, the staff has agreed to another year of a shared classroom format. Overall, we agree that early intervention to deal with reading difficulties is much more powerful than remediation at a later time. Good teaching is essential for students to reach their greatest potential. Good teaching of reading skills, early in a child's formal education, will help create the foundation needed for continued learning throughout their lives.

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