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Reading Recovery in the classroom: a literacy team approach

Abstract
A recent remedy for the concern over continued progress and over communication between Reading Recovery and the classroom is to adapt Reading Recovery practices in the regular classroom. A Title I Reading Recovery program in a Midwestern school adopted this very remedy. The program initiated in this elementary school has two Reading Recovery teachers, three first-grade teachers, and two second-grade teachers who work collaboratively as a literacy team. The goal of the program is to use a teamwork approach to teach reading both with the idea of meeting the instructional needs of the student and also of teaching the classroom teachers many of the strategies utilized in the Reading Recovery program.

Overall, all four teachers were very supportive of the literacy team program. They felt they had made a real difference in their students' literacy knowledge.
Reading Recovery in the Classroom: A Literacy Team Approach

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"See Jane run" (Montgomery, 1940). This simple sentence may bring back memories to many baby boomers; however, the memories may not be fond ones for some. Being a student in a first-grade classroom during the 50s elicits thoughts of reading out loud to the teacher and other boys and girls in a reading group. Reflecting on those days conjures a picture of three reading groups of children at varying stages in their reading. Learning to read was done with few difficulties for some, but for others was a valiant struggle. There were Eddie, Steve, and Barbara who seemed to never escape the bottom reading group. These were the children who fell behind their peers almost as soon as they entered school. Many of them were unable to achieve full literacy (Allington, 1992).

Things have not changed that much today as far as children with varying ability levels of reading. Teachers of reading have tried many methods and a variety of materials to reduce reading failure and frustration for these children (Pinnell, Fried, Estice, 1990). We, as educators, have done our best to address these at-risk students (Hodgkinson, 1988). Retention was always a possibility in the 50s, as it is today. The idea of retention has shown to be ineffective (Johnson, 1984). Remedial programs have been in use through the years with varying degrees of success in the pullout program and the in-class model. Gains have been reported, but no evidence is available of long-term success where a student catches up with their peers (Carter, 1984; Slavin, 1987). Educators are continually searching for answers to the question, "Why can't Johnny read?" (Flesch, 1955). During the 1985-86 school year, the schools of Columbus, Ohio, attempted to determine whether Reading Recovery was an effective intervention program for at-risk readers (Pinnell, 1989). The children who participated in Reading Recovery
that year were compared with another group of low performing children from randomly selected classrooms. The results showed that Reading Recovery children performed better than the comparison group and they also performed comparably to the first graders in those schools (Pinnell, Fried, & Estice, 1990).

**Reading Recovery**

The Reading Recovery program is an early intervention program designed by Marie M. Clay (1985) which is intended to assist children in first grade who are having difficulty learning to read and write. Only the children identified by their classroom teachers as being in the lowest 20% of their class in reading acquisition are eligible for the program. The idea of the program is for the students to receive intense short-term one-to-one tutoring which allows the children to succeed before they enter a cycle of literacy failure. Students are expected to accelerate to the level of the average in their class in literacy.

A major assumption of the Reading Recovery program seems to be that an intense and high-quality early intervention program will bring a low-achieving child up to average, and that he or she will “become an average progress child” (Clay, 1985, p. 52). Numerous articles have been written as to the pros and cons of the program. Shanahan (1995), in his independent evaluation of the Reading Recovery program, revealed his concern whether students in the program maintain their learning gains. Clay noted, “Research studies which followed children who had remedial instruction have often reported that progress was not maintained back in the classroom” (1993, p. 59). Based on her follow-up research, Clay reported that progress was sustained for most of the children in Reading Recovery upon graduation from the program (1993). This claim of progress
has been a concern of educators since the implementation of the program in Ohio (Shanahan, 1995). Some classroom teachers acknowledge the value of Reading Recovery practices in a one-to-one setting, but are wary of being able to support continued progress in the classroom setting. Shanahan voiced this very concern in the following statement, "The progress of children is usually accelerated during the period when they receive support. But hereafter, does their rate of learning continue at the accelerated rate, or at an average rate, or does it return to that shown prior to the intervention?" (1995, p. 978) In fact, Shanahan noted that in many Title I Reading Recovery programs there is a poor understanding or relationship between Reading Recovery teachers and classroom teachers because they have had very different teacher education experiences related to reading. This becomes an important issue of communication, in that classroom teachers cannot articulate the specifics of their students' learning experiences in reading nor can they apply what the children have learned in their own classrooms.

**Literacy Teams**

A more recent remedy for the concern over continued progress and over communication between Reading Recovery and the classroom is to adapt Reading Recovery practices in the regular classroom. Such an approach would bring successful one-to-one reading practices to the classroom and provide children with the needed support to progress. In fact, this whole notion of informing classroom teachers of the Reading Recovery program and practices may alleviate some of the current discord between classroom teachers and the Reading Recovery pull-out program (Shanahan, 1995).
A Title I Reading Recovery program in a midwestern school adopted this very remedy. The program initiated in this elementary school has two Reading Recovery teachers, three first-grade teachers, and two second-grade teachers who work collaboratively as a literacy team. The goal of the program is to use a teamwork approach to teach reading both with the idea of meeting the instructional needs of the student and also of teaching the classroom teachers many of the strategies utilized in the Reading Recovery program. The idea is to help the students who have graduated from Reading Recovery or who are currently in Reading Recovery maintain success in the classroom, and to also help students not in the program. The teachers do this by using the same language and the same prompts from Reading Recovery practices. The Reading Recovery teachers have a dual agenda of teaching classroom teachers Reading Recovery strategies for the classroom, as well as working with the students in the classroom with the goal of bringing all of the children up to grade level.

Meetings

The teachers meet weekly for 30 minutes, with one week meeting as a grade level team with the Reading Recovery teachers, and the following week with all grade level and Reading Recovery teachers meeting together. The Reading Recovery teachers set the agenda and present information as far as reading strategies and the latest in reading research for the group meeting. It is at these meetings that questions are fielded about concerns in the classroom. All teachers involved in the literacy program are able to get feedback on how it is going, and also to discuss anything that might pertain to a particular grade level.
Classroom Organization

Three days a week for 30 minutes the teachers have literacy team work with the students. The lesson format across three days usually consists of a read-write-read format. Typically, the children read the first day, they write the second day, and then the third day they read again with some adjustments for groups. At times the teaching team may provide a large group presentation, then a minilesson to a small group, and close with reading or writing activities for the students. The groups are developed both in classroom and across classrooms. A classroom may be divided into three or four small groups of children, and group sizes range anywhere from 2 to 10 students, depending on need. For example, one group works on comprehension building with the classroom teacher while another works on self-correcting strategies with the Reading Recovery teacher. Meanwhile, a third teacher from the team works on some extension activities with another group.

The children are periodically assessed by informal reading inventories, and then regrouped according to need. The flexibility of grouping is a key to this team approach where children are constantly reevaluated for need and group assignments change daily to reflect this ongoing assessment. The teachers try to watch that the same students are not kept together often. The teachers rotate as well so that not only do the students have experience with different teachers, but the teachers also have the opportunity to work outside their own classroom with many different groups and literacy focuses. When the team of teachers meet to discuss students’ progress, the various experiences with each child provides insights that results in better understanding of student performance and progress. Communication with the parents on a regular basis is realized with letters sent
home informing parents about what the teachers are doing. This allows parents to be better able to follow through at home with literacy activities.

Implemented in the fall of 1997, the program has been very successful. Out of 21 children in one classroom, 16 were reading on or above grade level by January 1998. Several were reading at the fifth- and sixth-grade levels. The students were tested at the beginning of the year to determine their achievement levels. Then they were tested again in January and February using the HBJ Holistic Assessment (1993). Growth was seen across achievement levels, especially for the children who were assessed as nonreaders initially.

**Methodology**

The success in continued progress of the students suggests that a literacy team approach may very well be the answer. But did such teaming also alleviate the concerns found in the literature regarding communication with and knowledge about Reading Recovery programs? To answer this question, the teachers were interviewed regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of their team approach.

**Participants**

Four participants, two Reading Recovery teachers, Mary and Susan*, with 4 and 6 years experience respectfully in Reading Recovery, one first-grade teacher, Charlene*, with 15 years of classroom experience, and one second-grade teacher, Edith*, with 29 years of classroom experience, were interviewed for their views about their year-long work in literacy teams.

*Names have been changed to maintain confidentiality
Instrument

Procedure. A 10-question interview was piloted with a Reading Recovery teacher from another building. The pilot instrument was evaluated for clarity of prompts, and questions were restructured and reordered. The final interview instrument involved 11 question prompts (see Appendix A) and was administered in a one-to-one setting involving 30-45 minutes. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. The texts were analyzed using a modified constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) where key phrases were highlighted and information was collapsed into common categories.

Results and Discussion

Overall, all four teachers were very supportive of the literacy team program. They felt they had made a real difference in their students' literacy knowledge. Charlene: “The students start participating. They start responding with appropriate responses. They are picking up books and reading where as before they would find almost any diversion not to read. They all know they can read.” The classroom teachers felt they knew more about Reading Recovery as a program and felt particularly informed about the practices used in Reading Recovery. In a sense they felt this demystified Reading Recovery as a program, and their teaming helped them keep the conversation about their students an ongoing communication between the classroom and the Reading Recovery classroom.

When asked the advantages of the Reading Recovery program, classroom teachers as well as the Reading Recovery teachers responded candidly. Edith: “I think I have had more grade level readers because of the Reading Recovery program. Success is
higher than failure. There are more that make it than those that don't, so I see the advantage of starting the year off with more grade level readers than we did prior to the program.” They felt that through the implementation of the program, the Reading Recovery teacher was better able to analyze and clear up confusions the student had in order to make progress in learning. Since it is an in depth one-to-one program, it allowed the teachers to get to the heart of the problem. The teachers were able to assess where the child was and where each needed to go with specific reading and writing skills.

According to the classroom teachers, students in the program began to read at grade level or higher, participated in classroom discussions with appropriate responses, and were looked upon as high achievers and good readers by their peers and teachers.

All four teachers cited concerns specifically with Reading Recovery. One concern was that only first graders were allowed in the program. At times the teachers felt that a student may be identified too late in the year, which then meant there may not be enough time left in the school year for the child to graduate from the program. Graduation from the program was also questioned, with the concern of what to do if a child is exited too early from the program and experiences remediation needs. In conjunction with this concern, the teachers questioned the placement of some students into Reading Recovery over placement into Resource simply because they fell within the appropriate bottom 10% in literacy.

The intensity of the program and the amount of paperwork wore on the Reading Recovery teachers, as well as on the students. The Reading Recovery teachers realized the importance of the paperwork involved, but at times believed it to be too much to accomplish in one day along with the intensive daily planning for their students. Mary:
“Record keeping is an integral part of the program and that’s the only way that you really do know exactly what your child needs on a daily basis.” The possibility of no follow-up to Reading Recovery instruction was a concern for the classroom teachers before the implementation of the literacy teams. However, since the classroom teachers were taught strategies and prompts used in the Reading Recovery program, they were able to follow through with these practices in the classroom. Prior to implementation of the literacy teams, classroom teachers had been utilizing whole class instruction and groupings of students. Over the past year, students that graduated from the Reading Recovery program were followed in grades two and three with the literacy team approach. A majority of these students have continued to be on grade level or above in reading. All of the children were tested with text level reading material at the end of the year. Students who began in Reading Recovery 4 years ago have made substantial progress in their overall reading levels. According to the literacy team teachers, none of the children who have participated in the literacy team program has tested low when assessed with the HBJ Holistic Assessment (1993).

The teachers anticipate the Reading Recovery program is here to stay. The use of the literacy teams has had a positive effect on students and teachers.

Susan: Teachers were real excited to know about the strategies used in Reading Recovery. We visited with the classroom teachers and talked about this being a chance when we could share as a team. The whole idea of having students look at their instructional level during part of the day was one of the beauties seen with Reading Recovery. The students make the acceleration because we are working at their level and not trying to make them fit some preconceived mold.

These literacy team teachers would like to see a Reading Recovery teacher in every school with a Title I program and a literacy team approach begun as well.
The district appears to support the program, but of course funding is always a concern. Visitors from the state capitol have shown interest in the Reading Recovery program. Hopefully, the district will receive necessary funding to implement and maintain the program.

As with anything, there are changes that the teachers would like to see. All the teachers agreed that more students should be allowed in the program. In addition, they would like to see the parents more involved in this team process, taking a more active role in their children's literacy education. Time is another factor in the program. They would like more time for problem solving within the team setting. The Reading Recovery teachers would also like to see more time made available for teaching their peers in the classroom the strategies utilized in Reading Recovery. The last concern was that there is too much record keeping. The Reading Recovery teachers felt this was also a time issue; however, they recognized the value of all the paperwork/record keeping. This intensive paperwork helps in the daily planning of each student's specific literacy needs as well as keeping them informed of their students' progress.

All four teachers stated that the administration at their school, in making future plans for instruction in the building, asked the teachers whether they would prefer having more time put into Reading Recovery or the Title I program. The teachers chose Reading Recovery over regular Title I small groups because they were able to see the positive impact occurring with students in Reading Recovery. Part of this "visibility of success" was attributed to the literacy team approach where classroom teachers were able to work closely with the Reading Recovery teachers and practices.
Conclusion

Reading Recovery appears to be here to stay, at least in this midwestern school. Of course, an important aspect of the program is the intuitiveness of the Reading Recovery and classroom teachers to thoroughly investigate the needs of their students. This unique literacy team program, implemented in this school, has exhibited very positive results, both in the students and teachers. Students are learning to read, wanting to read, and are remaining on grade level with their peers. And teachers are working together, learning together, and sharing their expertise with each other and their love for literacy with their students.
References


Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. a. How long have you been teaching?
   b. How long have you been teaching in the Reading Recovery program?

2. a. How many Reading Recovery students do you teach?
   b. How many students are served by Reading Recovery in your classroom?

3. What is Reading Recovery?

4. Are your peers supportive of the program? If yes, why? If no, why not?

5. What do you see as advantages to the Reading Recovery program?

6. Do you see any disadvantages? Tell me about them…

7. a. Have you noticed progress in your students that are currently in the program?
    How do you know this?
   b. How are students who have completed the program doing? How do you know this?

8. On a scale of 1-5, 5 being the highest, what number would you assign the program as it is being implemented today? Why?

9. What do you see happening with the program in your school? In your district? In your state?

10. If you could change anything about the program to better suit your students needs or your own, what would that be?

11. Please tell me about your literacy teams in your school.