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Reading Recovery and its issues

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Reading Recovery and Its Issues

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Abstract

The Reading Recovery Program, an intervention program for young school children who are literacy delayed, and the inservice program for teachers who will deliver the program are described. Teachers' views of the inservice program, the cost of the program, and an analysis of the program's effectiveness are presented.

An immense responsibility for educators is to provide the most appropriate reading instruction possible for children who are literacy-delayed. Even though the United States has remained high in international comparisons, too many children are reading at low levels. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that two-fifths of the 1994 fourth graders sampled failed to demonstrate a basic level of reading ability (1994).

Studies indicate the best way to break the cycle of failure for poor readers is to identify them and then to provide remediation for these children as early as possible. Many schools are looking at early intervention programs designed to correct early reading problems. One such early intervention program is Reading Recovery (Taylor, Hanson, Justice-Swanson, & Watts, 1997).

What is Reading Recovery?

Reading Recovery was developed by Marie M. Clay, a New Zealand educator, and introduced to the United States in the mid 1980's. It is a preventative rather than a remedial intervention program. Clay contends that even in quality school programs, some children do not benefit from sound instruction (Gaffney, 1994). Approximately twenty percent of children, and more in some areas, need extra help in learning to read, in spite of excellent classroom programs (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Marie Clay (1991) believes that reading is a message-getting, problem-solving activity. "Language and visual perception responses are purposefully directed by the reader in some integrated way to the problem of extracting meaning from cues in a text, in sequence, so that the reader brings a maximum of understanding to the author's message" (p. 6). It is like finding footholds when climbing a cliff-face. During reading, the child internally asks questions to eliminate alternatives, gains meaning from cues in the text, and solves problems in the text by using a set of strategies.

A child that is a literacy-delayed reader has fewer resources to bring to the reading process. Often such a reader pays attention to visual details and relies on inventions from memory. The child disregards differences between his/her response and the words on the page. The goal of this intervention program is to develop a child's inner control of the reading process (Clay, 1991).

Reading Recovery is an individual tutoring program that involves a child for thirty minutes each day outside the classroom. It is supplementary to classroom instruction, with short-term sessions of 12 to 20 weeks in duration. The instruction focuses on the child's strengths and presents reading and writing activities. The child learns strategies that can lead to independent reading and also to reading his/her own writing.

Such strategies are using the features of language as clues, rereading to confirm ideas, and self-correcting. Another goal of the program is to extend a child's reading ability to the average performance level in the classroom.

Teachers base their instruction in the Reading Recovery Program on the Observation Survey, a detailed analysis of what the child can do as a reader and writer. The survey includes six observation procedures: letter identification, a word test, concepts about print, vocabulary, dictation, and running record of text. These observations collectively provide an assessment of the child's reading and writing (Gaffney, 1994; Clay, 1993).

During the program, the child uses books of increasing difficulty, or graduate levels, and works just beyond his/her level of literacy with a supportive adult who collaborates with the child to solve his/her problems. The child learns to read by attending to many different aspects of the text (letters, words, pictures, language patterns, and story structures). The result of learning about each of these areas is the development of reading strategies that provide the child with ways to process the sources of information (semantics, syntactic, grapho-phonetic, and conventions of print) encountered while reading (Clay, 1993).

The first two weeks of the program are called "roaming around the known." During this time period, the teacher provides the child with opportunities to become fluent and flexible with

what he/she can do. This activity builds a foundation on which the teacher can begin (Kornfeind, 1999).

After the initial two weeks "in the known," lessons are initiated. A typical lesson begins with reading at least three stories that they were read during the first two weeks. Rereading texts allows the child to practice behaviors that must be used in the reading process and encourages the reader to apply reading strategies to texts. Such activities provide the teacher with opportunities to support the child's tentative responses. The teacher then takes a running record of the child's oral reading of a story that had been introduced the day before. The running record documents the child's reading behaviors and reveals the strategies the child uses during the reading process. From this record, the teacher creates an individual program for the child using specialized Reading Recovery procedures to promote the child's progress (Clay, 1993).

The lesson then may include letter activities that should last one to three minutes. To assist the child in letter identification, the construction of an alphabet book is begun with pictures representing the sounds. Eventually, the child should identify each letter in the book. When the child has some letter identification knowledge, part of the instructional period can be used to work with words in isolation called "making and breaking." This activity, as in writing when words are

constructed and as in reading when some words are taken apart to discover what they are, combines these processes to help the child become more aware of how to work with acquired language knowledge and how to learn new words. The intent is to help the child understand how words work. For example, when working with a set of easy and familiar words, such as "he," "me," and "we," the child is given the word "he" and is asked to substitute the letter "h" with the letter "m" and read the word "me." Then, the child is to replace the letter "m" with the letter "h" and read the word "he," and continue with the letter "w" and read the word "we." The difficulty of making and breaking activities can be increased as the child's competence develops. The teacher can present onsets, rhymes, suffixes, and prefixes.

The lesson continues from reading familiar texts, taking a running record, and working with letters and words to writing a short story as additional practice, because many of the tasks in writing are the same as in reading. In this writing experience, the child goes from ideas, to spoken words, to printed messages, and then to rereading those messages. The student is encouraged to orally tell the story that will eventually be written. The child and the teacher collaborate in writing the story, interacting in various ways. The teacher takes down the dictation of the child and copies it on a piece of light cardboard. The piece is cut into language units that the child can reassemble.

The puzzle-type task of known text can then be used for home practice. The largest proportion (over 90%) of Reading Recovery time is spent reading and writing stories that then are read (Kornfeind, 1999).

The thirty-minute lesson continues with an introduction of a new book. The teacher selects the book carefully to insure a minimum of new tasks to learn. Dr. Clay relates that "A few items and a powerful strategy might make it very easy to learn a great deal more" (1991, p. 331). During the introduction of the story, the teacher familiarizes the child with the elements of the story, such as plot and vocabulary. The child then reads the book, engaging in problem-solving. The teacher prompts and confirms appropriate responses and then teaches a few needed items after the reading. The teacher is looking for a reading system that is self-extending (Clay, 1991; Pikulski, 1994).

How are Teachers Selected

for the Reading Recovery Program?

Those who are in charge of the New Zealand program suggest teachers who volunteer for training should be permanent members of the staff. They should commit for at least two years to the program, teach before members of the inservice course, work with teachers of the children selected for the program, and demonstrate good relations with staff members (Clay, 1991).

How are Teachers Trained for the Reading Recovery Program?

Teacher leaders are trained through specially trained university faculty members. The teacher leaders then train teachers. This system assures that the Reading Recovery Program will be consistent not only across districts but also across subsequent years of training.

Reading Recovery teachers learn to observe, analyze, and interpret the reading and writing behaviors of children and to design and implement an individual program to meet a child's specific needs. The expectation is that the teacher will develop a better understanding of the reading process and become competent in selecting Reading Recovery procedures to meet the needs of each child. Thus, the teacher will be able to accelerate the progress of a child to the average level of performance in their class and to evaluate their own teaching (Clay, 1991).

Experienced teachers apply for a year-long training course that includes assessment training in the use of the Observation Survey prior to the beginning of school. Throughout the training course, a weekly inservice session is scheduled for approximately three hours and teachers instruct daily at least four children. The teacher leader makes school visits (Gaffney, 1994).

In the training sessions, teachers first learn how to take running records of text and to administer the tests in the

diagnostic survey. Testing results, along with carefully recorded observations, are rewritten into a diagnostic summary. This summary gives the teachers an analysis of behavior that should relate directly to the teaching program (Clay, 1991).

As teachers receive training, they also implement the program with children. During the weekly inservice sessions, two teachers in training conduct thirty-minute lessons with a child whom they are currently teaching. The lessons are observed by the other participating teachers through a one-way mirror. The teacher leader, along with the participating teachers, observe and discuss how the child is responding to each lesson while it is occurring. The discussion centers on the child's behavior, interactions between the teacher and the child, and the teacher's use of procedures. The teacher demonstrating makes decisions while the observers attend to the decisions and then after the demonstration discuss the options that arose. Teachers are encouraged to provide rationales for the demonstrating teacher's decisions and discuss possible alternative procedures (Gaffney, 1994).

Important aspects of the lessons are discussed after the demonstrations are completed. Teachers engage in the process of problem solving about the individual needs of the child. Teaching decisions are supported by ideas from the Reading Recovery Guidebook and the teacher's growing knowledge of the successful

performance of able readers and writers. These teacher-child lessons form the focus of the teacher training. Reading Recovery teachers interact with their fellow teachers and the teacher leader to construct a view of learning and teaching that supports literacy learning (Gaffney, 1994).

Contact with teachers continues beyond the initial training phase. Strict adherence to most procedures are necessary. Some teachers veer away from Reading Recovery practice when they no longer attend regular meetings. During the second year, teachers meet four to six times to share insights discovered about emerging literacy and to demonstrate and discuss their programs (Clay, 1991).

What Are the Responses by Trained Teachers to the Reading Recovery Program?

Reading Recovery is a complex course. During training, teachers are encouraged to discuss the theoretical reasons for what they are learning and teaching. Teachers have stated that their experiences in Reading Recovery produced a renewed sense of the meaning to teach strategically and plan for effective teaching. Reading Recovery has been described by a teacher as a "voyage" that provides both personal growth and offers professional discovery into the process of reading. Reading Recovery training increased observational abilities and provided techniques to teach children. The teachers did not seem to enjoy

giving the demonstration lessons but all commented on their value. Teachers described this ordeal as "a very nerve-wracking experience," which they dreaded. They also stated it was very profitable because they were reinforced for some responses to the child and also were shown ways of improving their teaching strategies. The lessons were invaluable because they make them more self-critical of their teaching strategies (Browne, Fitts, McLaughlin, McNamara, & Williams, 1996/97; Clay, 1991).

The teachers associated with the training gave some negative responses: The program "trained" the teachers alike and ignored diverse talents, knowledges, and perspectives. The Reading Recovery training was a skills-based model in which the teachers imparted the knowledge to the students. The students were not encouraged to use prior knowledge, construct their own knowledge, or learn from one another. The teachers were not offered opportunities to reflect but were asked to come up with the right answer. The demonstrations made the teachers feel threatened because negative comments were made about their teaching behind the observational window (Barnes, 1996/97).

Five Reading Recovery teachers from different states were asked to comment on their training. They all agreed that the training was intense and rigorous but believed they did not discard their old views of teaching. The teachers said that they

drew insights from their colleagues in the training classes through shared dialogue (Browne et al., 1997).

What is the Cost of Reading Recovery?

This individual tutoring program is expensive. Because Reading Recovery is costly, questions are raised as to whether the expenditures are justified or cost effective. Reading Recovery requires one full-time teacher or two half-time teachers who share full-time duties. Each teacher works with fewer than 16 students per year. The actual costs of Reading Recovery vary due to the differences in teachers' salaries, training costs, and number of lessons needed by each child. Schools also differ in terms of students' academic preparation and home and classroom support. With this in mind, some children require fewer lessons to be successful, this allowing the program to instruct greater numbers of students. On the average, a teacher works with 10 students per year at a per pupil expenditure of \$4,432. If the number of students is 16, the cost per student is \$2,770 (Shanahan, Barr, Blackwell, & Burkhart, 1993). Districts report that costs per child range from \$2,300 to \$3,500. Reading Recovery advocates claim this expenditure is cost effective (Askew, Fountas, Lyons, Pinnell, & Schmitt, 1998).

Several school districts have calculated the relative costs of retention, Title 1 instruction, Reading Recovery, and special education for children classified as learning disabled. One study

revealed retention cost at \$5,208 per student, Reading Recovery \$2,063, Title 1 \$943, and special education \$1,651. When the average amount of time that one student spends in each intervention is calculated, the monetary amounts change: Title 1 reading instruction varies in length; however, if instruction continues for five years, the cost is \$4,715 per student served. Students in learning disability programs in the elementary school average six years in attendance, costing \$9,906, without calculating the cost of psychological testing cost (Askew et al., 1998).

Reports indicate schools that adopt Reading Recovery reduce their first-grade retentions. This direct savings was found in the Lancaster, Ohio school district, where first-grade retentions declined by 9.5 per year after they implemented Reading Recovery. However, some of these students might still be retained in a later year (Shanahan et al., 1993).

Advocates further claim that Reading Recovery trained children will not require additional instructional interventions at a later time; therefore, Reading Recovery is a one-time cost. Reading Recovery does not do away with early referrals for special education; however, fewer referrals represent cost savings (Shanahan et al., 1993).

The assumption that Reading Recovery ends the eventual need for special education services is without foundation. An Ohio

School district placed approximately 19 percent of Reading Recovery students in a learning disabilities program after the completion of this program. After five years, this figure dropped to 8 percent. It was presumed the decrease was a result of more effective teaching. The children were not necessarily placed in special education because of reading problems. It is possible that 81 percent of this population would have been placed in special education if the Reading Recovery program had not been available (Shanahan et al., 1993).

Do Reading Recovery Children Continue
to Progress With Their Peers After the Intervention?

Long-term research is difficult because children move because families are mobile, thus the sample shrinks. If samples shrink too much, it is unknown how well the sample represents the population. Other factors, such as instruction, individual life circumstances, and implementation decisions affect student progress.

A comprehensive study of Reading Recovery's effectiveness was conducted by Pinnell and colleagues in the Columbus Public Schools (1988). The results suggested that Reading Recovery instructed children did not progress as fast as the average student in second grade. The results of the study further suggested that by third grade, the Reading Recovery instructed children may not be "significantly different from the comparison

groups as indicated by measures of text reading" (Shanahan, 1993, p. 29). A study done in Australia by K. J. Rowe indicated that the effects of Reading Recovery are long-lasting. Rowe found that students after finishing the Reading Recovery program to grade 6 in 100 schools in Victoria, Australia were within the same score range as the general school population and with fewer low scores. At the beginning of their schooling, they were clustered at the low range, but by grades five and six, this was no longer the case (Askew et al., 1998). In a follow-up study, about 70 percent of the children who had completed the Reading Recovery program had scores considered to be average or meeting passing criteria on reading comprehension tests by their fourth-grade year. These findings are consistent with the conclusions of Rowe as well as Shanahan and Barr that some Reading Recovery children do not maintain at the average level after the intervention (second grade) but perform better at higher grades (Askew et al., 1998).

Conclusions

The Reading Recovery program has been implemented in 40 states within the past eight years in spite of its expense and the rigorous inservice training of teachers. During this time period, a growing body of evidence is appearing that supports the conclusion that Reading Recovery brings the literacy of many children up to that of the average achieving children in their classroom. About seventy to ninety percent of the children leave

the program with reading strategies. However, Reading Recovery is not successful for all low-achieving children. About ten to thirty percent need further instruction after completing the full program.

Reading Recovery children are the low-achieving group in the first grade. Children who have participated in Reading Recovery continue to achieve better than similar children who were not enrolled in the program. Noting that the rate of growth in second grade for those who have had Reading Recovery tends to be slower than that of the average students suggests further intervention support in second grade should be available. It would be hard to expect that thirty to fifty hours of instruction, no matter how intensive or accelerative, could be the only support a student has throughout 12 years of schooling. Reading Recovery should not become the only appropriate intervention for children at risk.

School districts that adopt Reading Recovery should see the program as the first step in supporting a child who is not making progress in reading and writing. If a child is not successful in Reading Recovery or needs further support after completing the program, other programs need to be made available, such as Title 1 programs, learning labs, peer-tutoring, buddy reading, teacher intervention plans, or special education. Also, districtwide

policies and programs need to be developed for transient students.

When looking at the cost of Reading Recovery, some schools have experimented with small group interventions that include Reading Recovery-based procedures. Some of these programs appear promising though most have not proved as effective as Reading Recovery.

To support Reading Recovery after first graders have completed it, school districts could develop high quality support for classroom teachers so that instruction is strong year after year for those children who have been or may still be at risk of being literacy delayed. Staff development can include phoneme and spelling awareness as well as other excellent preschool, kindergarten, and primary grade literacy instruction. Schools can also develop home-to-school programs, encouraging literacy learning at the early stages of a child's life. Early literacy programs and excellent staff development may reduce the time necessary for children to be enrolled in Reading Recovery, thus reducing the cost.

Education's role is to open up opportunities for all children to extend their language abilities. It is reasonable to expect that some children need skilled demonstration and support to "untangle the confusions" to become readers and writers. Individual tutoring is effective for children who are having

extreme difficulties in the early stages of learning to read and write, along with excellent classroom teaching that attends to individuals' needs. Success in the early grades does not guarantee success throughout the child's school years; however, failure in the early grades often guarantees failure in later schooling.

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