

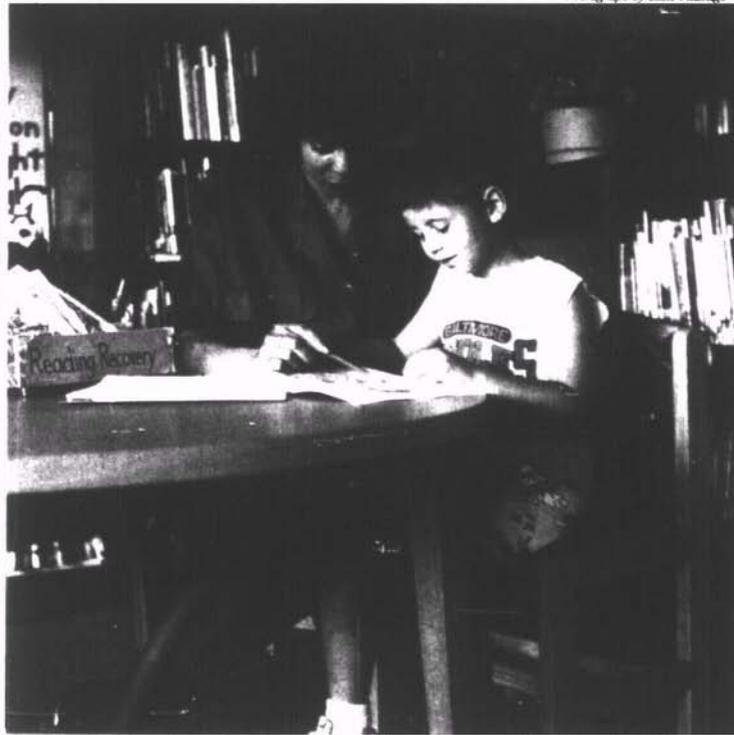
# Success for Low Achievers through Reading Recovery

Reading Recovery can help ensure a brighter educational future for high-risk children by solving their early literacy problems before they become severe.

Three years ago, "Reading Intervention for High-Risk First-Graders" appeared in *Educational Leadership* (Boehnlein 1987). That article was the first in an American journal to describe the U.S. implementation of Reading Recovery, an early intervention program for young children having difficulty in beginning reading. Based on research in New Zealand, the program appeared to hold promise for preventing reading difficulties (see Clay 1979, 1985).

The first project, initiated as a collaborative effort by the Ohio Department of Education, Columbus Public Schools, and The Ohio State University, began with a small pilot in 1984. Then, in 1985, the Ohio General Assembly appropriated funds to support teacher training and the purchase of books. Since that time, hundreds of school districts in Ohio and elsewhere have implemented the program. Reading Recovery has become a member project of the National Diffusion Network, the federal agency for demonstrating and disseminating excellent educational programs. Through NDN, school districts in 16 states have adopted the program. Has Reading Recovery been successful? Yes, but its success has been hard won and is not without qualification. Project implementers have had to remind them-

Photograph by Susie Fitzhugh



High risk students can learn to read, and their teachers can enjoy teaching them—just ask Gaye Pollard, Reading Recovery teacher at Glen Forest School, Fairfax County, Virginia, also shown on this issue's cover

## No two children read the same books or the same sequence of books.

selves that they're not trying something easy. After all, the program seeks to do what the prevailing belief system views as farfetched, to enable the lowest achievers to make accelerated and continuous progress.

In this article, I will describe the Reading Recovery program, its effectiveness, and the story of its implementation in the U.S.

### What Is Reading Recovery?

Reading Recovery is not a generic name for a variety of early intervention programs in reading. It is a specifically designed set of interventions credited to Marie Clay, the New Zealand child psychologist who conducted the initial research and put together the procedures. Within the program, adaptations are made only as the result of ongoing research and testing.

Reading Recovery includes procedures for teaching children, recommended materials, a staff development program directed by a specially prepared "teacher leader," and a set of administrative systems that work together to assure continued quality. Typically, within a school site, the lowest achieving students in a 1st grade age cohort are provided intensive one-to-one tutoring for 30 minutes each day, in addition to classroom reading instruction. When a child has become an independent reader and can profit from classroom instruction, the tutoring is "discontinued," and another child is entered in the program space

(refer further to Pinnell et al. 1988, Pinnell et al. 1990, Wayson et al. 1988).

*A strategic approach.* In the daily individual lessons, children are immersed in reading and writing as they simultaneously learn to use a range of skills in a purposeful, integrated way. Throughout the lesson, the teacher works alongside the child, observing reading and writing behavior, supporting active problem solving, helping to "untangle" confusions, and intervening to "teach for strategies," the kind of effective processes good readers use.

The idea is to help students learn to use what they know to get to what they do *not* know. Teachers want children to learn to monitor and self-correct their own reading and to actively search for and use many kinds of information (for example, background experience, language knowledge, letter-sound correspondence) as they operate on print. The goal for the learner is independence and a "self-improving system," that is, a set of understandings that will help this reader keep on solving problems while reading even when an adult is not there.

*Long-term teacher development.* The key to the program is making effective moment-to-moment decisions while teaching intensively. Teachers prepare for Reading Recovery by participating in a yearlong course (see Clay and Watson 1982, Pinnell 1987, DeFord et al. in press). No time is lost in service to children, though, because teachers begin to work with children on a one-to-one basis while attending an after-school session once each week.

During the inservice course, participants take turns teaching a demonstration lesson behind a one-way glass while the rest of the class observes. As the lesson proceeds, the leader guides observers to talk among themselves. This "talking while observing" process helps teachers sharpen their abilities to observe and to make decisions "on the run" while teaching. Even after the year of training, Reading Recovery teachers continue to update and increase their knowledge and skills through continuing contact sessions and peer consultation.

*A system intervention.* A Reading Recovery project is a system intervention

(see Clay 1987), which requires commitment, training, continuing inservice, and data collection. The central implementer is the teacher leader, who has received a full year's preparation program at a leader training site.<sup>1</sup> The teacher leader is responsible for teaching the inservice course, collecting data and monitoring children's progress, setting up administrative systems to make implementation possible, providing continuing contact for previously trained teachers, providing staff development for classroom teachers, and communicating with parents, administrators, and other district personnel.

*Not a packaged program.* Reading Recovery cannot be purchased as a "package." The required materials are minimal, basically books, pencils, and paper. Most important are the hundreds of "little books," which are short paperbacks with good stories and only a few lines of text on each page. These books are leveled into a slow gradient of difficulty to assist teachers in selecting new books for individual children and in monitoring children's progress as they read harder materials. (For a detailed discussion of texts, see Peterson 1988, DeFord et al. in press.) No one publisher is used for the program; there are no kits available. No two children read the same books or the

**The idea is to help students learn to use what they know to get to what they do not know.**

same sequence of books. The key to the program, and the major investment, is teacher knowledge and skill (see Rentel and Pinnell 1987).

### How Does It Work?

To find out how the program works, let's look at a Reading Recovery lesson. During instruction, the following components form a flexible framework within which the teacher makes decisions:

1. *Familiar rereading.* The child rereads several books that he or she has previously read.

2. *Running record analysis.* The child reads yesterday's new book while the teacher records reading behavior using a coding system called a running record. The teacher retreats to a neutral role, and the child reads as independently as possible.

3. *Writing a message.* With the teacher's help, the child first composes and then writes a message, usually one or two sentences. Then, assisted by the teacher, the child writes it word by word. The message offers various opportunities for the teacher to help the child construct words by analyzing sounds and representing them with letters. The child also gets to know a few high-frequency words by writing them quickly and fluently. The message is always read many times.

4. *Putting together a cut-up sentence.* After the message is written, the teacher quickly writes it on a small sentence strip and then cuts it apart. The child reconstructs the message, which requires searching for visual information and then checking by rereading.

5. *Reading a new book.* The teacher selects a new book, just a bit more challenging for that particular child, and then introduces it to the child by looking at the pictures and talking about the story. The focus is on meaning, although the child may be asked to locate one or two key words after first predicting the initial letter. Then, the child reads the story with some teacher help. (For more detailed descriptions of lessons, see Clay 1985, Pinnell et al. 1988, Pinnell et al. 1990).

This sequence of lesson components reveals a masterful combination of easy and fluent reading, challenging reading, and writing during which the teacher works alongside the child and through frequent interaction focuses attention

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on whatever level of the language hierarchy (text, sentence, phrase, word, or letter) is most appropriate at any given moment. These minute-to-minute interactions are the heart of the process called "teaching for strategies." The goal is to support the child's development of those "in the head" processes that good readers seem to use naturally.

### Is Reading Recovery Effective?

Does it work? That is the most important question about any program. Reading Recovery does work, although not for every child who enters the program. In this section, I will briefly summarize program evaluation data on Reading Recovery (for more detail, see Pinnell 1989, Pinnell et al. 1988, Slavin 1987, Slavin and Madden 1987).

*New Zealand research.* New Zealand studies of Reading Recovery, now in its ninth year there, indicate that regardless of sex, economic status, or sociolinguistic group, the lowest achieving children make accelerated progress in the program and continue to make satisfactory progress after release from the program. Clay (1990) cites government figures indicating that fewer than 1 percent of the total age cohort need further referral.

*The comparative studies.* Researchers in Ohio utilized two kinds of comparison groups to test the progress of Reading Recovery students. One comparison group was formed by randomly assigning children either to Reading Recovery or to another kind of compensatory help. The children assigned to other kinds of compensatory help were equivalent to Reading Recovery children in the beginning; this allowed researchers to assess to what degree the children were helped by the program, as opposed to natural maturation or the general curriculum. The second comparison group was a random sample of children from the grade level cohort, excluding all children from the Reading Recovery or other compensatory treatments. This comparison allowed researchers to determine whether the group of children called "discontinued," who are successfully released from Reading Recovery, could read material that matched the average range of ability in the school. The nature of this random sample—from middle and upper level achievers—made the second comparison tough indeed.

Results of the first comparison in a pilot study and in the first full year of implementation indicated that children served by Reading Recovery achieved at higher levels than did children who received other compensatory treatments. In the 1985-1986 study, children from 12 urban elementary schools were tested. On a measure of text difficulty, Reading Recovery children could read material three levels above comparison children, a difference equivalent to primer versus pre-primer 1 in a reading series. Reading Recovery children also made high gains on a standardized test and outscored comparison children on several other measures. And, when compared with the average range children in the second comparison, 90 percent met or exceeded the average range in reading.

Children were followed for several years. Each spring, a team of researchers who were "blind" as to treatment condition again tested children. This was a difficult task since by 1988 children from the original 12 schools were traced to 64 schools and by 1989, to 72 schools. Results in 1988 (3rd

grade for normal progress children) indicated that Reading Recovery children could successfully read material one grade level ahead of first-comparison children. And in the second comparison, 69 percent of discontinued children met or exceeded the average range in reading. In 1989, Reading Recovery children read material at a grade equivalent of 6.7; comparison children read at 3.7. On the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test, a standardized reading test, all children in the study scored at lower grade levels than indicated by actual text reading; the entire cohort, even the random sample, scored below 4th grade level. Trends showed Reading Recovery students still ahead. The 1989 results, however, should be interpreted with caution since project resources provided for testing only a sample of each group. Of the discontinued students still in the testing sample, 77 percent were in 4th grade and had thus followed a normal grade progression. Reading Recovery children also performed better on a standardized test of spelling ability, with the group as a whole scoring above average for 4th graders.

**Replications.** Children in the original Columbus, Ohio, site now represent only a small percentage of children involved in the Reading Recovery program. In 1989, the percentage of children successfully discontinued at sites ranged from 67 percent to 95 percent. Variation in effectiveness depends on quality of implementation as well as system factors, such as the percent of coverage (some districts serve the lowest 5 percent of the 1st grade cohort, and others serve as many as 20 percent). In spring 1990, the Ohio State University compiled data from more than 15,000 children.

Assisted by a national advisory board, investigators at The Ohio State University are now conducting a multifaceted study sponsored by The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. A series of studies will compare the effects of Reading Recovery and other interventions, both one-to-one tutoring and group instruction; we are also examining the impact of teacher training and conducting detailed analyses of the features of instruction within successful teaching situations.

*What do the study data mean?* From

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the research, we find evidence that Reading Recovery does have both immediate and long-term effects. The immediate effects are substantial and dramatic; they are consistent across hundreds of replications that involve a wide variety of curricular approaches, teachers with different backgrounds of experience and training, and a variety of economic, cultural, and ethnolinguistic groups. Further, the longitudinal data provide evidence that Reading Recovery does have long-term effects. Whether those effects will persist throughout children's school careers, regardless of circumstances at school and at home, is not clear. But for now, we can be confident that Reading Recovery teaches even very low-achieving children to read and spell. For districts with high numbers of at-risk students, we recommend the program as the cornerstone of a comprehensive approach to early literacy.

### **What Are the Problems?**

A recent visitor to an Ohio site said, "Everyone seems so enthusiastic. Come on, be honest. What's the down side of Reading Recovery?" There is a down side, and I will try to explain it.

First, any innovation, especially one with the unique features of Reading Recovery, will create conflict within a system. That conflict is usually resolved by getting rid of the new program or by adapting it so that it is not

really different from the status quo. Thus, to survive, the program loses those features that made it innovative and caused the dissension. So far, that has not been the case with Reading Recovery. The built-in system of checks and renewal have worked to keep the innovative features; for example, the staff development program and the use of one-way glass.

In addition, while Reading Recovery might be part of *an* answer to problems in literacy, it is not *the* answer. The program does one thing very well: it provides the experience and skilled teaching to guarantee that most low-achieving children learn to read and write and catch up with their grade level peers (Clay 1990). But Reading Recovery cannot be the only positive school experience that a child receives.

Children may learn to *read* through Reading Recovery, but they do not turn into different children, even though many adopt a much more positive attitude toward school. Poor children are still poor. Highly mobile families still move. Many have family problems. Some children's work habits are still not very good even though their reading ability has improved. Some continue to be discipline problems (Pinnell et al. 1990, pp. 293-294).

Further, implementing a high-quality Reading Recovery program is difficult and takes time. According to the program tenets, teachers need to develop a complex set of understandings and a flexible repertoire of moves and countermoves. Creating this teaching expertise requires long-term training and a reflective system of support and continued growth. Our experience is that without the legitimate teacher education course, even when the program components are utilized as described in Clay's book (1985), the results are disappointing (see DeFord et al. in press). Therefore, in their desire to begin the program right away, district personnel should not shortchange the training effort. They can take heart in knowing that the time spent will pay off in success for low achievers.

In large cities, with very low coverage (few schools and a low percentage of children served), high mobility, and rigid tracking systems, the implementation of Reading Recovery is especially complex and difficult. Reading

Recovery works well for inner-city children, but we need a comprehensive approach that includes the following interventions for each age cohort (for further details, see Martha King Center, Ohio State University, 1990; Pinnell and McCarrier 1989; Huck and Pinnell, in press):

1. Preschool contact with homes and the furnishing of cheaply produced "little books" for children;

2. Intensive staff development (comparable to the Reading Recovery course) for kindergarten teachers to enable them to teach early strategies and immerse children in reading and writing through using literature approaches and a whole language approach that includes intensive teaching and systematic assessment;

3. Good 1st grade literacy programs supported by staff development for 1st grade teachers and the provision of books;

4. Reading Recovery for those children who still need it in spite of #2 and #3;

5. Diagnostic monitoring of children's progress using techniques that assist teachers in decision making, as well as staff development for teachers in using such techniques.

### What Is the Future?

Recently, Adams (1990) cited Reading Recovery as an example of a balanced program that does a good job of helping children learn and use phonics within meaningful written contexts. Expert visitors to the Reading Recovery site have also identified factors such as immersion in reading and writing, massive amounts of reading, using writing and reading together, early intervention, intensive instruction, highly trained teachers, one-on-one attention, growth in self-esteem, use of good books instead of contrived texts, effective teaching of the use of letter-sound relationships, and consistent monitoring of progress as crucial to the success of Reading Recovery. Most likely, the program's success depends not on any single factor but, rather, on the complex ways factors interact relative to individual children and their teachers.

Reading Recovery is not the only exciting new program available—the characteristics I have mentioned here

are indicative of other approaches as well. But Reading Recovery can be one part of what is necessary as we endeavor to create better futures for high-risk children. □

<sup>1</sup>Reading Recovery now exists in five countries: New Zealand, Australia, the United States, Canada (Ontario and Nova Scotia), and England. For the U.S., the National Diffusion Network lists five established teacher leader training sites: The Ohio State University; the Center for the Study of Reading, University of Illinois; New York University; Texas Woman's University; and Portland State University (Oregon). Leader training classes are scheduled to begin either in 1990 or 1991 at several other sites, including National College, Illinois; Western Michigan University; College of Graduate Studies, West Virginia; and Clemson University, South Carolina. Teacher training sites may be school districts or universities and are listed in the following states: Arizona, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, New York, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. Beginning in 1990, teacher training sites will be opened in Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, Tennessee, and Utah.

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