

READING RECOVERY BOILED DOWN

Reading Recovery (RR) was developed in New Zealand during the 1970s by Marie Clay at the University of Auckland. Clay designed RR as a preventative early intervention program for the lowest achieving children who had been in school for 12 months, and who had not benefitted from formal reading instruction.

RR was introduced throughout New Zealand in the 1980s, and adopted by most other English-language countries, including Australia. This happened despite the fact that the research used by Clay to support RR had major flaws. Her claims about the program were highly questionable. RR was a major marketing success but of limited educational value.

The goal of RR is to reduce substantially the incidence of reading failure. This is supposed to be done by accelerating to average levels of performance the reading progress of 6-year old children who show early signs of reading difficulty. The RR program involves 30 minutes of daily one-to-one instruction for around 20 weeks by specially trained RR teachers. Successful exit, or discontinuation, from the program is based on children reading at a level near their class average and having a reasonable degree of independence in their reading.

The instructional approach of RR is to teach children to use multiple cues (syntactic, semantic, visual, graphophonic) to detect and correct errors while reading text. Word level information (decoding) is used mainly for confirming word predictions (guesses). Clay specifically said children who tried to use letter-sound information in an unknown word should be directed toward the message and the language structure of the sentence. This view of reading was debunked by reading researchers 30 years ago.

Even though RR has been one of the most researched intervention programs in the world, few properly conducted studies show that it works. Overall, only relatively small numbers of children benefit from RR. Children who successfully complete RR typically already have better developed word recognition skills. They are not the “hardest to teach” children who Clay wanted RR to focus on.

Studies have shown that large numbers of children are either not taken in to RR because it’s thought they won’t do very well, or they are withdrawn from the program before completion because of slow progress. And nearly 50% of children who are successful in RR lose their gains within 2 to 4 years.

Fewer than 50% of children who receive RR achieve long-term benefits.

WHY IS RR SO LIMITED IN ITS USEFULNESS?

1. Children are encouraged to use pictures or other cues to guess unknown words. This approach is supported by the use of predictable books rather than decodable books. Predictable books have sentences that are repetitive and have words that many beginner readers cannot read by themselves.
2. Learning to read is not like learning to talk. Most children need to be taught explicitly what sounds that letters, and groups of letters, make. Phonics helps in this process. Unfortunately, RR strongly and mistakenly disapproves of phonics. As a result, RR denies most struggling readers with the very skills they need to become successful readers.
3. RR does not teach children how words work. In addition to letter sounds, there are other important building blocks that children need to learn to help them read. Children need to be able to blend sounds together, segment words into their separate sounds, and break words into syllables. These skills are also really important for spelling development. RR does not focus on developing these skills even though the research about their importance is overwhelming. Struggling readers are disadvantaged as a result.
4. RR has little to no focus on spelling. Yet, there is a lot of evidence that shows reading and spelling should be learnt at the same time.

RR has turned out to be a big disappointment. One major review of early intervention programs showed that RR was no better than one-to-one interventions that were done by teacher aides or volunteers with little training. This comprehensive review showed that the most successful reading intervention programs in the junior primary school were based on phonics approaches. Yet, RR clings to outdated reading approaches that end up disadvantaging the very students the program is supposed to help.

Large numbers of children who receive Reading Recovery are unrecovered, or recovered for only short periods of time. This is because the program fails to address the essential skills beginning struggling readers need to learn.

Schools would be better to cut loose from RR. Instead, they should provide effective classroom instruction in Year 1 and identify as soon as possible those children who struggle with learning to read. Then, early intervention based on current scientific research on how children learn to read should be offered. This approach is better than the wait-to-fail approach of RR