



Briefing Paper

Reading Recovery® Council of North America

One-to-One Instruction is Superior to Small-Group Intervention for Struggling Young Readers: It Makes A Difference

In these times of tight funding and increased demand for academic results, educators increasingly turn to research to discover best practices for student achievement. A continuing question in the field of beginning reading is whether small-group instruction can be as effective as one-to-one in preventing reading failure. This paper reviews research on this question and focuses specifically on Reading Recovery, a beginning reading intervention that relies exclusively on individualized one-to-one instruction for success. Scientific evidence indicates that individualized instruction is more effective than small-group instruction.

10 Facts About Reading Recovery

1. Reading Recovery is a short-term early intervention for first graders having extreme difficulty with early reading and writing.
2. In Reading Recovery, children have daily 30-minute lessons with a specially trained teacher.
3. After their full series of lessons (12 to 20 weeks), about three-fourths of students are able to read at grade-level standard.
4. Most students who successfully complete lessons continue to progress with their average peers in elementary school.
5. Reading Recovery is in 15% of public schools with first grades.
6. More than 1.6 million U.S. first graders have had Reading Recovery lessons since it began in the U.S. in 1984.
7. Reading Recovery is a strong professional development program for teachers, strengthening literacy learning school-wide. In 2004–2005, Reading Recovery teachers taught an average of 8.1 Reading Recovery students and 41.4 non-Reading Recovery students.
8. Reading Recovery helps close the racial and ethnic gap in literacy learning.
9. Reading Recovery has been redeveloped in Spanish as Descubriendo la Lectura, in French as Intervention Preventive en Lecture-Ecriture, and is in the process of redevelopment in Denmark.
10. Reading Recovery is the most widely researched early intervention in the world, operating in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand, and Australia.

Meeting the USDE's Gold Standard: Research Evidence for One-to-One Instruction

The U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences reports that research evidence for one-to-one tutoring meets the gold standard, meaning outcomes found to be effective in randomized controlled trials. Research evidence clearly supports "one-on-one tutoring by qualified tutors for at-risk readers in grades 1-3." (Institute of Education Sciences, 2003, p. iii).

Reading Recovery relies on individualized instruction for struggling students because it is the most effective strategy for helping them achieve reading success. The following researchers have found one-to-one instruction to be more effective than small-group instruction.

- In a large-scale experimental field study of 40 schools, Pinnell, Lyons, DeFord, Bryk, & Seltzer (1994) compared results from four different intervention strategies: 1) Reading Recovery, 2) small-group instruction taught by trained Reading Recovery teachers, 3) another one-to-one intervention, and 4) an intervention taught by teachers with limited Reading Recovery training. Results clearly demonstrated that students in the group with standard individual Reading Recovery instruction performed better than any of the other groups, including those taught in small groups by a Reading Recovery teacher.
- Researchers studying Reading Recovery and small groups in Arkansas (Dorn & Allen, 1995) and Harrison (2002) concluded that Reading Recovery was the most effective choice for lowest-achieving children because of its individually tailored lessons. They found that small-group instruction was beneficial for children who needed less supplemental help and generally extended over a longer time period than Reading Recovery lessons.
- Other reviewers of one-to-one programs have come to the same conclusion. Wasik and Slavin (1993) reviewed the effectiveness of Reading Recovery and four other tutorial programs and concluded that "one-to-one tutoring is a potentially effective means of preventing student failure. As such, preventive tutoring deserves an important place in discussions of reform in compensatory, remedial, and special education" (p. 198). Vellutino and his colleagues (1996) found that early, individual tutoring was in most cases more effective than small-group instruction.
- The Committee on Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) concluded that additional efforts are needed for young children at risk of reading failure, including supplementary one-to-one

tutoring provided by skilled professionals. They emphasized the need for this intervention to be provided in first grade.

Apples to Oranges: Comparing Small-Group Instruction to Individualized Instruction

A few researchers have reported that small-group instruction may achieve comparable results to one-to-one instruction or to Reading Recovery. A closer look raises serious concerns about their findings because these studies were not comparing apples to apples.

Evidence was distorted

One study applied statistical procedures (meta-analysis) to examine 31 experimental studies (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, & Moody, 2000). The investigators found significant effect sizes for Reading Recovery as a tutoring program, but then suggested that small-group may be as effective as one-to-one instruction. This extrapolative finding came after examining just three studies that were not comparable across variables such as grade level, level of teacher training, foci of instruction, or outcome measures. Two of the studies were based on unpublished graduate student research, both of which included only four Reading Recovery students in the comparison group. In one of the studies, children were not taught by a trained Reading Recovery teacher, and in the other, the teacher was in her first few months of training. For the only published comparison study, scores of three treatment groups had been inappropriately averaged, thus confusing the effect of Reading Recovery.

It wasn't Reading Recovery

In a 2005 article by Iversen, Tunmer, and Chapman, based on Iversen's 1997 dissertation study, the authors claimed that students taught Reading Recovery in pairs showed similar progress as those taught in individual sessions. Yet, the one-to-one intervention in this study was not Reading Recovery because there were differences in how children were selected, in the teaching procedures, in teacher training, and in evaluation. This was not a study of or about Reading Recovery.

Group size wasn't the only issue

Vaughn, et al., (2003) conducted a comparative study of 77 students taught in teacher-student ratios of 1:1, 1:3, or 1:10. The study compared student-fall to student-spring achievement as opposed to group-to-group achievement. This confounded normal growth coming from classroom instruction with differences in treatment. It is not surprising that effect sizes were large because students generally do improve their reading knowledge from fall to spring. Claims of gain maintenance are based on follow-up at only 4 or 5 weeks after the intervention.

Worth the Gold — Why Students Deserve One-to-One Attention

Many schools have discovered that one-to-one instruction is economical in the long-term for two reasons: First, children move through Reading Recovery in a short period of time, usually 12 to 20 weeks of half-hour lessons (30 to 50 hours of teaching time). Professional development for Reading Recovery teachers stresses expert teacher decision making about what a child needs to learn next. When a child leaves the program, another low-performing child immediately begins individual lessons. Second, after completing their lessons, most children move forward with the average children in their classes and few need additional help.

Short-term one-to-one instruction is less expensive than long-term special education, or even retention. Without early intervention, it is likely that 80% of the lowest-performing readers in first grade will still be at the bottom of their class in fourth grade (Juel, 1998). Some will be retained in grade, others will be in special education, and still others will be in long-term remedial programs such as Title I. Reading Recovery prevents misidentification of children for special education and provides diagnostic teaching for children who must be referred.

With any early intervention, administrators must look at the overall results and evaluate the true costs of instruction. No other early interventions—group or individual—have shown results comparable to Reading Recovery. Reading Recovery is about preventing literacy failure and the costs of that failure to students, schools, and communities.

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