

INTRODUCTION

A. Background on the Internet letter

In May 2002, a letter criticizing Reading Recovery was widely distributed to members of Congress and the education community via the Internet. The letter identified the signers as “an international group of researchers who study reading development and interventions with struggling readers” (paragraph 1; see Appendix A for the complete text of the letter).

Although the Internet letter purports to be an academic debate, its motivation appears to be political. The letter was released as states and local school districts were developing budgets and federal grant applications.

While the signers of the Internet letter say their goal is “not to discredit Reading Recovery” (paragraph 2), it appears that Reading Recovery was singled out because in February 2002, local school supporters had effectively advocated to change draft Guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education. The draft Guidance contradicted the statute (PL 107-110, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) and undermined local control over educational decisions. Among other provisions, the draft Guidance

- limited use of funds to classroom instruction only
- required 90 minutes of uninterrupted instructional time for reading lessons
- omitted use of funds for professional development in early intervention

At a Senate hearing in April 2002 for the No Child Left Behind Act, three Senators spoke in favor of local control and specifically inquired about Reading Recovery’s eligibility. It is important to note that Reading Recovery has never asked for preferential treatment in the use of public funds. Rather, Reading Recovery sought the right to be considered as an early intervention option for state and local educational authorities.

In a 1995 independent evaluation of Reading Recovery, Shanahan and Barr argued for local choice:

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“It is appropriate, in our opinion, to continue to expend public funds in support of Reading Recovery. It would be wrong to accept it as the only appropriate intervention for children at risk. Public policy should permit local education agencies to adopt Reading Recovery or other proven approaches, and should encourage local experimentation and innovation to identify even better approaches.”

(Shanahan and Barr, 1995)

children at risk. Public policy should permit local education agencies to adopt Reading Recovery or other proven approaches, and should encourage local experimentation and innovation to identify even better approaches. (p. 992)

Reading Recovery is now in about 20% of public elementary schools with first-grade classrooms, and it works well with a variety of good classroom literacy programs. As one part of a school's comprehensive literacy program, Reading Recovery does not claim to be the solution for all students. The Reading Recovery community believes there are many paths to literacy and that no single program will make readers of all children. What Reading Recovery does provide is the most expert teaching for the most vulnerable, low-performing first-grade students. And, it provides a dynamic model of professional development.

The question has been asked: Why is the Internet letter considered a political attack and not an academic debate? The answer lies in the tone of the letter, in the choice of language, and in the lack of balance and civility that characterizes true academic exchange.

The Internet letter begins by stating, “the findings here are summaries of several peer-reviewed studies and syntheses of research on Reading Recovery. However, it is not our goal to discredit Reading Recovery, but as with any other program, outline its weaknesses to suggest how it can be improved” (paragraph 2).

Unfortunately, after this reasoned opening, the letter drops any pretense of balance by refusing to acknowledge Reading Recovery's documented success with hundreds of thousands of lowest-performing beginning readers in the United States, as well as thousands more in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

The Internet letter has a number of biases and omits important findings. Among them,

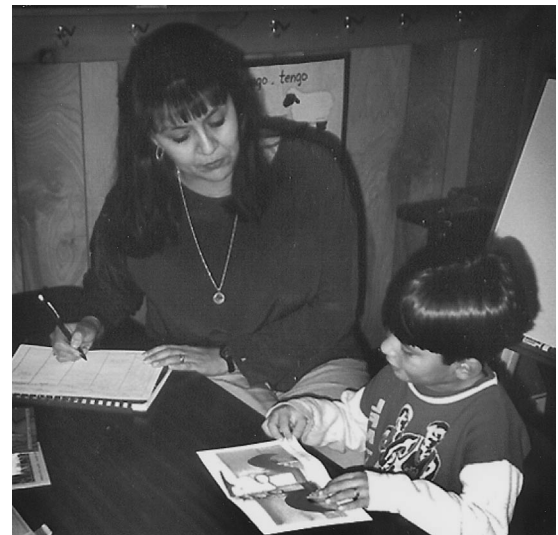
- The letter fails to mention the experimental random-assignment study funded by the MacArthur Foundation establishing Reading Recovery effectiveness (Pinnell et al., 1994). While the authors of the Internet letter might argue that the MacArthur Foundation researchers were supporters of Reading Recovery, the world of peer-reviewed articles would be quite limited if researchers who were testing programs did not publish articles about their results. In fact, external research review was built in at the design and audit of data. The MacArthur Foundation appointed a review team of literacy experts from outside the Reading Recovery community. In addition, a University of Chicago team provided

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input into the study design and conducted a separate and independent audit of the data. The report of the study was published in the premiere peer-reviewed journal of reading research, *Reading Research Quarterly*, and met all criteria to be included in the National Reading Panel report (2000).

- The letter cites two unpublished doctoral dissertations (Evans, 1996; Iversen, 1997) as evidence that group interventions are as effective as one-to-one interventions. Yet these studies provide weak support for their argument. The Evans study included a very small sample, just four children who received lessons from a teacher who was in her first months of Reading Recovery training. The Iversen dissertation did not use groups, but matched pairs of students. At the same time, the Internet letter ignores studies by researchers that document the effectiveness of one-to-one interventions for lowest-performing students (Dorn & Allen, 1995; Pinnell et al., 1994; Wasik & Slavin, 1993).
- The letter bases conclusions on a meta-analysis by Elbaum et al. (2000) that ignored one of its own major findings: that Reading Recovery had a significant effect on results ($d = 0.66$; p. 615). Elbaum and her colleagues also included studies that do not meet criteria for inclusion in a meta-analysis (for example, Evans, 1996; Acalin, 1995). The insufficient parameters in the Evans study have already been discussed. The Acalin study included 66 treatment subjects, only eight of whom were in first grade, and of those eight, four were in Reading Recovery. Treatment descriptions provided in the Acalin study reveal wide discrepancies from standard Reading Recovery procedures.
- The letter charges that Reading Recovery does not report data on all children, even though data and the explanation of procedures are publicly available from the National Data Evaluation Center Web site verifying that data are reported on every child who ever enrolled in Reading Recovery.

Clearly, the Internet letter is not an unbiased review of evidence. It represents a narrow but vocal minority opinion. In response, researchers and practitioners prepared a letter entitled “A Broader View of the Evidence: Reading Recovery as an Example” (see Appendix C). Within four weeks of its initial circulation, over 200 reading researchers and educators from outside Reading Recovery had signed the letter honoring a broader view of research and using Reading Recovery as an example.



Reading Recovery serves as a safety net providing one-to-one instruction for first-grade children having difficulty with literacy.

Following the release of the response letter, Reading Recovery researchers and practitioners prepared this more detailed report, “What Evidence Says About Reading Recovery.” Before reviewing the four charges in the Internet letter, the following section provides a brief overview of Reading Recovery and the role it plays as a part of a school’s comprehensive literacy program.

B. Reading Recovery overview

Reading Recovery is a short-term intervention that supports classroom instruction for the lowest-achieving children in first grade. Children meet individually with a specially trained teacher for 30 minutes daily for 12 to 20 weeks. Reading Recovery serves as a safety net for children having difficulty with literacy learning in any good classroom program. Results indicate that Reading Recovery meets the challenge of closing the gap early, before a cycle of failure begins. Components contributing to Reading Recovery’s effectiveness within a school system are teaching, professional development, evaluation and accountability, and implementation in schools. These components are briefly described in the following sections.

Teaching

Reading Recovery supplies one-to-one instruction to the most at-risk children from highly skilled teachers. Through Reading Recovery professional development, these teachers develop an understanding of literacy processes and literacy acquisition. They learn how to observe children closely and decide when it is most effective to introduce new learnings as well as when and how to scaffold learning support. Reading Recovery “brings hardest-to-teach children to a level where they can be full participants in the classroom program” (Clay, 1993b, precedes p. 1, paragraph 2).

The lowest-performing children need individually designed lessons that follow each child’s unique path to literacy learning. Lessons include explicit attention to the five essential components of reading instruction: phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. “To get results with the lowest achievers the teacher must work with the particular (and very limited) response repertoire of a particular child using what he knows as the context within which to introduce him to novel things” (Clay, 1993b, p. 8). One-to-one tutoring has repeatedly been found to be the most effective approach to prevent reading failure (Dorn & Allen, 1995; Pinnell et al., 1994; Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1992).

Reading Recovery epitomizes the model of prevention of reading failure as articulated by Pianta (1990). It represents a secondary prevention strategy for children who do not respond fully to a pri-

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mary prevention strategy such as good classroom teaching. The effectiveness of Reading Recovery for struggling readers in the context of a comprehensive school approach to prevention is well documented (see Allington & Walmsley, 1995; Crevola & Hill, 1998; Pikulski, 1994; Wasik & Slavin, 1993).

Professional development

Extensive training and ongoing professional development are hallmarks of Reading Recovery and are the reasons that Reading Recovery teachers can bring 60% of all lowest-performing first-grade children served up to class average in just 12 to 20 weeks of individual lessons. Reading Recovery has a three-tiered structure of university training centers, training sites, and schools to support teacher training and implementation.

In the United States, 23 university training centers provide the yearlong graduate program to train Reading Recovery teacher leaders¹ (Appendix B). The university trainers are faculty members at these centers. They teach children, engage in research, support implementation at affiliated teacher training sites, and provide ongoing professional development for Reading Recovery personnel at all levels.

At the training site level, 723 teacher leaders provide yearlong initial training for Reading Recovery teachers who receive university credit. Teachers not only attend weekly classes to discuss theory and practice, but they also apply their learning every day through teaching Reading Recovery children.

Reading Recovery teachers at 10,622 elementary schools are supported by their teacher leaders. Teacher leaders visit schools to observe lessons and consult on hard-to-teach children. They also provide ongoing professional development for trained Reading Recovery teachers to continue building teaching skills and to provide information about changes in Reading Recovery.

Evaluation and accountability

Evaluation data that are responsibly and rigorously collected provide legitimate and strong evidence of program success. Each Reading Recovery school is required to report its data to a national center annually in exchange for royalty-free use of the trademark. Data reporting is used for decision making and is integral to quality assurance.

The evaluation methodology is standardized nationally and follows accepted principles of evaluation research. Methodology docu-

¹ For the Reading Recovery overview discussion, figures given for staff levels reflect those of the 2000–2001 school year.

ments and research reports are available on NDEC's Web site (<http://ndec.reading-recovery.org>).

Implementation in schools

Positive results for Reading Recovery students depend not only on instruction, but also upon a school environment that supports efficient operations. Among the factors that affect results are

- daily lessons for students
- scheduling for students and teachers
- personnel to supply adequate teaching time
- collaboration with classroom teachers
- teacher selection
- adequate space and materials
- administrative support
- shared ownership and understandings in the school and community

C. Organization of “What Evidence Says About Reading Recovery”

This report responds to the four criticisms of Reading Recovery highlighted in the Internet letter: effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, assessment measures, and change in response to research.

Effectiveness: Section I reviews research and evaluation on Reading Recovery effectiveness for children and provides a closer look at the nature of evidence cited by the Internet letter.

Cost-effectiveness: Section II discusses a broader view of cost-effectiveness, long-term versus short-term gains, and research documenting superior results for one-to-one interventions for lowest-performing first graders. This section also provides more detail on the evidence cited by the Internet letter.

Assessment Measures: Section III provides background on the assessment measures used by Reading Recovery and reviews research documenting subsequent success of Reading Recovery students on norm-referenced tests.

Change in response to research: Section IV reports on Reading Recovery's built-in mechanisms for change and responds to the false accusation that Reading Recovery does not teach phonemic awareness and phonics.