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A NEW NATIONAL ALLIANCE:  
SPECIAL EDUCATION AND  
READING RECOVERY

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WHEN THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR LEARNING DISABILITIES ISSUED its report, *Learning Disabilities: A National Responsibility* (1994), following the Learning Disabilities Summit in Washington, D.C., educators anticipated the immediate dialogue, the media coverage, the far-reaching proposals—at last—all demanding early and strategic intervention for young children having difficulty learning how to read and write. But no press coverage followed. No proposals came forth to help the neediest young learners.

When the International Reading Association (IRA) released a similar report, *Learning Disabilities: A Barrier to Literacy Instruction* (1995), a report that identified answers to save the youngest learners from failure—a research-driven approach to teach children to read and write—still nothing occurred. No press coverage. No media blitz. Nothing!

Perhaps the real message of these two reports is that it is time for a national collaboration between two forces in American education: Reading Recovery and special education. They must collaborate if educators really want to halt the relentless referral of young children to special education because of reading failure when over 90 percent can be saved—*recovered*—by strategic early intervention in the first grade.

The first report from the summit on learning disabilities called for studies to identify model programs and the most appropriate interventions for children with learning disabilities. Yet Reading Recovery has ten years of longitudinal research in the United States that shows its success as a first intervention and as a tool for both systemic change and as an agent for change within a school. The dialogue of the summit highlighted the overwhelming evidence that too many learning disabled children are failing under the current implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1978) in public education. Instead, “. . . effort must be made to provide assistance as early as possible” (p. 7). Yet nine out of ten first graders are succeeding with Reading Recovery and are thus diverted from special education.

The summit report hammers away at the need for effective early intervention. No one disagrees. In order to achieve their goal of success, the summit participants call for (a) research directed at intervention, (b) the identification of research-based practices that will help those with learning disabilities, and (c) channels to promote this information. Yet for ten years, all three components have existed with Reading Recovery for first graders having difficulty learning how to read and write.

Most interesting, the report issued by the International Reading Association more specifically isolates the common practice of slotting children who have difficulty learning how to read into special education. Although the placement is believed to be beneficial, it may hinder “the ability of trained professionals to adequately serve the students in a cost-effective manner” (p. 6).

The IRA report identified Reading Recovery as an excellent example of both a professional development model and a highly effective intervention model, “. . . a program designed to help students who are at risk of failure in reading and would often otherwise have been identified as learning disabled” (p. 10). Reading Recovery teaches children how to read, but Reading Recovery also reduces the number of children labeled with learning disabilities. With Reading Recovery, the lowest achieving first graders not only *catch up* (are *recovered*) to the average readers in their class, but they continue to learn and progress over time, to the second grade, the third grade, the fourth grade, etc.—thus its hallmark of *sustained success*. Near miraculous turnarounds are common.

Cunningham and Allington, in their book *Classrooms That Work: They Can All Read and Write* (1994), highlighted Reading Recovery: "No other remedial program has ever come close to achieving the results demonstrated by Reading Recovery. Reading Recovery has been equally successful in teaching young learning disabled children to read and in returning them to their classrooms" (p. 254). Cunningham and Allington pointed out that out of the 10 to 12 students serviced by one Reading Recovery teacher each year, 8 to 10 of these students never need further remedial instruction.

If, as the IRA report stated, research demonstrates that Reading Recovery can decrease the number of first grade students who had been classified as learning disabled, and if the placement of children in Reading Recovery "for 15 to 20 weeks of one-on-one instruction is far less expensive than placing them in special education for one year" (p. 11), then what are we waiting for?

This year, the Massachusetts legislature—for the first time—appropriated \$500,000 for early intervention legislation that is written with language specific to Reading Recovery in order to prevent from qualifying other, non research driven interventions. This funding is currently paying the training of 81 additional Reading Recovery teachers who, by July, 1997, will have successfully discontinued approximately 500 first graders. After having conducted their own seven-month independent investigations of research relating to Reading Recovery, the legislative team confirmed (a) the high degree of success of Reading Recovery intervention to teach first graders how to read and write, (b) its ability to defer children from special education, (c) the ability of Reading Recovery to impact retentions, and (d) its cost-effectiveness (i.e., for every \$3 invested in Reading Recovery, a school system saves \$5).

Reading Recovery has a success rate nationwide ranging from 75 percent to as high as 94 percent and the child who achieves through Reading Recovery intervention sustains that success over time, over the following grades (DeFord, Pinnell, Lyons, & Young, 1988; DeFord, Pinnell, Lyons, & Place, 1990; Shanahan, Barr, Blackwell, & Burkhardt, 1993). Special education cannot come within 55 percentage points of the lowest Reading Recovery success rate.

As the IRA report emphasized, the failure is not of special education, but of policy. IDEA encourages the labeling of children as *broken* when it may be the method, the program, or the delivery model that is broken. Labels of learning disability are counterproductive, yet the labeling—the stigmatizing—continues. Reading Recovery, however, does not view the child as broken or malfunctioning, only as a child who needs help early, strategically, intensely (one-on-one), and within an accelerated (not a remedial) model.

Therefore, if children are victimized by the failure of policy, then change the policy. The IRA report suggested a change of definition from learning disabled: that suggests that schools provide high quality intensive intervention. The report stated that, after only one year with Reading Recovery, at least 75 percent of at-risk children will be working on the same level as their classmates. Only the remaining students are truly learning disabled and need the training and support of special education.

But this is the real source of frustration for educators—we are already there! Everything that these reports seek for young children is in place now and has been successfully functioning in the United States for over ten years and internationally for over 30 years. And the long range research says we do not have to settle for a mere 75 percent success rate because with effort we can achieve a success rate of over 90 percent (Clay, 1995). Reading Recovery fulfills every requirement identified. "Reading Recovery

is a way for a system to intervene for the purpose of preventing reading failure; it is preventative rather than remedial" (Lyons, 1994).

It is crucial to remember that a reading problem does not become a disability in the critical first grade; learning disability is not determined for life. It can be averted by short term, intensive, highly skilled intervention. By using Reading Recovery as the intervention strategy, a very high percentage of these children show no further need for intervention, as demonstrated by innumerable longitudinal studies (Clay, 1982; Clay, 1993; Lyons, 1995; Pinnell, 1990; Pinnell, 1991; Slavin, 1989).

Research conducted in Ohio (Lyons, 1994) over a five-year period through 1993 showed that less than one percent of Reading Recovery students were referred to special education (i.e., out of 5,091 first graders, only 26 [0.51 percent] were referred). In fact, during the 1992-93 school year, Reading Recovery teachers served almost 37,300 children in 3,800 schools in North America with a success rate as high as 87 percent, although in Massachusetts, as one example, the success rate has soared as high as 94 percent (Fall River Public Schools, 1996). The U.S. Department of Education (Lyons, 1994) reported in an urban study that, out of 700 first grade students, Reading Recovery reduced special education referrals from 1.8 percent to 0.64 percent, resulting in an annual cost savings of \$100,000 for that school district.

In one Massachusetts school district (Medford Public Schools, 1994), as one example of thousands of similar examples throughout the nation, 175 first-grade students have been successfully *recovered* over the past five years, but only five of the 175 have been identified for special education—less than 3 percent. The following examples from Massachusetts demonstrate the power of Reading Recovery to defer successfully discontinued students from special education for reading/literacy related issues:

1. District A: Of 147 discontinued students, only one student is in special education—under 1 percent. As the superintendent of that district says, Reading Recovery has had "a noticeable impact" (Fall River Public Schools, 1996).

2. District B: In their lowest achieving school, 60 students have been discontinued, but only six are in special education—10 percent—"but this figure is consistently over 20 percent" (Boston Public Schools, 1996).

3. District C: Only 5 percent of discontinued students have tested into special education (Cambridge Public Schools, 1996).

4. District D: During their first year training with two Reading Recovery teachers in two schools, all eight serviced children have been discontinued; seven are at grade level or above. Although one student has been referred to special education, all eight had originally been targeted for special education. According to their district director of special education, "Reading Recovery has proven itself as an early intervention prevention model. The current figure is one-tenth of what it would have been" (Arlington Public Schools 1996).

5. District E: Since 1993, no child has been referred to special education. "This figure is significant since these children were the lowest functioning in their schools, and, in most cases, had already been referred for a special education evaluation" (Melthuen Public Schools, 1996).

Regarding the cost effectiveness of Reading Recovery, District A above stated that, "Without Reading Recovery intervention, it is estimated (from past statistics) that 50 percent of the 147 program children would have been referred to special education, and 50 percent would have received Title I services. In addition, 8.6 students would have been retained and still would have required either Title I or special education

services." This district estimates that special education services at \$1,346,165; Title I services at \$366,930; and retention at \$33,050, for a total cost of \$1,746,145. By subtracting the Reading Recovery cost of \$385,048, this school district has a net savings of \$1,361,097 (Assad, 1996). This cost analysis has attracted enormous attention throughout the State of Massachusetts and is credited with influencing the passage of Reading Recovery/early intervention legislation in June, 1996.

The above data suggest that Reading Recovery does have the potential to reduce the escalating number of students diagnosed as having a learning disability while simultaneously verifying its cost effectiveness. So why place children in learning disability programs with no or limited success? Why maintain inequality when Reading Recovery has the potential to equalize almost all children? To continue this inequality verges on neglect or abuse of children. As Jonathan Kozol (1995) said, "The question is whether we want to be one society or two. Until that is dealt with, nothing else will be solved."

Although every educational support program is costly, what is more costly than the failure of a young child? What is more costly to the school district than continued failure over a student's twelve-year span of education? Yet, compared to other intervention strategies, Reading Recovery takes an average of only 40 hours over one-half a year, compared to, e.g., the average special education intervention of 1,620 hours over five to seven years. In fact, Reading Recovery was found to be a cheaper, shorter, and more effective. Reading Recovery is the most viable alternative to special education. Backed with over 30 years of research, Reading Recovery is the obvious first pre-referral program for first graders with reading or learning difficulties, especially since research suggests that once children are placed in special education programs that have limited success, the children rarely outgrow their disability (Lyons, 1994).

Information tracked by the Federal Department of Education (Miles, 1995) shows that more than 5.37 million children with disabilities were served during 1993-94. In fact, special education school-age children are "growing at a faster rate than the total number of school age children . . . . From 1976 to 1994, the proportion of learning disabled students has more than doubled, from 23.8 percent to 51 percent of all disabled students" (Schnalberg, 1995). Attached to this escalation is a matching price tag that totals in the billions nationally (and for Title I)—but with a minimal level of achievement that is often lost over a two-month summer break. Yet placing children in Reading Recovery for 15 to 20 weeks of one-on-one instruction/intervention is far less expensive than placing them in special education for one year.

The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) report, *Where's the Money Gone? Changes in the Level and Composition of Education Spending* (1995), examined nine school districts and found that these districts increased their per pupil spending by an average of 73 percent from 1967 to 1991, but less than one-fourth of the increase supported regular education. In 1967, regular education dropped from 80 percent of all spending to 59 percent in 1991. As the EPI report highlights, 60 percent of the money supported special population services.

Educators have answers to some of these challenges. Trained teachers can take the bottom 20 percent—the poorest readers—in any first grade and through early intervention can raise them to at least the average level of the class. The obvious answer is Reading Recovery, the most important first pre-referral for an at-risk first grader. Policymakers (national and state) need to talk, to share answers, to demonstrate effective, proactive, prescriptive programs. But right now, in the United States and the

English-speaking world, only Reading Recovery has the long-term research to demand attention.

Reading Recovery is the only systemic, long-term program in education that trains and retrains its teachers through planned revisiting and planned teacher professional development. It is the only educational program never abandoned after teacher training. And Reading Recovery possesses two traits absent in other educational intervention: it is accountable and it is backed by research.

Without a viable alternative to special education through early intervention such as Reading Recovery, one must keep in mind that (a) children who fail, fail early and fail often; (b) once a child is identified as a reading failure, the cost to the school district continues—in remediation, special help, special classrooms, and special materials; (c) reading failure is costly; the child who cannot read suffers from low self-esteem and has academic difficulties; (d) retention and remediation—coming on top of failure—do not help a child to catch up with his peers nor to function successfully in school; and (e) the consequences of reading failure do not end with a cost to the school or to the school district. Society bears the cost, too. Illiteracy often results in unemployment and a life of poverty. Since research has shown that special education intervention can neither *catch up* a student nor sustain success over time (Lyons, 1994), a collaborative model must be pursued. Instead, Reading Recovery, as an early intervention program for first graders, results in the child (a) needing fewer special education services, (b) being retained in grade less often, and, in many cases (c) being indistinguishable from the other non-handicapped classmates years after intervention.

Reading Recovery has grown from 56 students served in 1985 to over 100,000 in 1996. It has grown from 14 Reading Recovery teachers to 14,000. Reading Recovery has moved from a single school district to 49 states and eight Canadian provinces.

Kenneth Wilson, the Nobel prize winner in physics, in a recent speech at Harvard University to an audience of academics in higher education, referred to his recent book, *Redesigning Education* (1994), where he described the effective school programs of the future, programs that must include continuing professional development, reflective practice, quality control over the long run, successful scaling up, good marketing, and an acceptance of cost as a secondary issue to outcomes and achievement. Reading Recovery, he said, is one of only two educational programs to fit this description, and the development of all educational programs should be based on the successful Reading Recovery paradigm. Astounding! And all that Reading Recovery requires is support to reach the needs of the masses.

And as Marie Clay said (1995), Reading Recovery can easily discontinue (teach to read) 66 percent of enrolled first graders; with hard work, add another 25 percent on top of that. That is the success of Reading Recovery: it stipulates only what it can do, and it does it amazingly well. The goal of Reading Recovery is to untie the knots and tangles of the lowest first graders—the hardest to teach.

After ten years of Reading Recovery in the United States, over 90,000 first graders have made accelerated progress; they have caught up to their fellow first graders; they have become independent readers and writers. Reading Recovery is successful in urban and suburban communities and with ESL students, and Reading Recovery is now taught in Spanish. Its goal is to dramatically reduce the number of children who cannot read—and the evidence of that is compelling.

A sense of urgency exists. Educators must ensure that all children are literate. Society knows the consequences of illiteracy. Although success in the early grades is no

guarantee of success throughout school and beyond, failure in the early grades does virtually guarantee failure in later schooling (Slavin, 1992). Doesn't urgency demand that we eradicate the current institutionalized path of failure? An alliance between Reading Recovery and special education has the potential to eliminate this path of failure. An alliance between Reading Recovery and special education serves the common purpose of saving children.

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