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# Briefing Paper

Reading Recovery® Council of North America

## Early Literacy Matters: Dyslexia, Specific Learning Disabilities, and Reading Recovery

Policymakers and educational professionals recognize that the ability to read is critical to a child's success and to the health of our society. The Annie E. Casey Foundation makes the strongest possible case for the importance of early literacy education in their publication, *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*. They caution, "if we don't get dramatically more children on track as proficient readers, the United States will lose a growing proportion of its human capital to poverty, and the price will be paid not only by individual families, but by the entire country" (2010, p. 7).

Helping the lowest-performing first-grade children get on track as proficient readers continues to be the goal of Reading Recovery professionals, as it has been since the program's inception in North America in 1984. Research and evaluation over this 30-plus years of implementation have demonstrated that a short-term early intervention can be scaled up to achieve this goal for many of the lowest-performing first-grade children across our nation (May et al., 2015, 2016; Sirinides et al., 2018).

An intensive short-term early intervention such as Reading Recovery is necessary, but not sufficient to address the literacy crisis identified by the Casey Foundation. A comprehensive approach is needed that combines strong classroom instruction with support systems to provide individual and small-group instruction as needed across the primary grades (Askew, Pinnell, & Scharer, 2014).

Groups like the International Dyslexia Association and the Learning Disabilities Association of America share our interest in supporting the literacy learning of young children, though our methods differ. This paper provides information for Reading Recovery professionals to begin collaborative conversations with classroom teachers, special educators, other school leaders, and parents in support of struggling readers.



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We examine three aspects of early intervention that contribute to a comprehensive approach:

1. Early identification of struggling readers
2. Instructional components of intensive intervention
3. A response to intervention (RTI) approach

We illustrate how each topic is addressed in legislative initiatives, research perspectives related to dyslexia, and the role of Reading Recovery professionals in dramatically increasing the proportion of children on track as proficient readers.

## Early Identification of Struggling Readers

### *Legislative Initiatives*

- As of March 2018, 42 states had dyslexia-specific laws (Youman & Mather, 2018). Often state legislation mandates that schools implement procedures to identify children with dyslexia or related disorders (Petscher et al., 2019).
- For example, Wyoming legislation states that “each school district shall design and implement a reading screening program that measures student reading progress and attempts to identify dyslexia and other reading difficulties as early as possible in kindergarten through grade three.” <http://legisweb.state.wy.us/2012/Introduced/SF0052.pdf>
- Similarly, in Louisiana, regulations require that the “Board of Elementary and Secondary Education 1. provide for the screening and assessment of certain students for characteristics of dyslexia and related disorders.” <http://www.doa.la.gov/osr/lac/28v35/28v35.pdf>

### *Dyslexia Research*

- Compliance with this mandate is complicated by the ongoing research debate regarding the definition of dyslexia and the role of RTI procedures in this identification process.
- The literature includes numerous diverse and often overlapping concepts of dyslexia — ranging from anyone who struggles with decoding to a much narrower set of children whose decoding difficulties are unexpected relative to their other intellectual skills and life circumstances and, therefore, may be assumed to be biologically determined (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014; Petscher et al., 2019).

- Research suggests that since there is no adequate assessment to discern whether beginning readers’ difficulties are biologically determined, practitioners focus on assessments that identify students for educational support and instruction tailored to the child’s individual strengths and needs (Elliot & Grigorenko, 2014; Petscher et al., 2019; Vellutino, Fletcher, Snowling, & Scanlon, 2004).

### *Role of Reading Recovery Professionals*

- Teachers trained in Reading Recovery procedures select the lowest-performing children for intervention service after 1 year of classroom literacy instruction (Lose & Konstantellou, 2005).
- Literacy performance levels are determined by *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 2013) which includes six systematic, standard observation tasks.
- The composite score on these tasks meets the highest standards for classification accuracy, reliability, and validity as a screening tool to identify a child at risk of reading difficulty (D’Agostino, 2012a, 2012b; National Center on Intensive Intervention, 2019).

## Instructional Components of Intensive Intervention

### *Legislative Initiatives*

- These initiatives often specify that teachers receive training to support the use of specific instructional procedures that show evidence of supporting the literacy learning of the most at-risk students (Youman & Mather, 2018).
- For example, Texas guidelines state that teachers “who screen and treat these students must be trained in instructional strategies which utilize individualized, intensive, multisensory, phonetic methods and a variety of writing and spelling components . . . .” <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter074/ch074c.html>
- Similarly, Connecticut legislation indicates “any program of teacher preparation leading to professional certification shall include, as part of the curriculum, instruction in literacy skills and processes that reflects current research and best practices in the field of literacy training.

Such instruction shall (1) be incorporated into requirements of student major and concentration, and (2) on and after July 1, 2015, include the detection and recognition of, and evidence-based interventions for students with dyslexia.”

<https://www.cga.ct.gov/2014/ACT/PA/2014PA-00039-R00HB-05562-PA.htm>

### *Dyslexia Research*

- Recent recommendations regarding teaching children who have a specific reading disability are to assess students early, using assessments that provide guidance for instruction not available through psychometric assessments, and to provide intensive individualized intervention based on the child’s existing knowledge base (Vellutino et al., 2004).
- “The evidence suggests that a child’s response to this type of intervention would provide guidance as to his or her long-term instructional needs, regardless of the origin of his or her reading difficulties” (Vellutino et al., 2004, p. 31; see also Petscher et al., 2019).
- Elliott and Grigorenko (2014, p. 129) refer to this type of contingent teaching suggesting that “particular emphasis of differing instructional strategies in any given context should be adjusted to reflect students’ differing skill levels (Connor, 2010; Connor et al., 2007) and particular domains of reading difficulty (Connor et al., 2009).”

### *Role of Reading Recovery Professionals*

- Teachers trained in Reading Recovery procedures carefully observe student literacy behaviors noticing the changes that are occurring, what the child is attending to, and how he is problem solving. Teachers focus on the child’s strengths and attend to areas of weakness in the context of reading continuous text in real books and writing genuine messages (Clay, 2016).
- As noted by Adams (1996), “The Reading Recovery Program has been methodically designed to establish and secure that whole complex of lower-order skills on which reading so integrally depends. But its goal extends much further. The program is intended to help the children learn to monitor their own reading ...

and to develop a strong sense of how to search deliberately and methodically for information in letter sequences, word sequences, or meaning when needed” (p. 421).

- Phonemic awareness and spelling are taught during writing. Teachers scaffold the development of phonemic awareness using Elkonin boxes to help the child to hear and record the sounds of words she wants to write. Letters are taught deliberately during writing and through individualized alphabet books. Teachers foster a growing bank of words the child can write and read automatically. Magnetic letters are used to help children segment word parts. New vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency are developed as children read a variety of little books specially selected for them. Across the Reading Recovery intervention, children learn to use their increased knowledge of letters and words to monitor and search for information in support of word recognition processing and to accelerate their literacy learning (Clay, 2016; Doyle, 2019; McGee, Kim, Nelson, & Fried, 2015; Schwartz, 2015).
- Reading Recovery lessons are both structured and flexible in that teachers select a variety of texts and teaching procedures depending on each child’s competencies. Teaching procedures emphasize fostering strategic activities, reinforcing correct and partially correct attempts made by the child, developing fast visual processing, and building fluency in reading and writing. According to Clay (2016), “The goal of the teaching is to assist the child to construct effective networks in his brain for linking up all the strategic activity that will be needed to work on texts, not merely to accumulate items of knowledge” (p. 41).

## **A Response to Intervention (RTI) Approach**

### *Legislative Initiatives*

- Early identification of struggling readers and intensive, early intervention will help many children get back on track toward reading proficiency. However, some children will need more support for longer periods of time than can be provided in an intensive early intervention. This need for long-term support has also been recognized in legislation.

- For example, Texas regulations assert “because early intervention is critical, a process for early identification, intervention, and support for students at risk for dyslexia and related disorders must be available in each district.” <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter074/ch074c.html>
- California code makes similar provisions: “In determining whether a pupil has a specific learning disability, a local educational agency may use a process that determines if the pupil responds to scientific, research-based intervention as a part of the assessment procedures . . . ” [http://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displayText.xhtml?division=4.&chapter=4.&part=30.&lawCode=EDC&title=2.&article=2.5](http://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?division=4.&chapter=4.&part=30.&lawCode=EDC&title=2.&article=2.5)

### *Dyslexia Research*

- An individual child’s progress or response to an appropriate intervention has become a suggested approach to defining dyslexia; however, it is also apparent that “achieving a clear, scientific, and consensual understanding of this term has proven elusive” (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014, p. 38).
- “Response to intervention (RTI) dispenses with a search for deficits in specific cognitive functions when difficulties are first presented and instead places the emphasis on gauging the individual’s progress over time” (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014, p. 27).
- “When students with the weakest initial skills received the most-intensive intervention . . . their reading performance was significantly stronger at the end of the year . . .” (Al Otaiba et al., 2014, p. 23).

### *Role of Reading Recovery Professionals*

- Reading Recovery offers our schools an evidence-based, effective intervention for struggling readers as well as an appropriate process for the identification of students in need of ongoing and perhaps specialized support to ensure that their unique instructional needs are met.
- The result of each learner’s intervention is a positive outcome — either literacy achievement and processing abilities commensurate with those of average first-grade peers, or diagnostic information accumulated longitudinally uncovering the need for further assessment, for long-term assistance or for referral for specialist help (Clay, 2016).

- All decisions are based on the learner’s response to intensive Reading Recovery instruction that is provided by a carefully trained teacher, tailored to each individual’s observed strengths and needs, and delivered contingently. Instructional effectiveness relies on the expertise of a responsive teacher who makes effective teaching decisions based on extensive knowledge of literacy and learning and astute observations of learners.
- A learner’s intervention is up to but no more than 20 weeks of daily individual lessons, and the accumulated record of diagnostic information resulting from this period of instruction provides evidence key to ongoing planning. While this evidence-based guidance is paramount for decision making, Clay contends that it is not possible to identify causes of difficulties or to distinguish between experientially and constitutionally impaired readers. Rather, she concluded that successful Reading Recovery children include learners initially at risk for experiential factors (e.g., inadequate, prior instruction) as well as those who have organically based, or biologically determined problems (Clay, 2007).
- The small number of learners requiring specialist help following the intervention will include children whose problems are event-produced as well as children whose problems have organic origins (Clay, 2007). Therefore, Reading Recovery professionals advocate the importance and effectiveness of our one-to-one intervention in preventing learning/reading difficulties in many learners at risk for early failure in beginning literacy, irrespective of any related personal factors (experience or organically based).

### **Summary**

The Reading Recovery intervention provides for the early identification of struggling readers and exemplifies an evidence-based RTI approach (May et al., 2015, 2016; Schwartz, 2018; Sirinides et al., 2018; WWC, 2013) that focuses on the prevention of literacy difficulties, provides individuals with responsive instruction by expert teachers, addresses reading and writing development, results in positive outcomes for all participants, and provides information necessary for ongoing collaborative support of children who continue to struggle with literacy learning.

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