Over the past 25 years, Reading Recovery has had a significant influence on beginning reading instruction in the United States. It is a matter of fact that hundreds of thousands of at-risk children have benefitted from this intervention, as have their teachers who received specialized training in how to help beginners who struggle with reading (see Pinnell et al., 1994; Schwartz, 2005; Shanahan & Barr, 1995). Although I am not a member of the Reading Recovery community, my work as a teacher/applied researcher has been significantly influenced by the principles that underlie the intervention. In this article, I will comment briefly on several of Reading Recovery’s foundational ideas. I believe that these ideas will stand the test of time—that is, continue to exert influence—despite the inevitable ebb and flow of trends and innovations that we have come to expect in the field of beginning reading.

There was a great deal of enthusiasm and anticipation when Marie Clay brought her Reading Recovery intervention to Columbus, Ohio, in the fall of 1984. However, the premises underlying Reading Recovery were quite new to reading educators in the United States. In the 1980s, low readers in U.S. schools were not usually identified until the second grade, remedial instruction was provided in small groups, and there was no specialized training for teachers of struggling beginning readers (Slavin, 1989). Clay’s new intervention challenged each of these American practices. She stressed that

1. It is important to intervene early—during the first year of literacy instruction.
2. The intervention needs to be intensive—one-to-one as opposed to small group.
3. Intervention teachers require careful training over a long period of time if they are to be successful.

Let me address each of these premises in a bit more detail.

**It Is Important to Intervene Early**

Societal conventions determine the age at which children enter school and, hence, when they are taught to read. For many years in the U.S., the starting point was first grade (6 years old); more recently it has been pushed down to kindergarten (5 years old). Today, children are introduced to reading in kindergarten and expected to be fairly proficient readers by the end of first grade. Despite society’s wishes, 5- and 6-year-old children learn to read at different rates, particularly when they are taught in a classroom with 20 students and 1 teacher. This leads to a serious systemic problem. Those beginning readers who progress at a slower pace can fall dangerously behind their faster-achieving classmates, even by the end of first grade. Once they fall behind, they find it difficult to catch up (Clay, 1991; Juel, 1988). And, those who finish third grade 1 or more years behind in basic reading skill are seriously at risk in an educational system that, from fourth grade on, demands grade-level reading ability.

To keep children from falling behind in reading, Clay argued for early intervention. The sooner we intervene (e.g., beginning of first grade), she pointed out, the smaller the achievement gap between the at-risk reader and his or her average-achieving peers (see Figure 1). I am reminded of Clay’s simple, yet profound, point each summer in our university-based reading clinic. There, we work with a variety of students from first to seventh grade who have fallen behind in reading. Working one-to-one with a tutor for 4 weeks, all the children improve their reading skill to some degree. However, in considering the educational prognosis for individuals (i.e., “Will he or she catch up in reading?”), there is a huge difference between a first-grade child who enters the clinic 3 months behind in reading and a fifth-grade child who enters 3 years behind. The first grader has a chance ‘to get back in the game,’ to gain the skill that will enable him or her to read grade-level books in the fall. The outlook is not so optimistic for the fifth grader. This not atypical example, which clearly makes the case for early intervention, should haunt teachers and principals in the elementary grades, as it haunts me.
The Intervention Must Be Intensive

From 1965–1985 in the U.S., the dominant intervention for struggling, primary-grade readers was small-group, pull-out instruction conducted by a well-meaning, if not always well-trained, teacher or paraprofessional. Unfortunately, achievement results produced by such small-group interventions were less than satisfactory (Carter, 1984; Walmsley & Allington, 2007). Clay (1985) provided a trenchant explanation for the disappointing results. To catch up, she pointed out, low readers must actually move faster than children who start out with more reading-related knowledge. Small-group instruction is not powerful enough to address such a challenge; instead, intensive one-to-one instruction on a daily basis is called for.

Several years later, Wasik and Slavin (1993), who were also using one-to-one tutoring in their intervention (Success for All), buttressed Clay’s position. They stated that one-to-one, as opposed to small-group, instruction allows the tutor to (a) provide reading instruction at precisely the appropriate level, (b) provide immediate support and feedback to the child, and (c) substantially increase time on task. In fact, Bob Slavin (personal communication, February, 1998) once told me that of all Success for All’s various components—reading materials, grouping schemes, teaching procedures, ongoing assessments, etc.—the component most important to struggling beginning readers was the one-to-one tutoring.

Spurred by a controversial research review (Elbaum et al., 2000), in recent years there has been murmuring in the reading community that small-group instruction might be as effective as one-to-one tutoring in meeting the needs of struggling beginning readers. Not only does such talk defy common sense and the experience of tens of thousands of intervention teachers, but also it ignores the mountain of research evidence accumulated since 1985 that supports the greater effectiveness of one-to-one instruction (e.g., Center et al., 1995; Pinnell et al., 1994; Santa & Hoien, 1999; Shanahan & Barr, 1995).

Intervention Teachers Need to Be Carefully Trained

On average, first-grade teachers teach 70–80% of their students to read at or near grade level by the end of the school year. The challenge has always been how to help the bottom quartile of first-grade readers get off to a better start. In addressing this problem, Clay not only called for one-to-one instruction, but also argued that the teacher needed specialized knowledge or expertise if he or she was to make a real difference. Thus, Reading Recovery came to require a full-year practicum for each participating teacher.

In his book on the training of professionals, Schön (1987) defined a practicum in the following manner:

A practicum is a setting designed for the task of learning a practice. In a context that approximates a practice world, students learn by doing... They learn by undertaking projects that simulate and simplify practice; or they take on real-world projects under close supervision. The practicum is a virtual world, relatively free of the pressures, distractions, and risks of the real world, to which, nevertheless, it refers.

...It is also a collective world in
its own right, with its own mix of materials, tools, languages, and appreciations. It embodies particular ways of seeing, thinking, and doing that tend, over time, as far as the student is concerned, to assert themselves with increasing authority.

(p. 37)

In a practicum, the students (in this case, tutors) learn by doing under the guidance of an experienced practitioner. This instructor may sometimes impart information or theory, but his or her main function is “to coach” — to guide the practice situation through demonstrating, advising, and questioning. The ultimate goal of the practicum, according to Schön, is to produce professionals who can problem solve effectively in the indeterminate zones of real-world practice.

Reading Recovery uses the concept of a practicum. For several reasons, I believe that the program’s emphasis on such specialized teacher training may be its most important contribution. First, practicum training, an expensive investment in human capital, acknowledges and highlights the role of the teacher (as opposed to a program) as the crucial factor in teaching a child to read. Second, such training addresses the type of knowledge that intervention teachers require; not just knowledge of the beginning reading process (although this is helpful) but knowledge of how to make the process happen. Third, the training involves learning by doing over an extended period (full year), with continual opportunities for performance feedback and reflection. In short, a good practicum can produce pedagogical expertise — the tacit, subtle, experience-based knowledge that allows skillful teachers to accelerate the progress of struggling beginning readers. If one wants to verify the preceding statement, simply ask a random Reading Recovery teacher about the value of his or her training.

Concluding Comments

In this short essay, I have addressed a few of Reading Recovery’s foundational ideas. I have not discussed the innovative lesson plan (e.g., reread leveled books, write a sentence, introduce a new book), which has had an important influence on beginning reading instruction in the U.S. I have not mentioned the vast literature of opinion and research that surrounds a program of Reading Recovery’s stature and longevity—some of it fair (e.g., Shanahan & Barr, 1995), and some of it unfair (e.g., the politically driven Internet letter of 2002). Finally, I have not addressed ways in which one-to-one interventions like Reading Recovery need to evolve if they are to have maximum influence in the future (see Morris, 2005). Nonetheless, the three premises on which I did comment—intervene early, intervene intensively (one-to-one), and intervene with a carefully trained teacher—are, to my mind, of monumental importance. Innovative—indeed, revolutionary—at the time of their introduction (mid-1980s in the U.S.), these three ideas have proven their worth over a 25-year period. Today, however, they are under attack, not because the intervention programs they underpin are ineffective, but because these programs require a serious investment in careful teacher training and individual instruction. Will our schools rise to the challenge and do what is necessary to help the bottom quartile of first graders learn to read? Only time will tell.

References


**About the Author**

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