
THE MISCHIEF OF THE LOST LESSON:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE SOURCES
OF DISCONTINUITY IN
READING RECOVERY SERVICES

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TWELVE TEACHERS IN READING RECOVERY TRAINING RECORDED REASONS for missed Reading Recovery lessons over a one-month period, and found that school-related activities accounted for more than twice those resulting from student and teacher absences combined. Following this initial finding, teachers implemented specific strategies over the remainder of the school year in an attempt to reduce the missed lessons caused by school activities and student absences. In spite of their efforts, school activities remained the major impediment to the consistent delivery of Reading Recovery services.

A key to the successful results shown by Reading Recovery (RR) programs is consistency and continuity in services to students. National Diffusion Network guidelines recommend that students get one-half hour of daily instruction.

The issue of engaged learning time is not new; educational research focused intensely on the subject in the 1970s. Blair (1986) summarized the general findings:

- Total instructional time in a specific curricular area is positively related to student achievement in that area,
- The proportion of academic learning time is positively associated with learning.

Murphy (1996) defined six categories to help distinguish between dimensions of time under the principal's or teacher's control:

- Opportunity time. The total amount of time available in the school day,
- Relevant instructional time. The amount of available time actually allocated to instruction,
- Allocated academic time. The amount of instructional time devoted to academic subjects,
- Instructional time. The amount of allocated academic time during classroom instruction,
- Engaged time. The amount of instructional time in which students are actively engaged in learning activities,
- Academic learning time. The amount of engaged time in which students are experiencing success rates of at least 80 percent.

Principals have primary control over the first three dimensions. Principals and teachers control the last three jointly, principals indirectly through organizational structures and support mechanisms.

While the need for continuity of instruction through consistent service to students is well established, the sources of missed Reading Recovery lessons are less apparent. The purpose of this study was to examine the sources in discontinuity in the delivery of Reading Recovery services to students in five public school districts in Oakland County, Michigan.

Method

Twelve teachers in Reading Recovery training at Oakland University participated in this study. Each teacher was a regular member of his or her school staff. As part of the internship for Reading Recovery certification, each teacher carried a caseload of four Reading Recovery students whom they were supposed to teach for one-half hour daily. Teachers in the study initially documented the frequency of lessons delivered to each student in October. If the student missed a lesson, the reason was recorded as either a teacher absence, student absence, or school-related.

Results of the October pilot illustrated in Table 1 indicate that school activities were the cause of missed lessons at a rate more than three times that of either student or teacher absences, resulting in more than twice the missed lessons for student or teacher absences combined. An analysis of school activities revealed they were not literacy-related. The source of school-based missed lessons consisted of assorted events (field trips, holiday parties, assemblies, and classroom theme activities such as making gingerbread houses). End-of-the-year celebrations and field trips contributed greatly to missed lessons in May and June.

Table 1
Results of October Pilot on Reading Recovery Lesson Continuity

Lessons Delivered	Child Absences	Teacher Absences	School Activities	Average Number of Lessons
83.7%	2.7%	2.8%	10.8%	20.7%

Following the October pilot, the twelve teachers tried to control absences during the remainder of the school year through use of the following methods:

- Calling parents when a Reading Recovery student was absent in order to get the student back in school,
- Reducing their own absences by keeping themselves healthy,
- Controlling school-related absences by asking principals for their assistance in scheduling activities away from Reading Recovery time.

During the ensuing period from November through June, teachers continued to document the types of absences incurred in Reading Recovery lessons.

Results

Table 2 contains a summary by month of the percent of Reading Recovery lessons delivered and the average number of lessons per month, taking into account the number of school vacation days. Results indicate that each month more than 80 percent of lessons were delivered with the exception of May (72.2 percent) and June (60.5 percent). The average number of lessons delivered per month was highest in October and March. Although months in which students received the fewest number of lessons were those with significant numbers of school holidays (December, April, and June), the lowest proportion of possible lessons actually delivered occurred at the end of the school year in May and June.

Causes of missed lessons illustrated in Table 3 indicate that in general school activities account for as many gaps in service as child and teacher absences combined. During the October pilot, as mentioned earlier, the school-related missed lessons were three times greater than either child and teacher absences. In June, when the number of lessons delivered was smallest, school-related gaps in service were more than five times greater than student absences, accounting for 27.5 percent of missed Reading Recovery lessons.

Table 2
Reading Recovery Lessons Delivered by Month

Month	Percent of Lessons Delivered	Average Number of Lessons Delivered
October	83.7	20.7
November	85.5	19.6
December	81.9	15.1
January	82.9	17.3
February	82.0	16.0
March	85.2	21.8
April	84.2	15.2
May	72.2	19.7
June	60.5	10.7
Year average	81.9	17.9

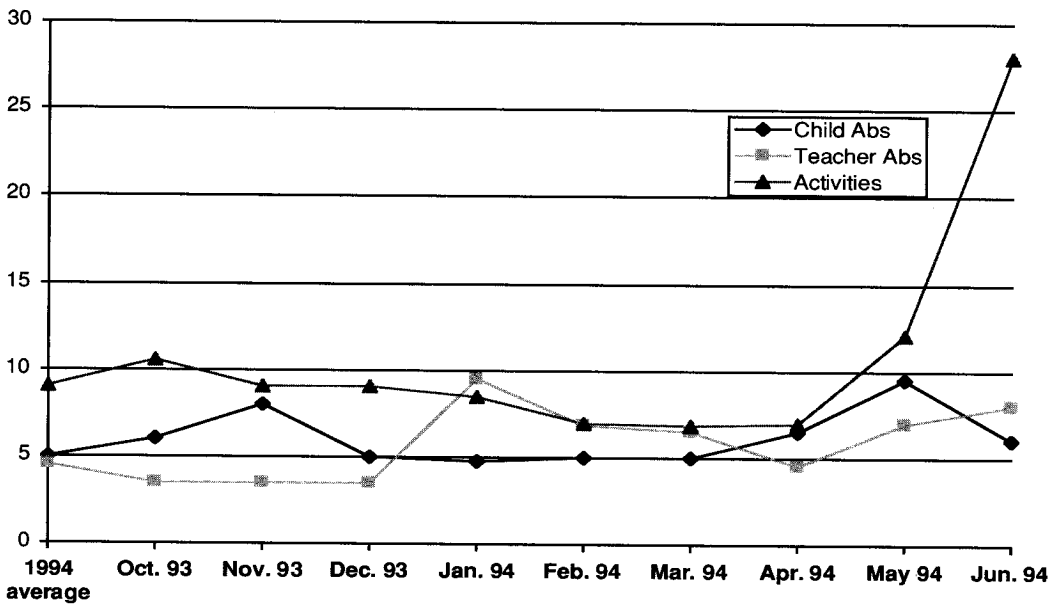
Table 3
Classification in Percent of Missed Lessons by Month

Month	Child Absence	Teacher Absence	School Activities
October	2.7	2.8	10.8
November	3.9	2.8	7.8
December	5.9	3.0	9.2
January	5.6	2.9	8.6
February	4.0	6.7	7.3
March	4.6	5.9	4.3
April	5.6	4.0	6.2
May	9.4	5.7	12.7
June	4.7	7.4	27.4
Average	4.9	4.2	9.0

These trends are illustrated graphically in Figure 1 with student and teacher absences remaining under ten percent across the school year, although students were absent from school most often in May and teachers most often in February. School activities shot above ten percent in October and May, peaking in June.

School activities accounting for the missed lessons included field trips, assemblies, holidays, and teacher interruptions for meetings. Principals participating in the study focused attention on the latter, attempting to encourage special education and child study committees to meet at Reading Recovery off-times. Standardized testing did not account for the lesson gaps; none of the participating schools administered them in first grade. The increase in missed lessons at the end of the year was caused by a variety of end-of-year events and pressures, including the need to use up field trip days and celebrations.

Figure 1. Comparison of Child Absence, Teacher Absence, and Activities.



Summary and Conclusions

The finding that school activities represented the major source of missed Reading Recovery lessons coincides with other research on academic learning time. As a rule, Karweit (1984) stated, noninstructional activities receive about the same priority as instructional ones and concluded, "It is clear that instruction is often not the major activity of the school day" (p. 34). In Murphy's (1996) framework, allocated academic time (time devoted to academic subjects) represents one of three dimensions under direct control of the principal. It is also that particular dimension which appears to impact continuity in Reading Recovery services. Principals might address the problem through attention to allocated academic time as a schoolwide goal, review of time usage with staff members, and revision or adoption of new approaches to allocating academic time. Further, principals can support both classroom and Reading Recovery teachers in their efforts to maximize the benefit of Reading Recovery services to students through continuous, uninterrupted service.

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