

Recovering Reading Recovery™

Reading Recovery, though popular with educators, is not beneficial to many students.
By an international group of 31 reading experts

This article responds to a number of questions that have been raised by educators, policymakers, and parents about the effectiveness of Reading Recovery™, a tutoring program designed for struggling grade 1 students. These are not isolated opinions, and the findings here are summaries of several peer-reviewed studies and syntheses of research on RR.

RR is not successful with its targeted student population, the lowest-performing students.

There is little evidence that RR has proved successful with the lowest-performing students. While research distributed by the developers of RR indicates a positive effect of the program, analyses by independent researchers have found serious problems with these conclusions.

Studies conducted by researchers associated with RR typically exclude 25-40% of the poorest-performing students from the data analysis.

In contrast, the studies funded by the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development and the Office of Special Education Programs in the Department of Education never purposely exclude a child. The data on efficacy are based on all those who are enrolled and available for follow-up. This is known as an 'intent to treat' approach, and it is standard for any evaluative research. RR's 'in-house' research does not follow the intent-to-treat approach.

In fact, for the poorest readers, empirical syntheses of in-house and independent studies indicate that RR is not effective. In one study, the gains for the poorest readers instructed with RR were almost zero.

There is also evidence that students who do complete the RR sequence lose much of their gains, even the best students. Furthermore, a recent study in New Zealand shows that students in RR may experience problems with self-esteem when they do not perform well.

RR is not a cost-effective solution.

Even if it were maximally effective in terms of student success, RR is not cost-effective because it requires one-on-one interventions by highly-trained teachers. A 1994 analysis found that RR cost over \$8,000 per student, while a 2000 study found that students who participated in RR did not outperform students who were provided one-on-one reading instruction by trained volunteers.

There are other grade 1 programs that are demonstrably efficacious, impact more students because they do not require 1:1 tutoring, are easier to implement, and do a better job than RR of improving student reading skills because they do not drop students. Several studies indicate that teacher:student ratios of 1:3 work as well as ratios of 1:1.

RR efficacy studies do not use standard assessment measures.

Most evaluations are restricted to the RR developers' own, non-standard measures. Thus, outcomes are inflated and unconvincing to the research community.

The primary outcome measure used by RR in-house researchers that has shown the largest effect is an assessment of 'text reading' developed by the authors. However, even RR specialists acknowledge that "The text reading measure is not an equal interval scale; that is, there are smaller differences in the beginning levels than at upper levels."

Reading Recovery does not change by capitalizing on research.

RR developers have been and continue to be resistant to integrating the findings of independent, scientifically-based reading research into their program. The lack of efficacy of RR with the poorest readers is not surprising given the research base that highlights the importance of explicit teaching of phonics for this group. RR teaches phonics, but the instruction is not sufficiently explicit.

RR has been independently evaluated in New Zealand, the country in which it was developed. These researchers, who have cosigned this article, asked that this summary be included.

"In New Zealand, where RR was developed, the program has been independently examined on two occasions. Both studies found shortcomings. In essence, the program is failing to meet the claims regarding its objectives and success. Senior RR administrators have also overtly blocked attempts to independently examine aspects of RR.

"The New Zealand Ministry of Education has stated that because of copyright issues, the Ministry is unable to make changes to the program. Despite strong evidence in New Zealand, Australia, and the US that changes are needed to make RR more effective, RR leaders do not seem willing to incorporate the findings of such research to make the program more effective."

There are three additions that would impact positively the number of students who benefit from RR, as well as their rate of progress. Costs would also be reduced.

- 1) Increased group size;
- 2) Explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness; and
- 3) Use of standardized outcome measures and continuous progress monitoring.

No single method works with all students. Methods like RR that are rigidly implemented and limited in the number of components of effective reading instruction will not work with all students. RR leaves too many students behind.

(Adapted with permission from "Evidence-Based Research on Reading Recovery," an open letter. The names of the 31 authors and the footnotes are available on request.)