

Reading Recovery

An Evaluation of Benefits and Costs

by Bonnie Grossen, Gail Coulter and Barbara Ruggles

Many believe Reading Recovery (RR) to be the best available program for preventing reading failure. RR was developed in the 1970s by Dr. Marie Clay, a New Zealand educator, to deal with the reading failure occurring there. In RR, program-trained teachers provide one-to-one tutoring in 30-minute daily sessions to the lowest 10 to 20% of a first-grade class. RR advocates claim that the program brings the lowest-performing children up to the average level of their local class by the end of first grade within 60 lessons, or 12 weeks. When students reach this goal, they are "discontinued" from the program, at which time the teacher can take another student into the 30-minute slot. Each RR-trained teacher, working a half-day, is expected to be able to tutor eight students in one year, though actual figures from the national data set indicate that the average number of students per teacher is much lower — 5.5 students per half-day teacher per year.

Because of RR's increasing popularity and its expense, more independent evaluators are reviewing the research that is cited to support claims regarding its effectiveness.

The RR data reporting is flawed.

The in-house RR evaluation system results in considerable bias in the data collected through that system. For example, the measures used to evaluate RR emphasize tasks that align with the specific strategies taught in RR, such as using context to predict words rather than sounding them out.

The standard for successful completion is not equitable.

RR's goal to bring the lowest pupils to the average level of their class falls short of a more equitable *standard* level, such as the national average. The average level of performance of a class of children from low-income areas is about the 20th percentile on national norm-referenced measures.

Far fewer students than claimed actually benefit from RR.

Analyses reporting that 75 to 85% of RR children are successful are misleading because nearly half the data are systematically omitted from the analyses. Children who are not expected to be successful are removed from the program and from the calculation of the success rate.

Children successful in RR are often not successful later.

Other research has documented that children who complete RR and return to the class do not continue to learn at the same rate as average children.

Research-based interventions are more effective than RR.

Research shows that explicit instruction in phonemic awareness beginning in kindergarten followed by explicit systematic instruction in phonics combined with extensive practice reading decodable text are emerging as important factors in the effective treatment of reading disabilities.

RR is extremely expensive.

Thirty hours of instruction for one child in RR cost more than a full year of schooling. More effective models are class-wide and actually cost much less, affect more students, produce higher performance and, most importantly, change school and classroom practices so that the need for costly after-the-fact interventions is minimized. For the cost of one year of RR in a school, class sizes could be reduced and the whole school's early literacy program could be redesigned. Installing a more effective school-wide program is a one-time-only investment, while RR requires the same level of investment year after year.

(Dr. Grossen and Dr. Coulter are professors at the University of Oregon, while Mrs. Ruggles is a teacher at Beacon Hill Elementary, in Park Forest, Illinois. The complete paper, which includes references, is available from OQE.)

A Fence or an Ambulance

by Joseph Malins

'Twas a dangerous cliff, as they freely confessed,
Though to walk near its crest was so pleasant;
But over its terrible edge there had slipped
A duke and full many a peasant.
So the people said something would have to be done,
But their projects did not at all tally;
Some said, "Put a fence around the edge of the cliff,"
Some, "An ambulance down in the valley."

But the cry for the ambulance carried the day,
For it spread through the neighboring city;
A fence may be useful or not, it is true,
But each heart became brimful of pity
For those who slipped over that dangerous cliff;
And the dwellers in highway and alley
Gave pounds or gave pence, not to put up a fence,
But an ambulance down in the valley.

Then an old sage remarked: "It's a marvel to me
That people give far more attention
To repairing results than to stopping the cause,
When they'd much better aim at prevention.
Let us stop at its source all this mischief,"
cried he,
"Come, neighbors and friends, let us rally;
If the cliff we will fence we might almost dispense
With the ambulance down in the valley."

Better guide well the young than reclaim them when old,
For the voice of true wisdom is calling,
"To rescue the fallen is good, but 'tis best
To prevent other people from falling."
Better close up the source of temptation and crime
Than deliver from dungeon or galley;
Better put a strong fence round the top of the cliff
Than an ambulance down in the valley.