

Reading Recovery helps 1st graders stay on track

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By Molly Giles

Children who struggle with early reading and writing skills are not necessarily destined for Special Ed, says reading and literacy expert Sue Geier of BOCES 2 in Spencerport. These kids may only need a few months of one-on-one literacy tutoring that is skillfully geared to their unique strengths and weaknesses.

A program that meets this need is Reading Recovery, a highly effective early intervention developed in New Zealand 30 years ago and now used throughout the U.S., including many school districts in our area. (See list below.) Geier is the BOCES-employed Reading Recovery Teacher Leader and Site Coordinator for Monroe 2-Orleans BOCES site, providing 47 local Reading Recovery teachers with advanced education, professional development, and support.

Catching problems early

“We estimate that there are only 1-2% of the population that are genuinely learning disabled in reading,” said Geier, “even though we have a higher percentage than that of children in Special Education—who are generally there because they’re having reading difficulties.”

Reading Recovery tries to catch and help those kids who have reading problems before they are labeled “Learning Disabled” and channeled into Special Ed. “Our goal,” said Geier, “is to identify the lowest 20% of first grade performers, give them a quick intensive boost in literacy learning, and move them toward the middle of the class.”

Benefits include great cost savings to the school districts and immeasurable benefits to the child, who avoids a stigmatizing label. In addition, by bringing low performers up to mid-range, Reading Recovery can help whole classrooms move ahead more swiftly.

How does it work?

A child in Reading Recovery works one-on-one with a specially trained and certified teacher daily for 13 to 20 weeks. Every 30-minute session includes reading, writing, and word study exercises entirely customized precisely to the child's needs, so no time is wasted on what the child already knows.

Daily lessons incorporate the generally accepted five essential components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness (ability to manipulate sounds in words); phonics (relationship between printed letters and spoken language); vocabulary; fluency (rapid, phrased reading); and comprehension.

Reading Recovery in action

Geier gave two examples of a child working in Reading Recovery:

“A child reads aloud a line of print with supportive illustrations, and says, *The girl is riding her bake*. That mistake should trigger a self-correction: It doesn't make sense. There is nothing about baking in the story and there is a picture of a bicycle. Encouraged to check more closely, the child sees the letter i.”

Another example: “A line of print, with illustration, says, ‘I love my father,’ but the child reads aloud, *I love my dad*. It makes sense with the picture, but when the child checks for letter-sound information, they see that they didn't read the word correctly.”

“We're trying to get good active mental problem-solving habits going,” said Geier, “so the children will check on themselves: *Does that make sense? Do the letters match my spoken words?* We're teaching children how to monitor their reading in order to fix it up.” Some physical actions help, she said, such as pointing under each word. “That action coordinates the eye, mouth and hand. It helps tracking. Some children have not learned how to track left to right across a line of print.”

On the emotional side, said Geier, struggling readers tend to be passive in their approach to learning. Through lack of success or interest, they have backed away from risk. “So, we so create a risk-safe environment, partly by celebrating their successes and efforts. The RR teacher designs every lesson for success and a little bit of challenge—to that individual child.”

Since at-risk readers are extremely different from each other (e.g., some have emotional or attention problems, while some have severely delayed language development), Reading Recovery teachers need extensive training. They are all experienced reading teachers who undertake another year of graduate training for certification, plus further professional development.

The results: empirical and anecdotal data

Educators today know the importance of early intervention in the vital area of literacy skills. So, school districts search for the programs with proven effectiveness. Geier pointed out that in March, 2007, the US Dept of Education conducted, through its What Works Clearing House, an analysis of scientifically researched early intervention programs, with ratings in four domains: Alphabetic, Fluency, Comprehension, and General Reading Achievement. “Reading Recovery got the highest rating of them all,” said Geier. Such ratings explain the fine testimonials from teachers, principals, and parents. Geier said, “I will often hear joyous statements from parents, such as, ‘My child used to fuss and cry at homework time, but now he’s relaxed and happy. When we drive down the street, he reads everything—every sign!’”

*School districts affiliated with the Monroe 2-Orleans BOCES Reading Recovery site include Churchville-Chili, East Irondequoit, Greece, Hilton, Honeoye Falls-Lima, Leroy, Spencerport, and Wheatland-Chili. Districts affiliated with the Wayne-Finger Lakes BOCES site include Bloomfield, Geneva, Marcus Whitman, Naples, Newark, Palmyra-Macedon, Penn Yan, Seneca Falls, Wayne Central, and Dansville.

