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Reading Recovery Program

by Dr. James Burns

The Michigan Reading Recovery Program, supported by the Department of Education and Professional Development at Western Michigan University, is intended to help first graders who are at risk of failure in learning to read. Fifteen Michigan school districts are collaborating with the Michigan Reading Recovery Program faculty as participants in this first year of the project. Twenty-seven teachers from these school districts are being trained in Reading Recovery procedures and will be working with more than 250 Michigan first graders.

Reading Recovery has been imported from New Zealand, the country found to be the most literate among the 159 nations in the world. Reading Recovery has demonstrated remarkable success with children who have difficulty learning to read and write.

Rather than a remedial program, it is an early intervention effort that reduces reading failure through intensive, short-term help to first grade children who are struggling in the very beginning stages of reading. Reading Recovery was developed in New Zealand by child psychologist and educator Marie Clay, and became a nationwide program there in 1979.

Reading Recovery provides struggling first graders with daily individual lessons in reading and writing. According to research in New

Zealand and the State of Ohio, where it is a state-funded program, first graders at risk of failure in learning to read were brought to the average of their class after 12 to 15 weeks of intervention. They continued to read at that level without further remediation. Three years later, those children retained their gains and continued to progress with their peers.

Clay's research found that young children who fail to learn to read are those who develop poor reading strategies at the very beginning. Poor readers practice failure, which affects all future learning, and this cycle of failure additionally results in loss of confidence and poor self-esteem. Reading Recovery intervenes before poor reading strategies begin. It breaks the cycle of failure, and develops in these young readers a self-improving system which enables them to learn the strategies of reading that all good readers use.

A number of special features make Reading Recovery unique. First, it is an early intervention program. This special help begins in first grade after a child has had a year of kindergarten instruction. It also supports the development of successful reading strategies by helping the children use what they already know. The program helps the children to become independent readers by teaching them specific strategies such as self-monitoring, cross-checking, predicting

and confirming, features which make it consistent with the Michigan Definition of Reading. Intensive, individual tutoring enables each Reading Recovery child to make accelerated progress and to catch up with his or her peers within three to four months of instruction.

One of the most important features of Reading Recovery is the extensive, continuing training that Reading Recovery teachers undergo. This training is essential to effective implementation of the plan. Reading Recovery teachers work daily in one-to-one sessions with at least four children. Once each week, the teachers observe two live demonstration lessons from behind a one-way glass, and then discuss the lessons and insights gained.

The lively, challenging dialogue of the weekly lessons and seminars helps Reading Recovery teachers to develop a personal theory of the reading and writing process which enables them to teach the reading strategies of successful groups. The Reading Recovery program "works" with almost any basal series or other choice of materials — literature-based or whole language, although most Reading Recovery teachers work with classroom teachers to create a Reading Recovery Supportive Classroom. The Reading Recovery teachers' participation in the program throughout a school year enables them to observe children at all stages of their Reading Recovery progress and to build real expertise about the way the program works.

To supplement the behind the glass sessions, the teachers are visited regularly by the Michigan Reading Recovery Program teacher leader. The field visits continue during every year that a teacher does Reading Recovery instruction. All teachers and teacher leaders also attend regular continuing contact sessions after their training year.

In addition to Reading Recovery teacher training, special training is also given to Reading Recovery teacher leaders, who are the key implementers of Reading Recovery in local school districts. The teacher leaders not only teach children in the program, but also conduct the training for other Reading Recovery teachers and coordinate the local programs within their local areas.

The training for teacher leaders now available at Western Michigan University, is also provided at the University of Auckland (New Zealand) College of Education, the Ohio State University, New York University, the University of Illinois, Texas Women's University, Portland (Oregon) State University, Clemson University, and National Lewis University (Evanston).

In New Zealand, some 45,000 children begin to learn to read each year. Nine thousand of those children are involved in Reading Recovery each year. At the end of the school year, the program has been 99.5% effective. In Ohio the success rate has moved from an initial 73.6% up to 86% of the participating children. This means that currently, 86% require no subsequent remedial help. There is no other intervention or remedial program that even approaches this success rate.

In this first year of implementation at Western, three Reading Recovery teacher leaders are being trained: Phyllis Hamilton from the Kalamazoo School District, Maggie Hills of the Portage Public Schools, and Ruth Beyerlein of the Saginaw City Schools.

In addition, twenty-four other Reading Recovery teachers are being trained: Stephanie Brinkerhoff, Carol Perry, and Marianne Speck from the Comstock School District; David W. Ross of the Grand Haven Public Schools; James Newnum of the Harper Creek School District; Mary G. Vliek of

the Hastings Schools; Muriel Renzema of Holland Christian School; Margo J. Heystek, Maxine Lyles, Francine R. Raffel, Carol Powell and Marlene Sadler of the Kalamazoo Public Schools; Linda Pugh Stimel of the Kelloggville Public Schools; Mary T. Peterson of the North Muskegon Schools; Mary Ann Howe and Patricia C. Johnson of the Oakridge School District; Ann McLaughlin of the Orchard View Public Schools; Diane Bussema of the Parchment Public Schools, Laura Boyd of the Plainwell Public Schools; Brian Dobie and Jan Krueger of the Portage Public Schools; and Betty J. Beyer and Patricia S. Maas of the West Ottawa School District. In addition, graduate assistant, Kristin Burns is being trained.

Western Michigan University faculty involved in the project are: Paul Wilson, Research Coordinator; Joe Chapel, Site Coordinator; Becky

Whitfield, Graduate Assistant; Lou Ann Grover, Administrative Assistant; and Jim Burns, Director. Jim Burns spent the 1989-90 academic year at Ohio State where he participated in three training programs for Reading Recovery: University Teacher-Trainer, Teacher Leader Trainer, and Reading Recovery Teacher. There are presently ten University Teacher Trainers, 102 Teacher Leaders and about 850 Reading Recovery Teachers in the United States.

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