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Unedited version

Reading Recovery is a one-to-one tutoring scheme devised in New Zealand, and brought to Australia in the 1980's. Designed for children in Year 1 who are struggling to learn to read, it is based upon the whole language view of reading development, but involves a more structured approach to teaching than the pure whole language philosophy would embrace.

The approach was adopted with enthusiasm by Australian education systems anxious to demonstrate their commitment to literacy for all students. Public concern about the literacy issue has been increasing for some years now, and we are at last beginning to see some degree of accountability from a reluctant education industry, pressured by "bottom-line" driven governments.

Reading Recovery is a very expensive approach to the problems of illiteracy, as it involves a teacher, specifically trained in the Reading Recovery approach, working with one child at a time, each day for around 30 minutes. The average full-time teacher reaches about 11 students per year, a cost to the system per student equal to that of a child's total annual education.

The expense of such a program must be considered in the context of its effectiveness for the students it is able to reach, and also in the opportunity cost to students precluded from assistance because there is insufficient funding to meet the identified need. Perhaps the program could be justified if it met the first of these hurdles, that is, if it is clearly successful and also more successful than less expensive alternatives.

Early research produced by Reading Recovery advocates was generally positive, but independent researchers are now questioning the findings on a number of fronts. The early research had serious flaws in the study designs which produced inflated positive findings. For example, the studies did not include students who were dropped from the program prior to its conclusion because they were not improving. In addition, low performing students were never included in the program (despite their need) because it was thought that the program would not help them. One independent study estimated that few students in the lowest 20% of readers would graduate from Reading Recovery, either because of their initial exclusion, or their early expulsion.

Additional recent research has raised further problems. The claim of Reading Recovery is that, in approximately 12 weeks, the lowest performing children will be raised to the average level for their grade, and be able to sustain normal academic development subsequently. One concern is the status of program graduates whose grade's average reading attainment is particularly low. Are they discontinued earlier, at a lower skill level, because they have the misfortune to be in a cohort of struggling peers? An increasing number of studies are demonstrating that, not only is success illusory in many cases, but even when reported success is attained, it is ephemeral. Students graduating from the program do not subsequently learn at the rate of their peers. By Year 3, there is no difference between the graduates and similarly needy students who received no assistance in Year 1. Thus the hoped-for inoculative effects of Reading Recovery have not eventuated. Students who have been in the program (at great expense) can expect to require similar, often long-term, assistance as other struggling students.

That Reading Recovery has not lived up to its early publicity is not really so surprising. Despite its laudable attention to detail in terms of systematic teaching, its views of the reading process, and hence the instructional content of its reading program, is sadly at odds with what is known about reading.

Its major weakness, shared with beginning reading programs of the popular whole language philosophy, resides in its assumptions about skilled reading. In this discredited view, skilled readers are thought to read primarily by predicting upcoming words by reference to contextual cues surrounding the word, rather than from a close examination of the word itself. This critical assumption is not supported by research - it emphasises a strategy which is one of last resort, at best. Even skilled readers usually require about four

guesses from context before selecting the correct alternative. Of course, skilled readers do not waste their time on such unproductive strategies, even when instructed to do so by their teachers. They focus on every letter of most words, effortlessly and automatically decoding even new words because of their understanding of the structure of words. By contrast, struggling readers are less likely to develop alphabetic insight unaided, and to direct them into the cul-de-sac of guessing is a cruel distraction, not simply unproductive, but counter-productive.

Some studies have attempted to improve the Reading Recovery outcome while maintaining the original structure. A New Zealand study noted a 37% improvement in effectiveness when phonemic awareness exercises and systematic explicit phonics instruction were included. However, Reading Recovery is a copyrighted program, and teachers are dissuaded from modifying the approach, however productive such modifications might be.

Other programs have been found to be more effective than Reading Recovery, and some have the advantage of being designed for a group format, thus allowing a much larger number of students to obtain the assistance they require. These programs have incorporated the content and instructional strategies shown in research to be effective in both beginning and remedial reading instruction. The program qualities include the critical need for explicit, systematic phonics in the early stages of reading instruction; the need to provide decoding-friendly text (rather than solely authentic, uncontrolled-vocabulary text); and, the need for extended practice opportunities for at-risk students.

Whereas huge sums (\$20 million dollars per year) are expended annually on Reading Recovery, only a few pilot sites have been approved for *Success For All*, a program with good theoretical and empirical support. Apart from *Success For All*, there has arisen a grass roots movement of more than 50 government and Catholic schools in Victoria successfully implementing a similarly well-credentialed course without government support or, curiously, even interest in evaluation. This model is called *Direct Instruction*, and includes beginning and remedial group-reading programs designed for primary and secondary schools.

It does appear incongruous that popular but ineffective approaches continue to be lavishly funded, while programs of great potential value are provided with minimal or no funding. Is it still the case that those with influence in our education industry remain wedded to philosophical principles rather than to a commitment to seeing our children thrive? Can we afford that?