

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 453 512

CS 014 308

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TITLE Rationale for Teaching at Least Four Reading Recovery Children.
INSTITUTION Reading Recovery Council of North America, Columbus, OH.
PUB DATE 1997-04-00
NOTE 4p.
AVAILABLE FROM Reading Recovery Council of North America, Inc., 1929 Kenny Road, Columbus, Suite 100, OH 43210-1069. Tel: 614-292-7111; Web site: <http://www.readingrecovery.org>.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Network News; p11-13 Spr 1997
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Guidelines; *Literacy; Primary Education; *Reading Instruction; Teacher Education; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Reading Recovery Projects

ABSTRACT

The Guidelines and Standards of the Reading Recovery Council of North America require that a Reading Recovery teacher "teach at least four children individually for 30 minutes daily in a school setting." This guideline may be perceived as constrictive or arbitrary, but it was established because of the importance to Reading Recovery teacher training, and the purposes of Reading Recovery as a system intervention to reduce reading failure and to the maintenance of program integrity. The paper first considers training and professional development, and then considers system implementation and program integrity. (NKA)

Rationale for Teaching at Least Four Reading Recovery Children.

by Noel Jones

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Rationale for Teaching at Least Four Reading Recovery Children

NOEL JONES

TRAINER OF TEACHER LEADERS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT WILMINGTON

The Guidelines and Standards of the Reading Recovery Council of North America (RRCNA) require that a Reading Recovery teacher, "Teach at least four children individually for 30 minutes daily in a school setting." (RRCNA, 1993, p. 3 and p. 4). The intention is that four children per day will be taught by each teacher in training and that a minimum of four children per day will be taught by each experienced teacher. Most teachers work with four children during a period of two to two and a half hours and spend the rest of their day in other education-related assignments. When a greater block of time is dedicated to Reading Recovery, (e.g., three hours), the expectation is that teachers teach more than the minimum of four children.

This guideline requiring teachers to teach a minimum of four children daily may be perceived as constrictive or arbitrary. Therefore, it is important to communicate the rationale for this guideline to administrators and other educators so they can better serve the intended goals of Reading Recovery, and so they might understand when exemptions to the guideline are appropriate.

The requirement to teach a minimum of four children was established because of its importance to (a) Reading Recovery teacher training and professional development, and (b) the purposes of Reading Recovery as a system intervention to reduce reading failure and to the maintenance of program integrity. These factors will be discussed in that order.

Training and Professional Development

Marie Clay has stated in the Canadian Reading Recovery Newsletter the importance to teacher professional development of maintaining a case load of at least four students during the training year. I quote from her statement:

For teachers in training it is unsatisfactory and unacceptable to teach fewer than four children daily. Teachers need to reach a variety of children with a variety of different problems in their first year while in training. When they take four at a time, they will probably take eight children into the programme during the year. This is a minimum to ensure that they are facing problems of very challenging and different kinds. They need this varied experience at the time their understandings of the programme are in formation.

Teachers also need to experience the way in which children can take different routes to the common outcome and how different in type and length their programmes must be. With only two children it is highly likely that the teacher will assume she can deliver a standard programme to Reading Recovery children, and not develop the repertoire

of alternative teaching approaches that she needs, for training is a critical time when the teacher is putting aside her old teaching pattern and taking aboard new ones. Because this is such an important issue, it has been discussed in several reports to districts in connection with implementing a quality programme.

The Guidelines and Principles for Reading Recovery in Canada [and in North America] require that a teacher in training must teach 'four children individually for 30 minutes daily in a school setting.' This expresses in a shorthand form the accepted practice across the world but assumes that these children will be discontinued and that four others will be taken into the programme in that same training year. (Canadian Reading Recovery Newsletter, 1995.)

System Implementation and Program Integrity

The rationale for maintaining a minimum case load of at least four children beyond the training year involves issues of implementation and program integrity.

According to Clay (1994), "The purpose of Reading Recovery is to significantly reduce reading failure within a school system." Put another way, the purpose of the program is to reduce dramatically the lowest-achieving end of the distribution of abilities so that very few children advance to the next grade reading below-grade level expectations. The theory and teaching procedures developed by Clay and other Reading Recovery personnel (Clay 1991, 1993a, 1993b) make it possible for the lowest achieving first grade children to accelerate their learning. However, in order to realize the possibility of significantly reducing the number of problem readers in a school system, the district should provide sufficient Reading Recovery service so that the program is available to most of the lowest-achieving children in the cohort which passes through the first grade during any single year.

What constitutes 'sufficient service' within a school will vary according to the school population and the quality of educational experiences available both before and after school entrance. Most frequently it is suggested that Reading Recovery intervention is needed by the lowest 15 to 20 percent of the first grade population. A rule-of-thumb for calculating 15 to 20 percent coverage is to provide one person teaching Reading Recovery for half a day for every two first grade classrooms (or one full-time Reading Recovery position for every four classrooms or 90 to 100 first grade children). In many schools the percentage of children at risk of failure is higher than 20%. In such schools Reading Recovery coverage may need to be higher, but there will also be a need to strengthen educational support for children's learning at all levels, including classroom, kindergarten and pre-school programs, and the family.

Administrators are urged to work towards the goal of full implementation within their systems; for example, the expect-

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tation that they will continue to offer training and expand the program is mentioned in the assurances that are part of the site application. However, the actual percentage of all school children helped by an early intervention such as Reading Recovery will depend upon the resources available.

Less than full implementation seriously jeopardizes the intent of the program. Without full implementation a significant number of children who need intervention will pass to the next grade. Teachers in the upper grade levels will find they still have a significant number of children who cannot read well enough to profit from classroom instruction. Thus there will be a continued demand to commit additional resources for remediation services.

Sometimes administrators find it hard to resist pressure from teachers at higher grades who find it difficult to cope with reduced support for their low-achieving students. Even if Reading Recovery were fully implemented in a system within a single year, problem readers will still be present in the upper grades during the early years of implementation. There is a temptation to reduce the case load of Reading Recovery teachers to two or three children daily in individual lessons so that their time might be spent remediating upper-level problem readers. However, this approach is short-sighted. If it results in insufficient coverage for at-risk children in the first grade cohort, the cycle of a significant number of non-readers will continue to progress through the system. Granting exemptions to the guideline for a minimum case load of four children will tend to defeat the aim of the program, which is to reduce reading failure within the system.

However, it is important to recognize that Reading Recovery children should be continually monitored, and sometimes it may be necessary to provide some support to children who successfully discontinued from Reading Recovery in Grade One as well as some who do not discontinue. Clay (1993b) reminds us that, "Although Reading Recovery children perform well in their classes some of them remain at-risk children, easily thrown by life circumstances or poor learning experiences. A refresher course of individual instruction for a short period should be most helpful for a 'recovered' child who has begun to slip behind his classmates (p. 59). Thus it *will* be important to continue to devote some time to the support of children falling into difficulty in upper grades because of "life circumstances." Achieving a proper balance between the early intervention program provided by Reading Recovery, support and strengthening of kindergarten and primary grade classrooms, and limited-time support for readers as they progress through the grades requires local problem-solving with thoughtful input from the Reading Recovery teacher(s), teacher leader(s), and university trainer in conjunction with the school staff and administrator.

In cases where a school has reached full implementation, it becomes possible to use a Reading Recovery teacher in more

flexible ways provided the needs of the first grade cohort are fully met. Therefore, exemptions have been granted for requests that clearly indicate the school is fully implemented and the program is addressing the avowed aim of Reading Recovery to reduce reading failure within the system.

The position of the Guidelines and Standards Committee is to grant exemptions in cases where the school system has made clear they are serving the intent of the program by providing Reading Recovery intervention to all at-risk first graders who need this service, and where a reduced case load for one or more teachers does not jeopardize this intent, and where the teacher(s) in question have the confidence of the teacher leader that their teaching reflects a clear understanding of the need to accommodate to each child's pattern of strengths and needs. In cases that are not clear, the applicant may be asked to submit further clarifying information.

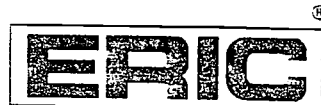
Some requests may come from districts that seek to use Reading Recovery to serve different or additional purposes; for example, some districts wish to have teachers trained in Reading Recovery just so their new understanding will make them better classroom teachers. These alternative purposes may be well intended; however, if they jeopardize the stated aim of significantly reducing reading failure within the system, these districts will most likely not achieve results consistent with Reading Recovery's claims and continuing record of success. Reading Recovery results are being carefully scrutinized by educators and researchers around the world who wish to know whether districts can realize the potential of this intervention and at what cost. Using the name Reading Recovery to serve alternative purposes tends to obscure the aims and diminish the quality and effectiveness of the program.

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