

# Saving James.(case study of struggling first grader's success in improving reading skills under reading intervention program)

by Karen Ruzzo

**Reading Recovery is an early intervention, highly structured literacy program for struggling students who have received the lowest scores in writing and reading. It trains teachers to develop the best strategies to empower young struggling students to successfully incorporate meaning, structure and visual clues. It rescues them from years and, perhaps, a lifetime of sustained frustration and failure. The considerable effectiveness of this program is illustrated in the case study of a first grader named James.**

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An advocate of Reading Recovery talks about the highly structured program - and the hope it brings to every child who struggles with the word, every teacher who yearns for his success

James, a first grader, was one of the first children I worked with when I became a Reading Recovery teacher. James knew only 14 letters, 3 words, and 4 sounds. He had some knowledge that print was read from left to right and was able to write his own name and the word More. He was one of many struggling younger readers who had fallen behind his classmates.

Knowing exactly what this student's strengths were before we began helped me build upon them. James would begin each 30-minute lesson reading aloud a few books he had already mastered. Then he would tackle the book he had read for the first time the day before, while I kept a running record of each error and self-correction.

Next, we would move into letter and word study. Using a magnetic word board, I would guide James to notice the connection between words; for example, between May, a known word, and day, an unknown word. The common "ay" sound would become the focus of that day's lesson.

James would then work on writing a story. He would practice a difficult word, letter by letter and sound by sound, before adding it to his sentence. I would copy his completed sentence onto a strip of paper and cut it apart, then challenge him to reassemble the sentence, including parts of words, such as pl and ay to form play.

Last, I would introduce him to a new book - one that also used the "ay" sound. After making predictions about the story and some of the words in the text, he would read it aloud, incorporating strategies learned in past lessons.

Within 20 weeks of the start of the program, this once at-risk student was on a par with the average readers in his classroom. He was able to function successfully in reading and writing from that point on. I realized that

through this highly structured program, I had virtually rescued James from years, maybe a lifetime, of continued frustration and failure.

### Why Reading Recovery?

Several years ago, when I started teaching kindergarten and first grade, I realized that the two reading courses I had taken for my initial teaching certification did not at all prepare me to teach children how to read. Frustrated, I offered my students the one strategy I knew for decoding words: "Sound it out." Then I discovered Reading Recovery.

Most children who have made little progress in literacy skills by first grade need immediate attention to avoid cementing poor reading strategies into habit, according to Marie M. Clay, Ph.D., the New Zealand educator and researcher who developed Reading Recovery in the 1960s and '70s. They can master the strategies that "good readers" acquire with ease, rather than repeatedly attempting tactics that fail. Teachers can learn, through an intensive, yearlong teacher-training program, the best strategies with which to empower young, struggling readers - strategies that will help them to integrate meaning, structure, and visual clues successfully. My Reading Recovery course work at the University of Rhode Island in Providence taught me how to observe reading behaviors closely and tailor lessons to the specific needs of the individual child.

Reading Recovery is an early-intervention program designed for first graders who have received the lowest scores in reading and writing. Students are assessed for inclusion in the program through six Observation Tasks, which test them on letter identification, knowledge of common words, concepts about print, writing vocabulary, analysis of sounds in words, and reading level. Once chosen for the program, children meet one-on-one with a trained teacher, 30 minutes each day for a maximum of 20 weeks. After successfully completing the program, children, including those with whom I've worked, continue to perform at an average or better level in reading and writing.

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### What If You're Not Trained in the Program?

Despite the fact that Reading Recovery reduces the number of costly special education and remediation programs, many educators still find themselves in districts that simply cannot afford to implement it. The cost of training just one teacher in the program is approximately \$17,000, not including materials, training facilities, and mentor visits. A Reading Recovery teacher must concentrate exclusively on the program rather than on regular classroom activities. The good news, however, is that even without formal training, teachers of any grade level can take lessons from the success of the Reading Recovery model.

### Assessment Must Drive Instruction

To move children forward, teachers must understand what the child can already do. An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement, by Dr. Clay (Heinemann, 1993), is a useful guide to refining assessment and becoming careful observers of children's literacy behaviors. Maria Utevsy, a veteran Reading Recovery teacher leader in New York City's District 2, says that "Reading Recovery isn't about a bag of tricks but rather about bringing in an understanding of ongoing assessment - knowing where kids are all the time, understanding them as readers and writers and knowing their strengths."

### Books Must Be Chosen Carefully

When choosing a book for a struggling reader, it is imperative that the book be challenging enough that there is some "reading work" but not so much that the child becomes frustrated. I organize the class library following a system suggested in Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children, by Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell (Heinemann, 1996), and the students in my class become familiar with the system quite easily. For independent reading, I direct each child to specific, labeled baskets of books that they can read with at least 90 percent accuracy. Books that require some assistance and instruction are found in a separate basket and are used during instructional periods.

### Cuing and Verbal Prompts Affect Fluency

Fluent readers take advantage of all they know about semantics, syntax, and phonics in order to make meaning out of words. Struggling readers must learn to do the same. To become fluent readers, youngsters must take advantage of the three cuing systems: meaning, structure, and visual cues. The use of verbal prompts during one-on-one sessions helps the child become aware of his

behaviors and learn to problem-solve by himself.

Promote attention to meaning:

\* "Does that make sense?"

Promote attention to language structure:

\* "Does that sound right?"

Promote attention to visual information:

\* "Does that look right?"

Prompt to integrate meaning and visual cues:

\* "Does it look right and sound right?"

Promote reading awareness:

\* "Could it be [this word]? How do you know?"

\* "Were you right? How do you know?"

\* "You said ----. Does that make sense?"

\* "Go back and think about what would make sense,"

\* "Do you know something about that word that can help you?"

Give the student feedback to acknowledge problem solving:

\* If the child rereads and self-corrects his error: "I like the way you went back and fixed that mistake. That was good checking." Or "I like the way you found out what was wrong all by yourself."

\* If a child rereads in a fluent and expressive manner: "I like the way you read that just as if you were talking."

\* If a child hesitates at an unknown word: "I like the way you stopped and checked that word."

### Gauge Reading Skills Through Writing

Analyzing students' writing for accuracy is a helpful tool in understanding what a child knows about letter sounds, directionality, spacing, letter clusters, capitalization, punctuation, and so on. I find it helpful to collect writing samples periodically to analyze what a child knows about the conventions of print. I record the information under specific categories, then use it to plan explicit teaching.

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For example, a youngster who repeatedly omits vowels in his or her writing would require extra attention in this area.

After three years as a Reading Recovery teacher in Rhode Island, empowering children with a system of reading and writing strategies, I returned to the classroom prepared to offer early readers more than simply "Sound it out." Today, as a second-grade teacher in New York City, I still carry with me all the lessons I learned to make children more independent, confident readers. I now know that children like James can be saved from illiteracy - and the benefits are priceless.

### TEACHER TRAINING AND RESOURCES

For information about training in Reading Recovery, log on to [www.readingrecovery.org](http://www.readingrecovery.org) or contact the Ohio State University Reading Recovery Program, 200 Ramseyer Hall, 29 West Woodruff Avenue, Columbus, Ohio 43210-1177; 614-292-7807.

For more Reading Recovery strategies, try the following books:

- \* *Apprenticeship in Literacy*, by Linda J. Dorn, Cathy French, and Tammy Jones (Stenhouse, 1998).
- \* *Word Matters*, by Irene C. Fountas, Gay Su Pinnell, and Mary Ellen Giacobbe (Heinemann, 1998).
- \* *Beyond Traditional Phonics*, by Margaret Moustafa (Heinemann, 1997).
- \* *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement*, by Marie M. Clay (Heinemann, 1993).
- \* *Becoming Literate*, by Marie M. Clay (Heinemann, 1991).

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