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Helping Young Children with Reading Difficulties

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Children typically learn and practice their reading skills while they are in grades one through three.

Because reading is an ongoing development of a complex skill, however, a wide range of abilities are evident in the early years. The most advanced children arrive at school with some reading skills already developed. Others begin school with a high degree of "reading readiness," meaning they are aware of the alphabet sounds, have some understanding that combinations of letters produce more complex sounds, and that written language can be deciphered once the rules for "sounding-out" are sufficiently understood. Finally, there are children who struggle with reading during their first years, and may always lag behind without extra help. This article is devoted to this last group of young readers.

Historically, some debate has existed over ideal methods for instructing young children in reading. On the one hand, some educators favour intensive phonics instruction, where an emphasis is placed on letter-sound combinations and the decoding of phonemes, or "sound units." On the other hand, some teachers advocate a whole language approach, where children are encouraged to recognize words through repetition of stories, and the recognition of word shapes. My own view is that an over-reliance on either strategy is ill-advised; the two approaches are best used in conjunction.

One currently popular reading remediation program incorporates aspects of both types of teaching approaches. Reading Recovery is a school-based early intervention for children, giving those who have particular difficulties in reading a period of intensive, individual help. The program emphasizes both the development of phonological awareness and the use of contextual information to assist reading. A typical length of intervention is from 12 to 16 weeks.

Children entering the program are those who have the most difficulty in reading and writing after one year at school, as determined by a series of objective assessments. Reading Recovery is directed at the lowest achieving six-year-olds in the mainstream classroom. An important part of the Reading Recovery program is the training of the teachers who provide the reading instruction. Reading Recovery teachers learn to observe and analyze the reading of individual students, and to design and implement an individual program to meet each student's needs. Some typical elements of the program include:

- The teaching is individually designed and individually delivered. Each child has an intensive program of daily, 30 minute lessons. This instruction is supplementary to normal classroom instruction.

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- The children read many small books during each lesson, some of which are written in a style close to that of oral language. In addition, children read slightly more challenging texts that they have not read before. Teachers analyze the child's reading performance on a daily basis.

- The comprehension of messages in reading is the focus of each lesson. As part of this process, children also compose and read their own messages or stories. They learn how to attend to detail without losing focus on meaning.

Parents, educators, and teachers are, of course, interested in knowing the likelihood of success of the program. To date, research has found that the program is effective and recommend it with only minor reservations. For example, a series of studies of the Ohio Reading Recovery program has found that the program is successful in accelerating 3 out of 4 students up to the level of their peers (Pollock, 1994).

One reservation about this particular reading remediation program is the high per-pupil cost. Remember, the instruction consists of intensive and individual help. Dyer (1992) points out, however, that the initial high cost is offset by the money saved through (1) not having to keep low-achieving students in the first grade; (2) not having to place students in special education programs; and (3) not mislabeling a child as "learning disabled" when the child needed only the brief, supplementary intervention provided by

Reading Recovery. Although the costs may seem to be high initially, Reading Recovery is actually one example of a sound and cost-effective early intervention program for helping children who struggle with reading in their early school years.

Referneces

Dyer, Philip C. (1992). *Reading Recovery: A Cost-Effectiveness and Educational Outcomes Analysis*. Spectrum, 10(1), 10-19.

Pollock, John S. (1994). *Reading Recovery Program 1992-93. Elementary and Secondary Education Act— Chapter 1. Final Evaluation Report*. Columbus Public Schools, Ohio. Department of Program Evaluation.