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As We See It; Classroom Teachers View Reading Recovery

**Jennifer Hamill
Cynthia Kelly
Jeanne M. Jacobson**

This is the second article in this special issue not written by Reading Recovery trained teachers. Hamill and Kelly are first grade teachers in one of the 26 participating schools in the first year of Reading Recovery implementation in Michigan. In response to questions by the editor of Reading Horizons, they explain the program — its impact on the Reading Recovery children and on their classroom teaching.

Clearly the concerted work of the Reading Recovery teacher-in-training and these teachers demonstrates that the Reading Recovery program is an intervention in the education system, as well as a program for children.

It's an early spring morning and three teachers who've known one another for several years are sitting at a low table in Jennifer Hamill's sunny first grade classroom, putting the final touches on an article about how Reading Recovery has touched children, teachers, and first grade classes. We've written, and talked, and written, and this is the time to polish our ideas in the question-answer format we've decided on.

Questions come from Jeanne Jacobson, editor of Reading Horizons, and answers come from Jennifer, and her colleague Cynthia Kelly.

Jeanne: Let's talk about history — recent history, since the Reading Recovery program was established at Western Michigan University in 1990, and came to your school last fall. Tell me about your school's involvement, and your own, in the program. Are you the only two classroom teachers in your school who have children in the program?

Cynthia: Yes. The Reading Recovery program began in Plainwell Community Schools in September of 1990. The program has only one Reading Recovery teacher, Mrs. Laura Boyd. It's located only at our school, Starr Elementary, and in this first year, there are two first grade classrooms involved.

Jeanne: Tell me about the students in Reading Recovery. Can you give me a sketch of how you saw the effects of the program reflected in their classroom progress? Is the story the same for each of these students, or did you see different responses, different rates of progress — even differing feelings about the program?

Jennifer: Rick began the program with very limited concepts about print, but a great ability to tell a story according to the pictures. He was easily frustrated in his reading and writing efforts. Several weeks into the Reading Recovery program he understood the one-to-one correspondence between a spoken word and a word in print, and was gaining knowledge of letter names and letter sounds. Now he is excited when he knows he has read something accurately and is proud and eager to share his accomplishments.

Although his reading progress is not as rapid as Ann's, he is really dedicated to learning. It's thrilling to watch his self-confidence become stronger every day, especially since he is a child who faces many difficulties. He spent one year in developmental kindergarten and one year in regular kindergarten, and still came into first grade with one of the

lowest predictions for reading success. He has speech problems, and I think these have interfered with his understanding symbol-sound correspondence. His writing has improved dramatically over the year, but you can see here, for example, that he's used an L to represent TH — that's a sound he can't yet articulate. (Writing and drawing by Rick are shown in Figures 1 and 2, and by Ann, in Figures 3 and 4.)

Figure 1: Rick's writing and drawing in September

In September, Rick pictured himself arms outstretched — the fish was this big! His writing mixes letters and letter-like forms; only by chance do the letter combinations occasionally form words or pronounceable units.



One unexpected aspect of the program is that the children in Reading Recovery tend to become more forceful. One day when the Reading Recovery teacher was working with Rick he was misbehaving and Laura told him he would have to leave if he didn't settle down. He shouted, "*But I want to LEARN!*" That was a surprise — but it was a pleasure to hear!

Figure 2: Rick's writing and drawing in April

In an April story, Rick's pictured self is no longer the most exciting part of his picture — words are the primary focus:

I Wat lis Kat — (*I want this kite*).



Ann's academic growth is very evident. When she began the program she had some beginning concepts about print, and about symbol-sound correspondence, but these were quite limited. Now she understands so much more about language, and Laura and I build on these strengths. She knows when she makes an error in reading, and I'm beginning to see in Ann the same self-correcting behavior I see in my skilled readers. Her invented spelling in her classroom journal is becoming closer to transitional and standard spelling.

Figure 3: Ann's writing and drawing in September

In September, Ann's vigorous little self drawing is typical of the products of chronologically younger children. Her writing is composed of capital letters, and she's written some family names: KIM DAD.



Cynthia: In my class, one of the children who began in Reading Recovery was eventually enrolled in an alternative program, and another was accepted rather late in the year. I've seen a positive change in all the children socially, as well as academically, that I don't think would have occurred without Reading Recovery. They've reached personal goals on a weekly basis, and this gives them a new level of confidence. Mary has become confident about her reading. She wants to read to her classmates, and likes to read with them.

During the time he was in Reading Recovery, Tom became more confident in his reading, especially at home. He is still struggling when he reads in the classroom, but his parents have been delighted with his eagerness to read his Reading Recovery books to them. Being able to read entire books is exciting for him. Tom has progressed by making small steps and is beginning to use some reading strategies. I've been particularly impressed with Mary's progress in writing, which was very primitive at the beginning of the year. Now that she's showing understanding of sentence structure and mechanics, her creativity has blossomed and her writing is no longer as constricted. She's using writing to communicate her ideas. Reading Recovery instills confidence and self-motivation in children. They're no longer afraid to take risks, and this motivates them to think, question and learn.

Figure 4: Ann's writing and drawing in April

In an April piece of writing, her story lets us understand her illustration.



She uses capitals and lower case letters; she punctuates correctly — apostrophe, periods. She knows what she doesn't know,

for she's left out the word or words to describe what Kelly is, and left a space to fill in later.

I'm the gingerbread man. Killy is the...

I ran away frm a dar.

(I'm the gingerbread man. Kelly is the ...

I ran away from a bear.)

And there's the frightening bear!

I'm the gingerbread
man killy is the
I ran away frm a
dar.

Jeanne: Classroom teachers are, rightly, concerned about the integrity of their own programs. What adjustments have you needed to make, now that Reading Recovery is a part of your school? Are there negative as well as positive aspects about having Reading Recovery here?

Jennifer: We recognize that teachers need to adapt classroom procedures to meet the individual needs of their students, and fitting our programs in with the Reading Recovery program is one such adjustment. Before the program began in our school we were aware of the success rate of the program. Now that I've witnessed firsthand the achievements of my two students, having them leave for thirty minutes each day is not a problem. I wish all of my struggling readers could receive this same percentage of individual instruction.

Cynthia: We've adjusted, but so has the Reading Recovery teacher. Laura's efforts to accommodate our schedules have been outstanding. When the program began I had concerns about my students missing the special events that happen during a school day — assemblies, extracurricular activities, special classroom projects. I didn't want participation in Reading Recovery to be a disappointment for my students. Now I've seen that this rarely happens. If efforts are made by all the teachers involved, participation in Reading Recovery can be seen by the children who participate as a gain and not a loss.

An advantage of the program is that we've had a chance to work directly with the Reading Recovery teacher, and I believe this has been a key to the students' success. Together we've defined students' strengths and needs in reading and writing. We've been consistent in encouraging each student to build strategies to apply both in and out of the classroom, and the students know that the skills they're learning are not for use only in the Reading Recovery teaching sessions.

Jennifer: One regret I do have is that it's been difficult to find a good place in our building to house the program, though both the Reading Recovery teacher and the principal have worked to produce a quiet, cheerful and inviting area. Reading

Recovery is such an important service that locating it properly needs to receive high priority before the program even begins.

Jeanne: Are there "spin-offs" from the program that have an effect on other students, and on your teaching?

Jennifer: The information I continue to learn through the Reading Recovery program is very exciting. I'm using that information to improve my own teaching and my ability to judge the reading progress of all my students. I find that I evaluate students now on their individual efforts and base my teaching more directly on their personal reading strengths.

Cynthia: I use my own experience with Reading Recovery on a daily basis in my classroom. I respect the program for being child-based, building on the success and knowledge of each individual — and not based on inappropriate comparisons among children. The philosophy and the diagnostic tools used in Reading Recovery are helping me establish an individualized reading program in my classroom. The short patterned tradebooks used in Reading Recovery are a very effective tool for all young readers. They teach important sight words and their patterned nature and picture clues help insure success for the reader.

Jennifer: I'm glad that Laura showed us how to take and interpret a running record. This has become a valuable tool in my own classroom reading instruction. I find that I can more easily pinpoint what kinds of instruction each of my students needs and teach them that, instead of wasting precious time with instruction they don't need. For example, the first time I took running records, I found three students who were experiencing the same difficulty with the *-ed* ending. I grouped them together temporarily to teach a skill they needed immediately. The running record is also useful when we discuss with parents a child's strengths and areas of difficulty.

The Reading Recovery program has further strengthened my belief that early readers should be instructed according to their individual needs. We should challenge children to excel,

as well as to celebrate what they know now, and find excitement in their personal accomplishments.

Cynthia: Both of us find that we used to talk primarily about teaching stories, and now we think and talk about teaching *strategies*, which is where we know our attention should be. Reading Recovery supports this focus.

Jeanne: *We're talking about Reading Recovery in its first year here. What changes do you see already, and what do you see in the future?*

Jennifer and Cynthia: The focus of the reading teacher is changing. There's more prevention rather than remediation. There's going to be better, faster help for the struggling reader. The program is already having an influence in the classroom both on testing practices and instructional efforts. We're using running records; we use cut up sentences; the little books are wonderful. There's more opportunity for practice with material children can work with and find success with right away.

Jeanne: *Your audience is a wide one — all of the readers of Reading Horizons. What's your final word to them?*

Jennifer: I believe that half the battle in becoming a good reader is seeing yourself as a reader, and Reading Recovery has helped my students to view themselves as readers. It's a program that works, by preventing a problem from growing. It won't cure every academic or social struggle but each positive development will help the student.

Cynthia: I've studied the research and seen the effects of Reading Recovery. I am excited to see the program here in Michigan, and am eager for its nationwide growth.

The children are coming! Mrs. Kelly is off to her classroom, a bright setting alive with books — Big Books, little books, books the children have written, drafts of stories in the process of being written and revised. The Reading Recovery teacher will be picking up Mary for her Reading Recovery session.

In Ms. Hamill's class, children enter talking, and head for the books. Two children select Frederick from among the books displayed under the sign, Our New Author is Leo Lionni, and settle down to read together. Others head for the bookracks where their own books are stacked and shelved with a wealth of much-thumbed tradebooks. One child picks out Chris Van Allsburg's The Z was Zapped, and sits, back to the bookshelf, turning the pages and murmuring. Children's posters are everywhere: Ways to Help A Environment. Plat a new tree eveey year. Do not cut down tees. They give us oxygen. The bulletin board by Ms. Hamill's desk is a collage of pictures and letters from the children, with pride of place given to a cheery crayoned bookmark: Raed a book. I tink you will like It!

She flicks on a record and children begin to sing. One of them grabs a pointer, and leads the song as they cluster round a poster with stanzas written alternately in blue and green: Oh, the rain comes down, and it falls to the ground, and it flows down the river to the sea. The great and mighty ocean waves to the sky, as the clouds pass filled with oceans and oceans, oceans of rain. Drip drop drip drop. Drip-a drop-a drip-a drop-a. Drip Drop. Somewhere in this active group of readers are Ann and Rick, indistinguishable, to a visitor, from their classmates. Reading Recovery has helped to answer Rick's shout: "I want to learn!"

End Note: *By the time this article went to press, the children described had been discontinued from the program.*

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