We can do better than Reading Recovery

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Reading Recovery (RR) is a short-term tutoring intervention that provides one-on-one tutoring to first-grade students who are struggling in reading and writing. It has been a popular program, but it is now on the way out in New South Wales. The NSW Department of Educaton decided to axe its $50 million dollar funding of the program following its own internal review.

NSW's internal review was not the first time RR has been red-flagged. New Zealand academics have mentioned that the research into the effectiveness of the program in New Zealand isn't doing RR any favours. Distinguished literacy expert, Louisa Moats, on a recent visit to Australia even went so far as to say the program is 'harmful'. She commented, "The whole [Reading Recovery] approach is based on ideas that have not held up to scientific scrutiny. So it is indefensible to keep on spending money on this."

Yes, there have been some red flags for a while, but now that the decision has been made, was it the right one? I say yes.

Reading Recovery is theoretically flawed

RR uses a well-known model called the Three Cueing System. Students are meant to draw on three cues – syntactic, semantic and graphophonic – to decode and make meaning from text. The Three Cueing System has a shady past and reminds me of Kenneth Goodman's long-discredited Psycholinguistic Guessing Game.

Both ideas share the understanding that students draw on contextual clues to decode text and that the use of phonological information does not play a significant role. For many years in the 20th century, rhetoric and intuition reigned because decisive evidence on the issue of how students come to read was hard to obtain. However, this is 2018 and there most certainly is evidence. Research has converged on the same conclusion: phonological information is an essential element in skilled reading and impairments in the use of phonological information are typical of poor readers. It is now known that good readers do not rely on context to decode text; they rely on precise and detailed attention to letters and words. Guessing informed by syntactic and semantic cues is used by poor readers to compensate for their poor decoding ability (Seidenberg, 2017).

Knowing that the use of context is characteristic of poor readers, we must ask why we would support a program that encourages students to use it.

Reading Recovery support was always based on flawed research evidence

It is true that RR has research evidence in its favour (examples), but the evidence oft presented is flawed. From what I have seen, the studies never actually pin the intervention against any other plausible intervention designed to increase

reading achievement. Instead, most of the studies evaluate its effectiveness against doing nothing. Even if RR is flawed in its design, doing something is better than nothing, especially on a one-to-one basis. In this paper, Benjamin Bloom describes the profound effect a one-to-one intervention has on achievement. Given that a child in a one-to-one intervention has the exact same time for instruction as peers in a normal classroom scenario, the child in the one-to-one intervention will learn significantly more than their peers (in one study cited, it was 2 standard deviations). This tutoring effect has a lot to do with the fact students in one-to-one environments are much more likely to stay engaged in the task, and the corrective feedback they receive is tailored perfectly and given at the perfect time.

So, even if RR is flawed, students are of course still going to benefit from it in the short term – it is better than doing nothing!

There are better alternatives

If we would like to measure the effectiveness of RR, perhaps we should compare its effect to other one-to-one interventions for struggling readers such as a high-quality systematic synthetic phonics program. Indeed, we now have three national inquiries into the

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teaching of reading that explicitly state that systematic phonics is an absolutely essential part of learning to read. The conclusions of the three inquiries are informed by the large body of evidence showing that the use of phonological information is an essential element in skilled reading. Because RR is designed to help students who are struggling readers, it is worth noting that those students presenting with reading difficulties overwhelmingly have problems with English's deep alphabetic code; they have trouble matching the sounds of the language to the letters that represent these sounds in writing and vice versa. To help our struggling 6-year-olds, it seems completely logical to implement programs that target this problem. These programs do exist and they are a much better alternative.

We can do so much better than Reading Recovery. It was time for the program to go.

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