



"An impressive and growing body of authoritative opinion and research evidence suggests that reading failure is preventable for all but a very small percentage of children."¹

— John Jay Pikulski

Reading Recovery®
Council of North America

www.readingrecovery.org

TEN PRINCIPLES IN LITERACY PROGRAMS THAT WORK²

by Gay Su Pinnell

National attention is focused on early literacy, as several panels investigate and debate new directions in teaching children to read and write. The National Research Council Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children has analyzed research on effective programs for students who are having difficulty learning to read and write. This research meets the criteria established by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) for reliable, replicable research. Based on a survey of research that met the NICHD criteria, including the research presented in *The Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998), 10 principles provide guidance for designing early intervention programs.

Research has demonstrated that young readers having difficulty are mostly of average intelligence, and they have problems resulting from multiple and differing causes. With appropriate intervention, almost all can learn to read, provided instruction is intensive and begins early. It is therefore important that reading interventions be multi-dimensional to meet the diverse needs of learners.

The following discussion illustrates how Reading Recovery epitomizes the 10 principles in literacy programs that work. These principles operate throughout a Reading Recovery lesson and apply differently for each child who is learning to read and write (see box, below). The power of Reading Recovery lies in the integration of the 10 research-based components and the careful, sensitive application of these components during a Reading Recovery lesson.

The Reading Recovery Lesson

- Reading familiar stories
- Reading a story that was read for the first time the day before
- Working with letters and/or words using magnetic letters
- Writing a story
- Assembling a cut-up story
- Introducing and reading a new book

¹ Pikulski, J. J. (1994, September). Preventing reading failure: A review of five effective programs. *The Reading Teacher*, 48:1, 30-39.

² Pinnell, G. S. (2000). *Reading Recovery: An analysis of research-based reading intervention*. Columbus, OH: Reading Recovery Council of North America.

PRINCIPLE #1

Phonological Awareness: Teach students to hear the sounds in words.

Developing the ability to hear the sounds in words is explicitly recognized in Reading Recovery. When children are evaluated for selection for Reading Recovery, a measure of ability to hear and record sounds in words is used. Performance on this measure of phonological awareness provides data that teachers use daily as they work individually with young children. Children selected for Reading Recovery are the lowest achievers in their first grade classes. Most, although not all, need instruction to develop phonological awareness.

PRINCIPLE #2

Visual Perception of Letters: Teach students to perceive and identify letters of the alphabet.

Students are assessed for letter recognition as part of the battery of tests used for selection. Most children who enter Reading Recovery need to learn more about letters, have very limited knowledge, and need to learn how to look at print.

Because Reading Recovery teachers work one-to-one every day and keep daily records, it is possible to identify with precision what the child knows or is confused about. Teachers begin with the known set of letters and work for expansion. For children with very low letter knowledge, teachers use movement and, if necessary, verbal and visual approaches to help the child remember the letter. Children write letters, construct their own alphabet book recording their knowledge to date, and work extensively with magnetic letters.

Program evaluation reports indicate that with very few exceptions, children who participate in the program can identify the 54 characters (upper and lower case letters of the alphabet, plus the print version of a and g) by the end of the 12- to 20-week program.

PRINCIPLE #3

Word Recognition: Teach students to recognize words.

First-grade children who are having extreme difficulty in learning to read and write generally know very few if any words. These children are just learning to look at print and to identify a few letters and sounds. It is helpful to build a small but expanding repertoire of words that the child knows in detail and can recognize quickly. With that goal in mind, early in the program, the teacher works to extend knowledge of words by having children make words using magnetic letters, trace words, and write words. Word cards may also be used. The words that the teacher selects to teach to children are

- words with high utility,
- words which occur most often in the language,
- words needed often in writing, and
- words the child almost knows and that a little more practice will bring to overlearning.

PRINCIPLE #4

***Phonics/Decoding Skills:* Teach students to use simple and complex letter-sound relationships to solve words in reading and writing.**

In Reading Recovery lessons, children learn letter-sound relationships in several different ways, and they are taught to apply that knowledge in reading and writing. Word-solving skills are assessed on a word reading test, a test of hearing and recording sounds in words, and a test of text reading. Analysis of students' errors while they read texts reveals their current skills, and the teacher works from there. Through explicit instruction based on the individual's needs, students are taught to analyze words while reading text. Strategies include left-to-right letter or letter cluster sound analysis as well as noticing word parts. Several different components of the lesson foster the use of sounds and letter correspondence. All instruction is directed toward helping children learn how words work and the automatic, rapid recognition of words while reading for meaning.

If the child has low letter knowledge, the teacher will work intensively with letters; but when the child knows about 20 letters, the teacher will also begin to do some work with words in isolation. This procedure is called *making and breaking*. Using magnetic letters, the teacher works with the child each day, moving from making words that the child knows to using predictable (regular) letter-sound sequences, to simple analogies, and to less predictable letter-sound sequences. The process is systematic in that the teacher has a precise record of the sound-letter sequences that the child already knows and can use; the expansion of knowledge moves from that place to more complex associations. The emphasis is on flexibility and on helping children learn principles to apply in solving many words.

PRINCIPLE #5

***Phonics/Structural Analysis:* Teach students to use structural analysis of words and learn spelling patterns.**

In Reading Recovery, word analysis is integral to the reading and writing of continuous texts, and there is also explicit instruction in structural analysis of words. Words are considered in isolation to illustrate principles that help children gain control of the principles that underlie English spelling. There is a strong link to reading and writing, with the goal of helping children quickly use knowledge of word structure to take words apart and to spell words.

PRINCIPLE #6

***Fluency/Automaticity:* Develop speed and fluency in reading and writing.**

In Reading Recovery, there is a strong emphasis on teaching for fluency and phrasing in oral reading. In the 30-minute Reading Recovery lesson, the majority of time is devoted to students' reading of continuous text. While it is important for children to read and use problem-solving skills on a new, challenging text every day, Reading Recovery teachers also make extensive use of rereading texts. Teachers select texts carefully to encourage fluency.

PRINCIPLE #7

Comprehension: Teach students to construct meaning from print.

Reading Recovery students are taught that what they read must make sense. Instruction helps students develop a variety of strategies directed toward helping children search for meaning as they read. In fact, the Reading Recovery teacher assures that children never lose meaning by careful text selection, careful introduction, and conversation about the story. These strategies (called a self-extending system) include helping children

- monitor their own reading and writing;
- search for cues in word sequences, in meaning, and in letter sequences;
- discover new things for themselves;
- repeat as if to confirm the reading or writing so far;
- self-correct, taking the initiative for making cues match or getting words right; and
- solve new words by using all the above strategies.

PRINCIPLE #8

Balanced, Structured Approach: Provide a balanced approach so that literacy develops along a broad front and students can apply skills in reading and writing.

Reading Recovery consists of an interrelated set of learning experiences. Teachers intentionally work to be sure that students make connections across components of the lesson framework. A key concept in Reading Recovery is that "every new thing learned should be revisited in several other activities." A lesson consists of a variety of activities including reading and comprehending both familiar and new texts, writing a message of importance to the child, phonemic awareness, letter-sound correspondence, basic sight words, fluency, and teaching for strategic processing. It is this balance of activities, providing the opportunity to use skills in many ways, that allows for acceleration.

PRINCIPLE #9

Early Intervention: Intervene early to undercut reading failure.

Reading Recovery is a short-term (12 to 20 weeks) safety net intervention. Children are entered into Reading Recovery at a critical time in their school careers (age six or during first grade). Reading Recovery helps children make accelerated progress and catch up with their first-grade peers. The program also helps students continue to progress with good, ongoing classroom teaching. It is a supplementary opportunity and is not intended to replace classroom instruction.

PRINCIPLE #10

Individual Tutoring: Provide one-to-one assistance for the students who are having the most difficulty.

Reading Recovery is defined as one-to-one tutoring. It is not a classroom program; it is not a small group program. Quite simply, if the instruction is not one-to-one, it is not Reading Recovery.