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ABSTRACT

This article sees Reading Recovery as a tool for systemic change that has the potential to reduce the number of children classified with learning disabilities. The article contends that as the United States Congress meets to revisit the "Individuals with Disabilities Education Act" (IDEA), it is imperative that they develop an awareness of critical educational research regarding successful early intervention practices, particularly Reading Recovery. It points out that in the author/educator's district, over a 5-year period, 175 first graders have successfully passed through Reading Recovery, but only 5 of these students have been referred to special education. The article argues that the goal of IDEA should be to stop the relentless referral of young children to special education because of reading failure when as many as 90% can be saved by strategic early intervention in the first grade through Reading Recovery. It notes that two reports have been released recently, one from the National Center for Learning Disabilities and another from the International Reading Association, which underscore the need for Congress to reconsider the way special education is implemented and children's needs are met. The paper calls for legislative support for research-based intervention, citing a speech by Kenneth Wilson, a Nobel Prize winner in physics, in which he described the effective school programs of the future--programs would include continuing professional development, reflective practice, quality control over the long run, successful scaling up, good marketing, and an acceptance of cost as a secondary issue to outcomes and achievement. (NKA)

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A Message to Congress: Redefining Special Education.

by David Moriarty

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
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COMMENTARY

A Message to Congress: Redefining Special Education

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As the United States Congress meets to revisit the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA), it is imperative that Congress develop an awareness of critical educational research regarding successful early intervention practices in the United States over the past 10 years. These successes are due in part to one of the most powerful early intervention, pre-referral, professional development models available—Reading Recovery. One of the most important effects of this intervention has been the dramatic decrease in the number of students referred to special education after having been successfully “recovered” through this short, one-time intervention for first graders having difficulty learning how to read. In my own district, over a five year period, we have had 175 first graders successfully pass through Reading Recovery; however, only 5 of these students, less than 3%, have been referred to special education.

Reading Recovery is a tool for systemic change that has the potential to reduce the number of children classified with learning disabilities. Research has replicated its ability to sustain success over time – over years – which neither special education nor Title I programs can match. Many Massachusetts communities have a success rate over 90%, a rate matched by several states. Reading Recovery is a program that provides a way for a system to intervene for the purpose of preventing reading failure. It is accountable; it is research driven. It is an intervention program that results in fewer children needing special education services or being retained in the first grade, allowing them essentially to be indistinguishable from other non-handicapped classmates years after intervention. It is a program that returns “recovered” first graders to at least the average reading level of the first grade class.

The goal of IDEA should be to stop the relentless referral of young children to special education because of reading failure when as many as 90% can be saved by strategic early intervention in the first grade through Reading Recovery.

National Reports on Learning Disabilities

Two reports have been released in the past year which underscore the need for Congress to reconsider the way special education is implemented and children’s needs are met. First, the National Center for Learning Disabilities issued its report

of the Summit on Learning Disabilities in Washington, D.C. in 1994: *Learning Disabilities—A National Responsibility*. This report highlights the overwhelming evidence that too many learning disabled children are failing under the current implementation of IDEA in public education. Instead, “...effort must be made to provide assistance as early as possible” (p. 7). Yet nine out of 10 first graders are succeeding with Reading Recovery and are thus diverted from special education. The Summit report consistently emphasizes the need for effective early intervention.

In addition, the International Reading Association (IRA) released a similar report in 1995: *Learning Disabilities – A Barrier to Literacy Instruction*. This IRA report more specifically isolates the common practice of slotting into special education children who have difficulty learning how to read. The IRA report identifies Reading Recovery as an excellent example of both a professional development model and a highly effective intervention model: “... a program designed to help students who are at risk of failure in reading and who otherwise

Reading Recovery is a tool for systemic change that has the potential to reduce the number of children classified with learning disabilities.

would have been identified as learning disabled” (p. 10). Reading Recovery not only teaches children how to read, but also reduces the number of children labeled with learning disabilities. With Reading Recovery, the lowest achieving first graders not only catch up to the average readers in their class, but they also continue to learn and progress over time, through the 2nd grade, 3rd grade, etc., thus demonstrating its hallmark of “sustained success.”

If, as the IRA report says, research demonstrates that Reading Recovery can decrease the number of first grade students classified as learning disabled, and if the placement of children in Reading Recovery “for 15-20 weeks of one-on-one instruction is far less expensive than placing them in special education for one year” (p. 10), then what are we waiting for?

The IRA report emphasizes that the failure is not of special education, but of policy. IDEA “encourages the labeling of children as ‘broken’ when it may be the method, the program, or the delivery model that is ‘broken’” (p.11). Labels of learning disability are counter-productive, yet the labeling – the stigmatizing – continues. Reading Recovery, however, does not view the child as “broken” or “malfunctioning,” but only as a child who needs help early, strategically, intensely (one-on-one), and with an accelerated (not a remedial) model.

If children are victimized by the failure of policy, then change the policy! The IRA report suggests a change of definition from “learning disabled” and that schools provide high quality, intensive early intervention. The report also states

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that, after only one year with Reading Recovery, at least 75% of at-risk children will be working at the same level as their classmates, suggesting only the remaining students are truly disabled and need the training and support of special education.

Legislative Support for Researched-Based Intervention

In fiscal year 1997, the Massachusetts legislature allocated \$500,000 for early intervention legislation that included language specific to Reading Recovery so that other, non research-driven interventions could not qualify. After conducting their own seven-month independent investigation of research relating to Reading Recovery, the legislative team confirmed:

- the high degree of success of the Reading Recovery intervention in teaching children how to read and write
- its ability to defer children from special education
- the ability of Reading Recovery to reduce the number of retentions
- its cost effectiveness (e.g., for every \$3 invested in Reading Recovery, a school system saves \$5)

Research conducted in Ohio over a five-year period through 1993 showed that less than 1% of Reading Recovery students were referred to special education (Lyons, 1994). The U.S. Department of Education reports in an urban study that, out of 700 first grade students, Reading Recovery reduced special education referrals from 1.8% to 0.64%, resulting in an annual cost savings of \$100,000 for that school district.

Such research suggests that Reading Recovery does have the potential to reduce the escalating number of students diagnosed as having a learning disability. So why place children in learning disability programs with no or limited success? Why maintain inequality when Reading Recovery has the potential to equalize the chance for success for almost all children? To continue this inequality verges on neglect or abuse of children. As Jonathan Kozol (1995) says, "The question is whether we want to be one society or two. Until that is dealt with, nothing else will be solved."

Reading Recovery is a viable alternative to special education. Backed by over 30 years of research, it is an obvious pre-referral program for first graders with reading or learning difficulties, especially since research suggests that once children are placed in special education programs that have limited success, the children rarely outgrow their disability – exactly the opposite of Reading Recovery placement.

Conclusion:

Reading Recovery Must Be Considered

Kenneth Wilson, a Nobel Prize winner in physics, in a

recent speech at Harvard University to an audience of academics in higher education, referred to his book *Redesigning Education* (1994), where he describes the effective school programs of the future. He urged that programs must include continuing professional development, reflective practice, quality control over the long run, successful scaling up, good marketing, and an acceptance of cost as a secondary issue to outcomes and achievement. He said that Reading Recovery is one of only two educational programs to fit this description, and that the development of all educational programs should be based on the successful Reading Recovery paradigm. Astounding! And all that Reading Recovery requires is support to reach the needs of the masses.

Without a viable alternative to special education through early intervention such as Reading Recovery, one must keep in mind that:

- children who fail, fail early and fail often;
- once a child is identified as a reading failure, the cost to the school district continues – in remediation, special help, special classrooms, and special materials;
- reading failure is costly; the child who cannot read suffers from low self-esteem and has academic difficulties;
- retention and remediation, coming on top of failure, do not help a child catch up with his or her peers nor function successfully in school;
- the consequences of reading failure do not end with the cost to the school or to the school district; society bears the cost as well because illiteracy often results in unemployment and a life of poverty.

Since research has shown that special education intervention can neither "catch up" a student nor sustain success over time, the Reading Recovery alternative must be pursued. Write your legislators!

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