

Reading Recovery in New Zealand: Uptake, implementation, and outcomes, especially in relation to Māori and Pasifika students

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Executive summary

This report presents the findings of a study conducted for the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MOE) on Reading Recovery, an early intervention for students making limited progress in reading and writing after their first year at school. This study focused on school decisions about offering Reading Recovery and other literacy interventions, and on the implementation of Reading Recovery in schools. It also examined the impact of Reading Recovery on the performance of Māori and of Pasifika students, relative to other students, by the time their Reading Recovery lessons ended. The report describes features of effective Reading Recovery implementation in schools with high Māori and Pasifika enrolment, which may be adopted by others.

The data collection methods used in this study included:

- an analysis of the 2003 national Reading Recovery student data collected by the MOE;
- three questionnaires targeting a stratified national sample of schools that went to principals and Reading Recovery teachers at schools offering Reading Recovery, and principals at schools not offering Reading Recovery;
- interviews with three national Reading Recovery trainers and a sample of seven tutors;
- focus group questions for 30 groups of Reading Recovery teachers and their tutors; and
- eight case studies of schools selected for their effective implementation of Reading Recovery, involving staff interviews and the collection of school records.

School uptake of Reading Recovery

In 2003 Reading Recovery was implemented in 67 percent of all state and state-integrated primary and composite schools in New Zealand (Anand & Bennie, 2005). The survey and MOE national 2003 data showed that the uptake of Reading Recovery varied by school type. The schools less likely to offer Reading Recovery were small, rural, or low decile schools, or those with high Māori enrolment.

Most principals in schools not offering Reading Recovery indicated the desire to do so in the future. The main reasons schools did not offer Reading Recovery were the cost of the intervention, the desire to offer interventions that reached more students, and the unavailability of trained Reading Recovery teachers willing to teach Reading Recovery. Principals from small rural schools reported that in order to offer Reading Recovery they would need funding for the travel costs of Reading Recovery teachers to attend training and Continuing Contact support sessions, and for relievers to release Reading Recovery teachers. They would also need better access to Reading Recovery clusters.

Other interventions offered to students in Years 1–3

At both Reading Recovery and non-Reading Recovery schools Māori and Pasifika students were more likely than students of other ethnicities to receive a literacy intervention (including Reading Recovery) indicating a greater need. We do not know if this was primarily related to family income or maternal education as the national Reading Recovery data does not enable analysis by these factors.

The other interventions most commonly offered to students in Years 1-3 in both Reading Recovery and non-Reading Recovery schools were interventions provided by teacher aides, Resource Teachers of Literacy (RTLits), or Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLLBs), and phonics programmes. Survey responses suggest that a substantial number of schools had not monitored the effectiveness of these interventions.

Of note was the high number of literacy interventions being offered at some Reading Recovery and non-Reading Recovery schools. When considered alongside the finding that some schools were not monitoring the effectiveness of their interventions this finding suggests the need for further support and professional development on the school-wide selection and planned use of literacy interventions. It also indicates the need for evidence of the effectiveness of these other interventions so that school use of operational grant funding on literacy interventions is informed and efficient.

Student access to Reading Recovery

Although Māori and Pasifika students were over-represented in Reading Recovery, they were also over-represented in the categories of students most likely to miss out on the intervention. Three main groups of students did not have access to Reading Recovery. These were students in:

- schools that did not offer Reading Recovery;
- Māori medium education; and
- schools with low levels of implementation (provision) relative to need.

Māori and Pasifika students were over-represented in many of the school types that did not offer Reading Recovery. They were also over-represented in the types of schools most likely to report high numbers of students missing out on Reading Recovery. These were low decile, large, urban, and contributing schools. This shows that equitable access is a primary issue when considering the impact of Reading Recovery for Māori and Pasifika students.

The recommended entry criteria for Reading Recovery

Trainers, tutors, case study school staff, and most survey respondents in Reading Recovery schools considered 6 to 6-and-a-half to be the best age for students to begin Reading Recovery.

Those survey respondents who did not think this was the case tended to come from low decile schools and schools with very high Māori enrolment. They considered that some students were not ready for Reading Recovery by the age of 6 due to their oral language performance, to their lack of school-like literacy experiences, or to their maturity. Trainers, tutors, case study staff, and some survey respondents noted that an alternative solution to delaying the entry of such students into Reading Recovery was to provide literacy professional development to Year 1 teachers, more focused literacy instruction and literacy or ESOL interventions in Year 1, or to provide school-like literacy activities to children in early childhood settings. These strategies were used successfully in the eight effective Reading Recovery schools.

According to trainers and tutors, the practices of delaying students' entry into Reading Recovery until they were considered "ready", and excluding the lowest performing 6-year-olds from Reading Recovery in the belief that others would make quicker progress were the result of pressure for Reading Recovery places. Such practices were indicative of schools with low levels of implementation relative to need or of schools unable to adequately address the literacy needs of their Year 1 students. They considered that funding or teacher-related issues underlay many of the beliefs and practices related to student readiness and potential to make rapid progress. Trainers did not think it was possible to predict students' rates of progress or outcomes in Reading Recovery by entry scores or behaviours, and this perception was confirmed by MOE analyses of the Reading Recovery national data and the analysis conducted as part of this evaluation.

The effectiveness of Reading Recovery

The impact of Reading Recovery on student performance

The results of the analysis of the national 2003 Reading Recovery data showed that gains were made by students in Reading Recovery across all school and student characteristics, indicating the intervention was effective for different students and in a range of contexts. Students entered Reading Recovery with different levels of performance and these differences were reduced for discontinued students by the time their series of lessons ended. Those with the lowest initial scores tended to make the greatest gains. There were, however, differences in the number of lessons discontinued students received in order to achieve these results. Discontinued students with the lowest entry scores (who tended to be Māori and Pasifika students and students from low decile schools) tended to have the greatest number of lessons. This suggests that the practice of providing more lessons to those students with greater needs is an important one for reducing differences in student performance.

Perceptions of the effectiveness of Reading Recovery

Principals across all school types considered Reading Recovery to be a cost-effective intervention that worked well in their schools. The main strengths of Reading Recovery when compared with

other literacy interventions identified by the survey, interview, and focus group respondents in this study were that it:

- is delivered by teachers with specialist training who receive ongoing professional development and support;
- is designed to supplement the class programme;
- is a one-to-one intervention which can be tailored to individual needs;
- involves daily instruction;
- includes reading, writing, and oral language;
- develops students' metacognitive skills building towards a self-extending system;
- uses data to inform student selection, instruction, and outcome decisions; and
- has a research base.

The emphasis on phonological processing and reading for meaning

The national trainers and tutors described how Reading Recovery had been modified over time in response to research findings to incorporate a greater emphasis on phonemic awareness and phonological processing, along with other refinements in the emphasis on visual perception, language structures and fluency, oral language, and writing. This was confirmed by findings reported in the research literature.

Nearly all teachers at the eight effective Reading Recovery schools observed that one of the strengths common to Reading Recovery students when compared with other students was the range of strategies they had at their disposal. They commented on the embedded nature and systematic employment of these strategies, and students' ability to articulate their use of these strategies. The majority of survey respondents from Reading Recovery schools also considered that one of the strengths of Reading Recovery when compared with other literacy interventions was the emphasis placed on a range of reading strategies.

Principles of effective implementation of Reading Recovery

Trainers, tutors, and some survey respondents identified a number of challenges for the effective implementation of Reading Recovery faced by some schools. These included large numbers of students entering school with low levels of oral language performance, and issues with students' attendance and mobility. The case study schools also faced these challenges. However staff at these schools considered Reading Recovery to be an effective intervention well suited to their students. Common to these schools were a number of characteristics and strategies seen to contribute to the effective implementation of Reading Recovery. They provide some principles of good practice for effective implementation and include:

- a school-wide commitment to Reading Recovery;
- the integration of Reading Recovery into an overall literacy plan;
- a commitment to literacy acceleration in the first year of school;

- high Reading Recovery implementation relative to need;
- skilled Reading Recovery teachers;
- strong lines of communication between Reading Recovery teachers and class teachers;
- consistent expectations and use of strategies by Reading Recovery teachers and class teachers;
- a commitment to involving parents;
- high expectations of student attendance and a commitment to Reading Recovery lesson continuity;
- ongoing monitoring of discontinued Reading Recovery students; and
- interventions for students in Year 3 and beyond needing additional literacy support.

Recommended changes to Reading Recovery

Recommended changes to Reading Recovery made by the participants in this study tended to relate to the implementation of Reading Recovery at their particular schools or on a national basis, rather than to the Reading Recovery model itself. The main school-based recommendations related to:

- improving the communication between the Reading Recovery teacher and teachers of students who had been discontinued the previous year; and
- improving partnerships with parents.

Recommended changes to the national implementation of Reading Recovery related primarily to the funding of Reading Recovery. These included:

- increasing the MOE staffing allocation for Reading Recovery;
- ensuring variation in the distribution of the staffing allocation better reflected variation in need at different schools;
- catering for unexpected need by, for example, having a more readily available emergency staffing allocation provision for schools experiencing unanticipated influxes of 6-year-olds needing Reading Recovery;
- increasing the staffing allocation to provide non-contact time for a range of activities such as administration, collecting students from class, observing students in class, ongoing monitoring, and travel time;
- funding the travel costs of teachers attending training, and Continuing Contact sessions; and
- providing more or all teachers with Reading Recovery training.

These recommendations suggest that the staffing allocation was not considered adequate to meet student need. However the provision of Reading Recovery places is dependent on both the MOE staffing allocation and on school use of the operations grant or other discretionary funding. Schools are expected to at least match the hours provided by the MOE. The extent to which schools meet their need for Reading Recovery places is therefore partially dependent on school priorities for using their discretionary funding. In all but one of the case study schools the school contribution to Reading Recovery staffing was greater, in some cases considerably greater, than

the staffing allocation provided by the MOE. The staff at most of these schools considered all who needed Reading Recovery had access to it. Schools also have the option of using discretionary funding to cater for unexpected arrivals of students needing Reading Recovery or to provide additional time for Reading Recovery teachers to carry out activities such as observing and monitoring discontinued students. Some of the effective Reading Recovery schools had also taken these options. However staff at these schools observed that their commitment to funding Reading Recovery staffing was at the expense of other things, highlighting the delicate juggling act schools face in the use of their discretionary funding.

The effectiveness of Reading Recovery for Māori and Pasifika students

Impact of Reading Recovery on Māori and Pasifika students' performance

The analysis of the national 2003 Reading Recovery data provides information for considering the effectiveness of Reading Recovery for Māori and Pasifika students relative to students of other ethnicities in three main ways:

- the impact of Reading Recovery on the achievement of discontinued Māori and Pasifika students when compared with those of other ethnicities;
- the proportion of Māori and Pasifika students who were discontinued or referred when compared with those of other ethnicities, and
- the impact of Reading Recovery on the achievement of referred Māori and Pasifika students when compared with those of other ethnicities.

Impact of Reading Recovery on discontinued students

Māori and Pasifika students entered Reading Recovery with lower initial scores than other students and these differences were reduced by the time their series of Reading Recovery lessons ended. However Māori and Pasifika students received a greater number of lessons than other students. This finding supports the practice of providing more lessons to those students with greatest need in order to ensure equitable outcomes.

Differences in student outcomes appeared to be more related to the type of school students attended than their ethnicity: students from low decile schools, particularly large, urban, state schools (at which a substantial number of Māori and Pasifika students attend) had lower initial and final overall scores than their counterparts from other schools.

Proportion of Māori and Pasifika students who were discontinued

Māori and Pasifika students were less likely to have their series of lessons discontinued than other students. This may have been because a higher proportion of Māori and Pasifika students attend

low decile schools and students in lower decile schools were less likely to be discontinued. The two main reasons students were not discontinued were because the decision was made to refer them to another intervention or because students moved schools before completing their series of Reading Recovery lessons. Student mobility, which is more likely to occur in low decile schools (Wylie, 1999), can result in a failure to be discontinued if the new school does not offer Reading Recovery or does not provide the transferring student with a Reading Recovery place before they are considered too old to take it. Trainers and tutors considered that this was more likely to occur when there was a pressure for places in schools with low levels of implementation relative to need. The survey results indicate that large urban schools and low decile schools are more likely to have low levels of implementation relative to need.

Impact of Reading Recovery on students who were referred

While Reading Recovery was effective in reducing initial differences in performance of discontinued students, this did not tend to be the case for students who were referred, particularly for those in low decile schools. This was most likely due to the different number of lessons students received before being referred. Māori and Pasifika students received fewer lessons before referral than other students. This may relate to the fact that a higher proportion of Māori and Pasifika students are located in low decile schools: the number of lessons received by referred students tended to decrease with decreasing decile. However, even within low decile schools, Māori and Pasifika students received fewer lessons before referral than students of other ethnicities who had similar initial achievement. The finding that Māori and Pasifika students were more likely to be referred to another intervention and after fewer lessons than other students highlights the need to examine and fine-tune the Reading Recovery and classroom experiences of these students to reduce the higher probability of them being referred.

Features of Reading Recovery considered to support the performance of Māori and Pasifika students

The features of Reading Recovery considered most important for supporting the progress of Māori and Pasifika students related to the one-to-one nature of tuition because this enabled teachers to:

- build close relationships with students;
- provide a safe learning environment in which students were not at risk of feeling shamed in front of their peers;
- learn about the diversity of students' out-of-school experiences;
- cater for these experiences through text selection, and story writing topics;
- negotiate the meanings and vocabulary in texts based on experiences foreign to students; and
- model oral language structures and engage students in the use of these language structures in authentic and meaningful contexts.

Suggested modifications for Māori and Pasifika students

The findings of this study highlight a number of possible modifications for further improving Māori and Pasifika students' progress in Reading Recovery. These include:

- ensuring “first wave” teaching better meets the needs of Māori and Pasifika students;
- ensuring that Reading Recovery training supports Reading Recovery teachers to develop a wide range of strategies for identifying the cognitive, linguistic, and cultural resources of Māori and Pasifika students;
- examining the Reading Recovery experiences of students who are referred and school decisions about their referral;
- increasing the number of Māori and Pasifika Reading Recovery teachers;
- increasing the availability of texts set in a wide range of Māori and Pasifika contexts; and
- strengthening home-school partnerships.

Views on the delivery of Reading Recovery in te reo Māori varied. Some emphasised the need to reconstruct Reading Recovery so that it could be delivered in te reo Māori. Some questioned the need for Reading Recovery in te reo Māori as they considered that students did not have great difficulty in learning to read due to the phonologically transparent nature of the language. Others questioned the extent to which the philosophy and approaches of Reading Recovery aligned with Te Aho Matua philosophies. The provision of Reading Recovery in te reo Māori would involve a complete research-based reconstruction of Reading Recovery driven by those involved in Māori medium education.

Summary

Reading Recovery is well established in New Zealand schools. It was considered a cost-effective intervention that was operating successfully by staff in schools that offered Reading Recovery. Most principals in schools not offering Reading Recovery indicated they would like to do so in the future; the main barriers faced by these schools were the cost, in relation to other school priorities, and the availability of trained Reading Recovery teachers willing to teach Reading Recovery.

Recommended changes tended to relate to questions of implementation, rather than to features of the model itself. The effective schools selected as case studies provided examples of how Reading Recovery can be successfully implemented in low decile schools with high Māori and Pasifika enrolment. These schools had high levels of Reading Recovery implementation relative to need and Reading Recovery was part of a planned and coherent school-wide literacy strategy beginning in Year 1 or in early childhood settings. They exhibited to varying degrees features common to strong professional learning communities and the Reading Recovery teachers played an important role in these communities.

Students across all the school and student characteristics made gains while on Reading Recovery. Māori and Pasifika students entered Reading Recovery with lower scores than those of other students and these differences were reduced for discontinued students by the time their series of lessons ended. The findings of this study indicate that the effectiveness of Reading Recovery for Māori and Pasifika students would be further enhanced by addressing barriers to access, by better meeting the needs of Māori and Pasifika students in “first wave” instruction, and by investigating more closely the Reading Recovery and classroom experiences of students referred to other interventions and the reasons for these referrals.