

Student Aspirations: Reading Recovery May Influence More than Literacy Development

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Abstract

The effects of the Reading Recovery (RR) program on at-risk children's literacy development have been well documented. However, the effects of the Reading Recovery program, which combines one-on-one attention with an individualized approach, may go beyond the realm of reading and writing to affect students' aspirations. This paper represents an effort to connect practices of the RR program with known conditions for student aspirations. The implications of this work suggest that investing effort in RR may affect not only children's literacy development, but also their aspirations, which are generalizable to other areas of the children's lives.

The Reading Recovery (RR) program has been evaluated extensively with regard to its impact on children's literacy development. The original studies were conducted by Clay (1985), the founder of the program, but her results have been replicated around the world (e.g., Pinnell, Lyons, & DeFord, 1996). The program has been studied in terms of its cost effectiveness (Dyer, 1992) and how it compares to other early literacy programs (Pinnell, Lyons, DeFord, Bryk, & Seltzer, 1994). In this paper we argue that its effects may be even more far-reaching, to the aspirations of the students who participate.

RR is an early intervention program for first graders who are at risk for literacy failure. Children are selected for the program based on both the recommendations of the kindergarten teacher and their performance on a series of literacy-related tasks (Clay, 1993a). The program

involves intensive, daily, one-on-one sessions between the at-risk child and the RR teacher for 30 minutes. One of the defining characteristics of the program is its individualized nature. The RR teacher gathers detailed information regarding each child's strengths and weaknesses each day, and uses such information in planning the next day's lesson. Experienced teachers go through a year of intensive additional training to become RR teachers. Reading Recovery training includes the study of theories of literacy acquisition and detailed methods of data collection. Careful observation allows a RR teacher to notice and to build upon the cognitive operations a child already possesses, but which may not be evident in a classroom setting.

Such one-on-one instruction, targeted to each child's specific needs, allows at-risk children to accelerate their learning, catching up to their peers. The extra

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instruction is short-term; students are released from the program when they have achieved the average literacy level of the other first graders in the class and have demonstrated they are capable of continuing to develop their reading and writing competencies without special tutoring (Clay, 1991, 1993a, 1993b).

Aspirations are an individual's ability to identify and set goals for the future, while being inspired in the present to work toward those goals (Quaglia & Cobb, in press). Although not dealt with directly by Clay, it seems plausible that children's aspirations may be affected by their experience in Reading Recovery. In what follows, we will attempt to link the RR program characteristics and outcomes with what is known about student aspirations. After relevant research on student aspirations has been described, theoretical explanations for our contention that RR may be expected to affect the aspirations of children will be delineated, and qualitative evidence to support this supposition will be provided.

Research on Student Aspirations

The National Center for Student Aspirations (NCSA) has studied the effects of various factors on student aspirations. While much of the research has focused on older children and adolescents, there is no reason not to expect parallel processes in younger children.

Through research and practical application in schools, conditions that impact the development of student aspirations in schools have been identified. Specifically, the NCSA (1995) has identified eight conditions that positively affect student aspirations, including, as described below: *achievement*, *belonging*, *curiosity*,

empowerment, *excitement*, *mentoring*, *risk-taking*, and *self-confidence*.

Achievement includes effort, accomplishment, citizenship, and perseverance.

Belonging involves a relationship between two or more individuals, characterized by a sense of connection, support, and community.

Curiosity is characterized as inquisitiveness, an eagerness and strong desire to satisfy the mind with new discoveries.

Empowerment means allowing students to take control and to assume responsibility for their academic, social, and personal actions.

Excitement refers to being "worked up" about something, being emotionally involved, and having an intense experience in the learning process.

Mentoring involves ensuring students have someone they can talk to and confide in during both pleasant and difficult times.

Risk-taking involves a deliberate and thoughtful activity which includes choosing healthy and sensible options.

Self-confidence is characterized by belief in oneself to be successful.

Primary functions of the NCSA involve survey development along with program delivery and dissemination. Most of the survey development has been conducted with middle level and high school students. The current survey includes two scales that represent aspirations (ambition, inspiration), two scales for student self-description (achievement motivation, general enjoyment of life), and eight scales related to school climate conditions (achievement, belonging, curiosity, empowerment, excitement, mentoring, risk-taking, and self-confidence). The middle-level survey includes items such as:

"During class time, the things I learn are important to my future.";

"My teacher makes class fun.";

"My teacher makes me feel comfortable when I ask for help."

The survey is intended for group administration, and the results of the survey are used by schools to assess their students' level of aspirations, allowing research based interventions to be targeted appropriately on the aspirations relevant to aspects of school climate that students traditionally perceive in a relatively negative light (Plucker, in press).

Reading Recovery and Student Aspirations

Although Clay, the founder of the RR program, does not discuss student aspirations in her work, a strong argument can be made that participation in RR likely will affect the conditions for student aspirations, either directly or indirectly. Following is a discussion of how each condition for aspiration relates to Reading Recovery tutoring.

The primary expected outcome of participation in the RR program is increased literacy achievement, and it is expected to occur at an accelerated rate compared with other children in the classroom. Clay (1993) writes, "the child ... has been making very slow progress and has been dropping further and further behind his classmates. In order to become an average-progress child, he would have to make fast progress, faster than his classmates, to catch up to them" (p. 8). Throughout the program, children are encouraged to make efforts and praised for their perseverance. The goal is for them to become independent learners, capable of continuing to learn on their own. These aspects of achievement are

especially similar to those necessary for aspirations. Because, according to the NCSA, achievement is one of the preconditions for aspirations, RR would be expected to affect student aspirations positively, through increased achievement, as well as student awareness of success.

Secondly, the relationship between the RR teacher and the student is one of mentoring. The RR teacher shares the student's successes as well as challenges. It is imperative that a positive relationship be established between the child and the RR teacher. Regarding the first two weeks of the RR program where such a relationship is built, Clay (1993b) writes:

Hold his interest, bolster his confidence, make him your co-worker. Get the responding fluent and habituated but even at this stage encourage flexibility, using the same knowledge in different ways. Confidence, ease, flexibility and, with luck, discovery are the keystones of this period which I have called "roaming around the known." Do not move too soon; be sure the foundation is firm and the child confident. (p. 13)

During the initial two weeks of RR, in establishing a relationship characterized by mentoring, the RR teacher is expected, according to Clay, to affect the child's self-confidence and sense of curiosity, two more of the NCSA's eight conditions for aspirations. RR, therefore, would likely affect student aspirations directly through these channels as well.

The self-confidence Marie Clay described would follow naturally from increased achievement. That is, a child who can achieve more, and who can recognize his or her achievements, may become more confident as a result. False praise from teachers will be recognized and not valued, but children whose literacy skills are truly improving will know,

and this will be reinforced by teachers and parents who also see the improvement. Actual achievement, coupled with praise, will raise a child's self-confidence.

Before a child is discontinued from the program, he or she needs to have established a "self-extending system", a phrase Clay (1993b) uses to describe children's ability to continue to add to their repertoires of literacy strategies on their own in the classroom. She explains when a child has a self-extending system, he or she can be thought of as empowered:

Acceleration is achieved as the child takes over the learning process and works independently, discovering new things for himself inside and outside the lessons. He comes to push the boundaries of his own knowledge, and not only during his lessons. The teacher must watch for and use this personal searching on the part of the child The teacher will foster and support acceleration as she moves the child quickly through his programme . . . but the teacher cannot produce or induce it It is the learner who accelerates because some things which no longer need his attention are done more easily, freeing him to attend to new things.

When this happens at an ever-increasing rate acceleration of learning occurs. (p. 9)

Thus, empowerment is an additional route through which RR may affect student aspirations.

Risk-taking is essential to the development of empowerment. The RR teacher provides a supportive, trusting environment that allows children to feel safe enough to attempt difficult tasks, while risking being wrong. Learning to take risks is fundamental to all children's success, according to Clay (1993b). She writes,

the programme sets the highest value on

independent responding, and this must involve risks of being wrong The goal of the teaching is to assist the child to produce effective strategies for working on text, not to accumulate items of knowledge. A teacher who allowed only for correct responding would not be allowing the child to learn self-correcting behaviors! . . . Any theoretical position which includes self-monitoring and self-correcting as significant behavior in reading or in writing implies the existence of near misses, uncorrected responses and sometimes corrected responses. The important thing about the self-corrections is that the child initiates them because he sees that something is wrong and calls up his own resources for working on a solution. (p. 15)

Concomitantly, RR may positively impact children's excitement about school and learning. Tutoring sessions are conducted in such a way that children are challenged, while at the same time are capable of meeting those challenges. While students may struggle with literacy learning in the classroom in the early stages of their program, they are able to enjoy the time in RR because they can be successful from the beginning. This, of course, changes over time as children's progress is accelerated and they can derive excitement from their classroom environment. Such success in RR and then in the classroom likely affects children's sense of belonging, as well.

Qualitative Evidence

As part of program evaluation for the RR program in one northern New England state, parents, classroom teachers, administrators, and RR teachers responded to open-ended survey questions, and they rated the program along dimensions of quality. The survey was distributed to 1429 parents, 535 class-

room teachers, 250 administrators, and 250 RR teachers, and was returned with a response rate of 82%. Respondents from all categories rated the program favorably, with a number commenting that it had affected children's attitudes and aspirations as well as their literacy skills.

Parents' reactions to the program were almost singular in their support. Many expressed appreciation for the changes in their children's skills, such as: "The program is the best thing that could have been done for our son and I am very pleased that the school cares enough about its children to have this program."

Some parents noted the accomplishments of their children after the RR program, such as: "My son certainly has learned new ways of figuring out the words that he doesn't know and is more willing to try to do things on his own."

Other parents noted improvements in their children's attitudes about school and their self-esteem after the RR program. Examples include: "She enjoys school more and feels that she can help the teacher with the younger children." "My son has become more confident in participating in class. His self-esteem has definitely been boosted." "[Child] went from feeling 'stupid' to having a lot of confidence in her reading abilities. She is very proud of her skills and is always looking for someone to read to."

Many classroom teachers' comments reflected positively on their own children's progress. One teacher wrote: "RR has made teaching reading much smoother in my class. Children who need extra help receive it and many of them are able to move quickly enough to become independent readers and writers."

Some comments from classroom teachers also indicated that RR may have

affected students' attitudes and self-esteem. For example, two teachers wrote: "New confidence and self-esteem has helped in all classroom areas not just in reading" and "Increased self-esteem about learning to read; attitude shift from 'I can't' to 'I can'; increased independence in the classroom."

In addition to supporting the program's effects on early literacy, some administrators also noted changes in children's self-esteem after taking part in RR. For example: "The children with whom [RR Teacher] has worked have made significant gains in self-confidence and in other subjects, not to mention impressive gains in reading."

Although far from being scientifically collected, we believe these comments are significant because they were unsolicited. Respondents were asked to give their reactions to the RR program and its impact on children's literacy development, but were not asked to comment on self-esteem, aspirations, or attitudes. Yet many noted gains in the very areas we know to be critical to the development of aspirations as discussed here. Seemingly, RR is affecting the conditions necessary for aspirations in a positive way, as evidenced by the comments collected through these surveys.

Future Directions in Research

We suggest that Reading Recovery and other early interventions for at-risk children be evaluated for their effects on the whole child, as well as on specific areas of scholastic development. We are currently working to develop an instrument that would measure the eight preconditions for aspirations in K-2 children. The conditions described earlier in this paper have been validated with older

children and adolescents. These may or may not be the preconditions for aspirations among young (i.e., K-2) children, but it nonetheless represents a starting point. Once established, such an instrument would allow quantitative research in this area to move forward.

There are a number of hurdles to measuring any attitudinal construct in the early elementary school population. First, because children in the early elementary grades may have shorter memories and shorter attention spans than older children (Hughes, 1984), surveys for this age group must be shorter in length than those for other age groups.

Secondly, the cognitive abilities and language development of young children constrain the use of potential items as well as overall survey length. Many words and phrases which would be appropriate in surveys for adults or even adolescents, cannot be used because the young respondents would not understand them.

Finally, the construct of "social desirability" is a problem when measuring attitudes of young children. Social desirability refers to a tendency to give answers that make oneself look good (Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991). In a research context, this can translate into answers that reflect how the respondent wants to be viewed, rather than how the respondent feels most of the time. Gilberts (1983) suggests this is a difficulty when measuring self-esteem in children, but that it is most problematic in children below age four.

McKenna and Kear's Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (1990) notably appears to have overcome some of these hurdles. Their twenty-item scale measures children's attitudes about reading.

All items begin with the phrase, "How do you feel. . .". For example, one item asks, "How do you feel when it's time for reading class?" To make the response categories more accessible to young children, the scale features the comic strip character Garfield in four poses, roughly equivalent to the responses, "Very Happy", "Happy", "Unhappy", and "Very Unhappy". The survey was field tested with over eighteen thousand first through sixth grade children, and it demonstrated both internal consistency and known-groups validity. The "attitudes about reading" construct is quite different from aspirations, however, the characteristics of a successful instrument are often generalizable across constructs and this work may apply to the assessment of aspirations.

Although the eight conditions for aspirations have not been measured in early elementary school aged children, at least one study attempted to measure a related construct in this population. Traynelis-Yurek & Hansell (1993) measured the self-esteem of first graders at risk for reading failure following participation in a program designed to help them learn to read and write (the program may have been Reading Recovery, but the authors did not specify). Although the methodology used in the study does not allow strong conclusions to be drawn regarding either the validity or the reliability of their proposed instrument, Traynelis-Yurek and Hansell made a notable attempt at creating an instrument suitable for young children. Their most important finding was that the children discriminated between and among items. That is, all the items showed variance. Although far from a developed instrument, their results suggest distinct possi-

bilities for measuring young children's aspirations.

In a time of scarce resources and an abundance of programs to implement, it is important to recognize those programs that may have a positive impact on the whole child. RR may be such a program. Its successes as an early intervention program for children with minimal literacy skills are well documented. However, by design or not, we see a program that operationalizes the conditions which influence the development of student aspirations.

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Biography

Anne Rhodes-Kline has a Ph.D. in Psychology from Temple University. From 1995-1997, she conducted program evaluation on Reading Recovery for the state of Maine. She is currently a Social Science Analyst with the U.S. General Accounting Office, where she is involved with a variety of research projects.

Russell J. Quaglia is the Director of the National Center for Student Aspirations and an associate professor in the field of Educational Leadership at the University of Maine. He travels extensively throughout the U.S. and in more than 25 countries presenting information on school reform and student aspirations. His research has been published in numerous professional journals, such as, *Research in Rural Education*,

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