

LITERACY

Supporting a child with Down syndrome through Reading Recovery

Sarah Kent

This article describes the Reading Recovery approach to supporting children's literacy development and evaluates the significant benefits of the approach for a pupil with Down syndrome.



schools I taught English as a Foreign Language with the British Council in Japan and Thailand. I also hold a Diploma in TEFLA. I have a son of twelve and a seven-year-old daughter who has Down syndrome. My daughter (hereinafter referred to as Maisie) attends the mainstream school in which I am currently working.

In January 2007 I started training as a Reading Recovery teacher. The training for Reading Recovery involves teaching as we train.

Initial assessments are made to indicate which children should enter the programme. In mainstream schools, these are the lowest attaining children in the assessed cohort.

About Maisie

Maisie was identified as one of these children. Seeing her scores in black and white was an emotional time. Despite the early intervention that she had already received and my 'expertise', she was still not making average or particularly 'good' progress - compared to typically developing children and higher attaining children with Down syndrome. I was disappointed when my tutor explained that it was felt the programme may not be the right one for her.

One of the reasons outlined was that Maisie was already receiving 30 hours per week of one-to-one support and that it might not be considered fair to other children for her to receive 'double' support. Equally, the Teacher Leader had no experience of teaching children with Down syndrome and felt that she may not have the expertise to support my teaching of Maisie. In addition there was little hard data to draw from which demonstrated that the programme would be appropriate.

Whilst I felt these were all valid reasons, I was sure that the progress Maisie had made whilst I had been working informally with her, using the

What is Reading Recovery?

Reading Recovery is an intervention programme for children round about the age of six at primary school who are at the lowest levels of literacy. The programme, which has a strong research base, originated in New Zealand and was developed by Dame Marie Clay (see REFS 1 AND 2).

Children receive 30 minutes of intensive 1:1 support everyday, tailored to the child's individual needs on a programme which runs for an average of 12-20 weeks. Support is delivered by a trained Reading Recovery teacher. Reading Recovery teachers are qualified, experienced classroom teachers who have completed a further year of training to become qualified as Reading Recovery teachers.

About me

Before training as a Reading Recovery teacher I had worked as a class teacher for 10 years. For 9 of those years I had been Literacy Co-ordinator for the school. Prior to teaching in mainstream

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Box 1 | A Reading Recovery session

The 30 minute daily Reading Recovery lesson includes activities in text reading and text writing.

There are six core activities in each lesson.

1. Text reading: reading familiar books

The reading of two or more familiar books in a phrased and fluent manner at the beginning of the lesson provides opportunities for the student to practise good reading behaviours.

2. Text reading: taking a running record of yesterday's new book

The teacher takes a running record (a shorthand record of the student's reading) of the new book from the previous lesson. First the student reads the text without help. Then the teacher teaches the student. The most powerful teaching points from the book are selected to obtain the quickest progress possible.

3. Letter identification and word making and breaking

After the running record, a short time is spent using magnetic letters to help the student extend his or her letter knowledge, to speed up the student and comprehension of how words work.

4. Text writing: writing a story

The student writes one or two sentences about a known book or a personal experience. The teacher supports the writing process while teaching for flexible writing strategies that will encourage progress towards independence.

5. Text reading: rearranging the cut-up story

After the story is written, the teacher writes it on a strip of cardboard. It is then cut up so that the student can search and check for information to help in reassembling the story.

6. New book

Finally, a new book is introduced. The teacher introduces the text before the child reads it.

source: www.schools.nsw.edu.au/studentsupport/programs/readingrecovery/lesson/index.php

principles and practice from Reading Recovery, indicated that this could well be the right programme for her.

As parents, we have fought all the way for Maisie and this was something I had to pursue. The Head Teacher was behind the decision to take Maisie onto the programme as he felt that she had a legal entitlement to be included. Through discussion it was agreed that she would enter my next cohort of children on the programme.

However, with the knowledge I was gaining it was impossible for me not to start sooner with her! Consequently, from January 2007 I began (informally) to tutor Maisie, sometimes at school, and sometimes at home.

TABLE 1 shows the progress she made throughout the programme and has continued to make since finishing the programme.

Maisie came off the programme in February 2008. She was reading at level 22. She recently achieved a level 2A for reading and 2C for writing in her SATs.

Other changes

The impact that the programme has had on other areas of Maisie's development is also worth noting. Her speech and language assessment in October 2007 showed that, since her last assessment (October 2006), she had made significant gains in many areas. She could now follow instructions carrying 5 information words (previously 2/3), the length of productive sentences was 8+ (previously 4/5), her use of past tense regular and irregular verbs had improved, speech clarity had improved and dis-fluency was less noticeable.

She is showing greater independence in class, her fine motor skills, particularly handwriting, have improved – see FIGURE 1 – and her self-esteem and confidence have rocketed. She can hold her own in guided reading sessions and in many literacy-based tasks. Her Teaching Assistant has commented that she is often 'redundant' now in literacy activities! Maisie has continued to make progress since coming off the programme, as

	Book Level	National Curriculum Level	Written words to fluency	Letter identification (/54)	BAS – word reading	Duncan (/23)	Concepts about print (/24)	Hearing and recording sounds in words
February 2007	1	W	1 Stanine 1	50 Stanine 3	4:10 years	6 Stanine 2	3 Stanine 1	4 Stanine 1
September 2007*	5	1C	14 Stanine	49 Stanine 2	5:10 years	17 Stanine 4	4 Stanine 1	28 Stanine 2
February 2008#	22	2B	46	54	6:10 years	23	14	36
May 2008	24	2A	36	54	7:4 years			

Table 1 | Maisie's progress throughout the programme, and continuing progress after completing the programme (see BOX 2 for glossary of terms)

*start of programme
end of programme

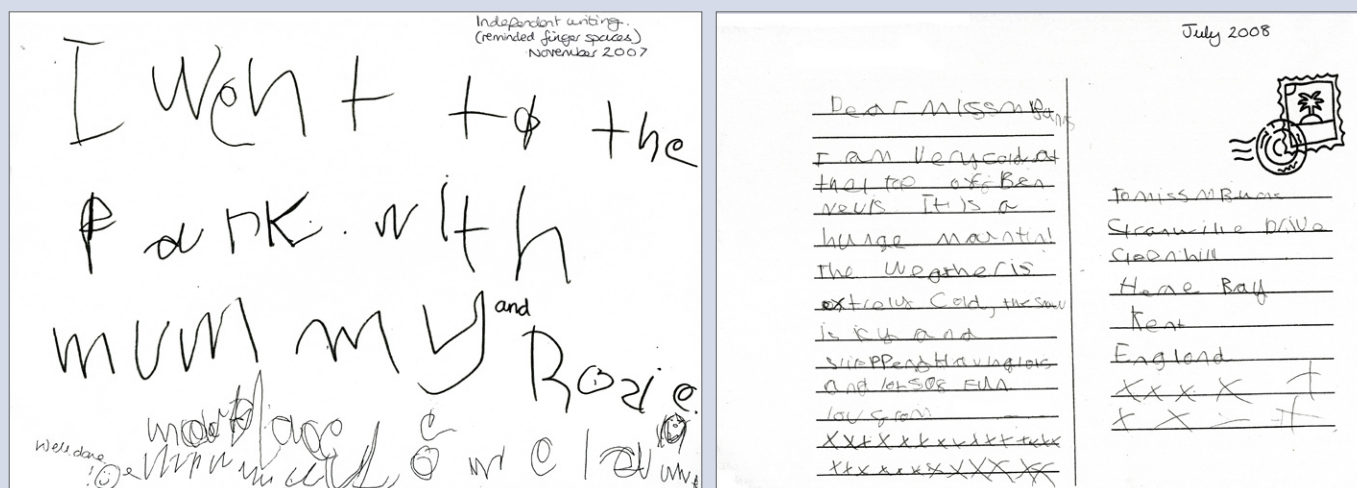


Figure 1 | Maisie's independent writing, November 2007 and July 2008

Box 2 | Glossary of terms

Book levels: Book Band Levels, which have a corresponding national curriculum level.

Written words to fluency: words that Maisie can write independently, unprompted.

Letter identity: letters, both lower case and capital, that Maisie can correctly name. The test is out of 54.

BAS: a word reading test which gives a word reading age^[3].

Duncan: a word reading age.

Concepts about print: This tests knowledge about book orientation, directionality and other features of books / reading.

Hearing and recording sounds in words: A sentence is dictated which the child has to write.

Stanines: a normalised standard score. "Stanines are scores which redistribute raw scores according to a normal curve in nine groups from 1 (a low score) to 9 (a high score) (see Lyman, 1963)"^[4]

evidenced by her SATs scores three months after being 'discontinued' from Reading Recovery.

Why I think Reading Recovery worked for Maisie

I think the 'secret' of success is the level of expertise of the teacher and the individually-tailored programme.

It is true that, in line with the situation in the majority of mainstream schools, SEN support is delivered by Teaching Assistants. Whilst not wishing to denigrate in any way the fabulous work that Maisie's Teaching Assistants have undertaken with her, it is worth stressing that they do not have the requisite expertise and knowledge of qualified teachers. Through close observation and appropriate intervention at each stage, Maisie has been able to make significant gains with her literacy.

The programme is different for every child and is tailored to their individual needs. We always start with what they can do and work from there.

The focus is on strategic behaviour, and not – as with many other intervention programmes – on item knowledge. An example of this is when looking more closely at words, a Reading Recovery teacher may teach a child how to chunk, or break that word, how to re-read up to the word so the child is using the visual information and meaning and structure to help them get to the word. Obviously these strategies are worked on one at a time and pulled together when the child is ready.

Through the use of careful observation and focused prompting, children on the programme receive input that is relevant for them at that time in their development.

Kent currently has over 70 Reading Recovery schools.

I would strongly recommend finding out if your child's school has a Reading Recovery teacher. If not, it may be that the Teaching Assistant can visit a neighbouring school with Reading Recovery. If you would like to come and observe me teach a Reading Recovery lesson, I can be contacted at alex.hector@virgin.net.

In the future, I hope to train as a Better Reading Partnerships trainer. This is a programme delivered by Teaching Assistants. I would then like to tailor the programme and deliver training to Teaching Assistants working with children with Down syndrome. Initially this will be in the Canterbury Coastal area.

Maisie has shown both myself and my colleagues the power behind this intervention programme. It has highlighted to me what, with the right level of intervention and teacher skills and expertise, our children are capable of.

1. Clay M. *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals, Part One*. Heinemann; 2005.
2. Clay M. *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals, Part Two*. Heinemann; 2005.
3. *British Ability Scales*. NFER Nelson; 1996.
4. Clay M. *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement*. Heinemann; 2003.

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