

Australia: First Offshore Implementation

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Australia is such a diverse country. By July 2007, our multicultural and multiracial population was in excess of 21 million people, largely concentrated in coastal areas.

Our nation is a federation of states and territories each with its own separate and autonomous public and non-government school systems with differing educational and administrative cultures, styles, policies, and priorities.

Within and across these different education systems are diverse groups of educators sometimes with quite different and opposing views on literacy teaching and learning.

It was more than 25 years ago that Marie Clay entered our part of the world, with the promise of Reading Recovery. Our subsequent journey in implementing our early literacy intervention has not been a smooth one, but the successes are many.

Marie's 1982 presentation at a national reading conference in Darwin in the far north was heard by an administrator from rural Victoria in the south. This led to the first teacher, Joan Smith, traveling to New Zealand in 1983 to be trained as a Reading Recovery tutor.

Others, including myself, from the eastern states and territories of Queensland, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, and Victoria followed over the next few years to work with and learn from both Marie and Dr. Barbara Watson at Auckland University. At the same time we were joined by colleagues from New Zealand who not only

supported our training but joined our fledgling implementations.

By the early 90s, the effect of Reading Recovery was beginning to be felt by our education systems. The report of an Australian government inquiry into early literacy intervention acknowledged that its committee agreed with the submission: "Whether or not Reading Recovery is provided at a school is no longer a resource allocation or a financial decision. It is a moral obligation to provide the most certain entry to the world of reading and literacy and a productive life which we have been able to locate."

From the mid 90s, New Zealand-trained Australian trainers became more visible on the Reading Recovery landscape, training tutors within their own states. Through good and bad years we have strived to deliver the highest-quality literacy intervention: 2006 saw more than 28,000 children participate in Reading Recovery. They were supported by more than 3,000 trained teachers in schools across Australia. Our implementations were supported by over 90 committed tutors and six hardy trainers.

Marie spoke of the Australian experience (her first offshore implementation of Reading Recovery) as one that provided valuable lessons with respect to age at entry to school, expectations, and emphases during the first year at school, as well as variations in curriculum and assessment processes.

However, her influence extended beyond the implementation of Reading Recovery. As early as 1987,

Marie was responding to invitations to speak to state education departments on what a literacy strategy for the first 2 years of schooling might look like.

She counselled us: "On entry to school, we in education can no longer lean on concepts of individual differences like intelligence, maturation, readiness and cognitive unfolding to justify our practices in schools. The individual differences with which children enter school reflect how they have been treated by the world and in particular what opportunities they have had to learn."

She challenged us: "Can we provide them with short cuts across country or even a lift in a Porsche for a short time so that we can close some of the gap in the first year of school, in the interests of social justice?"

Her words are as inspiring and prophetic today as they were more than 20 years ago.

Marie dedicated her 1998 text, *By Different Paths to Common Outcomes*:

To all my teachers — family, colleagues, teachers and young learners — for they have immensely increased my view of what is possible.

These words are dedicated to *our* teacher, Marie Clay, whose words and actions have not only increased our view of what is possible in Australia but will continue to guide our teaching and learning for a very long time to come.