Small World: Reading Recovery in the Department of Defense Schools

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One of the burning questions for Reading Recovery's young students is "Where's Spot?" Though Spot (the beloved character in Eric Hill's 1980 classic) loves playing hide-and-seek with children at home, he is also quite a traveler and has been seen

- swimming in the Blue Lagoon in Iceland
- visiting castles in Germany
- sipping tea and eating scones in England
- learning to belly dance in Turkey
- eating pasta in Italy
- watching Mount Etna erupt in Sicily
- buying lace and chocolates in Belgium
- looking at the cows in the Azores
- learning to flamenco dance in Spain
- taking karate lessons in Okinawa
- snorkeling in Guam.

Spot has been spotted in all those places with Department of Defense Dependents Schools (DoDDS) teachers, but his favorite place to be is in the DoDDS Reading Recovery rooms helping children learn to read.

Reading Recovery Professionals and Children

Reading Recovery has been part of the overseas military school system since 1993. Table 1 (page 55) illustrates the 11-year growth of DoDDS-Europe and DoDDS-Pacific. DoDDS serves military and civilian Department of Defense employees' children. In the DoDDS-Europe site, Janice Hines, Jeanne Lemire, Mary Jo Williams, and Julie Wittenberg work in seven different countries supporting over 120 teachers in 50 schools. In DoDDS-Pacific, Beverly Williams works in two countries supporting 28 teachers in nine schools.

Reading Recovery teachers in DoDDS come from all over the United States, as do the first-grade children they teach. Teachers have been trained in many different U.S. training sites and in DoDDS with many different teacher leaders, which makes sharing knowledge behind the glass truly interesting! The shared language of Reading Recovery training allows teachers to instantly bond and discuss children's reading and writing behaviors. The various perspectives during the behind-the-glass discussions keep Reading Recovery teachers (and teacher leaders) thinking in new ways about their teaching.

The children are just like first graders everywhere, except that perhaps they...
Locations of DoDEA Schools, Europe
Locations of DoDEA Schools, Pacific
have an expanded world view. Some of the children have grown up overseas, so environmental print takes on a whole different look. Sometimes the stories in their writing books might be about going to see the queen of England, sweeping up volcanic ash, touring the real Cinderella castle Neuschwanstein, or watching Italians make buffalo mozzarella. The children might also write about more serious matters like having a tank with soldiers outside their housing complex or being sad that Mom or Dad had to go away for a while.

The universal appeal of such characters as Spot, Mrs. Wishy Washy, and Baby Bear connect DoDDS children to children around the world. The goal is the same for children in Reading Recovery in DoDDS as it is everywhere. Like their stateside counterparts, Reading Recovery teachers hear DoDDS children saying, “That didn’t make sense” or “I reread” or “This was the tricky part.” Do you ever wonder if Dr. Clay envisioned that the invisible threads of Reading Recovery would connect teachers and children around the world?

Department of Defense Schools

A 2001 study by Vanderbilt University, titled March to Excellence, highlights the success of the DoDDS schools. In a news release, Department of Defense Education Activity Director Dr. Joseph Tafoya stated that the report termed the formula for the schools “one of the best-kept secrets in education.” He also noted

If the [DoDDS] school system were a state, it would rank number one in the country for minority students’ achievement in reading and writing. Overall, only two states, Connecticut and Maine, ranks higher than DoD schools on national reading and writing performance tests (DoDEA news release, October 2001, p. 1).

Reading Recovery is specifically mentioned as one of the many reasons for the success of students in DoD schools (March to Excellence, p. 34).

Support from the Military

Quite often Reading Recovery teachers find an extra level of support that their stateside colleagues don’t experience. As noted in March to Excellence, “Soldiers are instructed that their ‘place of duty’ is at their child’s school on parent-teacher conference day, and are relieved of work responsibilities to volunteer at school each month” (p. 60). The military troops work on the same posts and bases where their children attend school and actively participate in the success of students. The military provides a wealth of services for the families. Reading Recovery teachers can be sure that there is a network of support for the children with whom they work.

### Table 1. Growth of DoDDS 1993–2003

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<tr>
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<th>DoDDS-Europe</th>
<th>DoDDS-Pacific</th>
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<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading Recovery Teachers</td>
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<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Served</td>
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<td>103</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Training Sites</td>
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**Unique Challenges**

Just as in all schools and school systems around the world, DoDDS Reading Recovery has its own unique challenges. Teachers might have to fly, take the train, or drive the autobahns or autostradas to meet for continuing contact. Some of the teacher leaders live out of suitcases, and they frequent airports and hotels throughout the school year. The teacher leaders are not always able to drop in to see a child when the teacher is concerned about a student. Reaching out to touch someone most likely involves e-mails, faxes, or telephone calls. World events can directly impact teaching in DoDDS as well. A brand-new teacher might even experience an evacuation of her school in Turkey and end up teaching in Germany for a short time.

Quite often children must deal with the absence of a parent due to the military member being deployed for duty in another area for an extended period of time. In the case of an extended family emergency in the United States, the family and child may be gone for several weeks.

Vacations at nontraditional times of the year may also cause extended absences. It is not uncommon to learn that a child will be gone for the next week or two because the family is going to be in Paris, Thailand, China, Australia, or some other fascinating location.

Another unique challenge in DoDDS is tracking the children after Reading Recovery. Generally children arrive overseas with a military parent and remain in a school for a typical tour of 2 or 3 years. Parents, local principals, and area administrators remain committed to Reading Recovery’s help in assuring that our first graders can be successful wherever they go.

**Success Stories**

If we lined up success stories from Reading Recovery end to end, they might just extend from DoDDS schools to the United States! According to one DoDDS principal’s survey from 2002–2003,

> Reading Recovery has had a profound impact on our school. Every child serviced became a reader. My total staff is pro Reading Recovery, especially the first and second grade teachers. These lower grade teachers can see the difference between children serviced by Reading Recovery and those low children who did not receive services. If I could have another Reading Recovery position, I would take it in an instant. Reading Recovery is a fantastic program and worth every dollar we spend to train teachers.

As difficult and trying as it might be to keep training opportunities and continuing contact available, DoDDS-Europe has made a commitment to 26 more Reading Recovery teaching slots in the 2004–2005 school year. The great news is that the principal quoted above will have not one, but two more Reading Recovery positions! Thank you, Dr. Marie Clay, from all of us across the world. Those beautiful smiles on children’s faces as they become confident readers and writers make it all worthwhile!

**References**

