Innovations and Changes: Reading Recovery Today

James Flood and Diane Lapp, Distinguished Research Professors of Language and Literacy
San Diego State University

Carl Braun, past IRA president and professor at the University of Calgary, Canada, first told us about Reading Recovery in the early 1980s. He explained that Marie Clay had developed a program for first-grade delayed readers in New Zealand that was sure-fire. Over the years we have found his comment to be prophetic; he certainly knew that he had seen something groundbreaking. Shortly after our conversation with him, we shared the podium with Gay Su Pinnell of The Ohio State University at a professional development conference in Wichita Falls, Texas. As Gay explained the mechanics of the program, we became fascinated with the possibilities.

Throughout the succeeding 20 years, we have witnessed the ways in which Reading Recovery has accelerated children’s attempts toward literacy throughout the world. We’ve seen Reading Recovery in operation in Massachusetts and California with students from a wide variety of life experiences that ranged from affluent family backgrounds to children living in poverty. We’ve seen it work with boys and girls, and we’ve seen it work with first- and second-language children.

Many of our colleagues and personal friends—including Irene Fountas, a former student of ours at Boston University; Trika Smith-Burke and Maribeth Schmitt, colleagues at NYU and Purdue; Patricia Kelly, also a former student of ours; Sharan Gibson, a colleague; and other teacher trainers at San Diego State University—have been trained as Reading Recovery teachers, teacher leaders, and trainers. Each has been profoundly changed by their experience with Reading Recovery. They all acknowledge that their sensitivity to children’s needs has expanded enormously and their understanding of the individual differences has broadened to include a much wider view of the cognitive, motivational, and affective factors that affect each child’s literacy development.

Throughout the past 2 decades, we have closely followed the research on Reading Recovery that appeared in many literacy journals, including Literacy Teaching and Learning, and external reviews of Reading Recovery; we have never failed to be impressed by the positive gains made by children who have received Reading Recovery services. We have seen successful programs operate in San Diego and its suburban schools in El Cajon and Poway. Hundreds of children were served well; in each program more than 80% of the children became solid first-grade readers when they completed their programs.

However, during these years we have also seen the consequences of economic fortune (and misfortune). We’ve seen the phenomenon where school districts embraced Reading Recovery for a period of time and then reluctantly moved away from it.

When asked, “Don’t you think it’s too expensive?” we have steadfastly answered, “The evidence shows it works.” We also added the overused tagline, “Pay now or pay a great deal later.”
because local budgets were unable to afford the program. When asked, "Don't you think it's too expensive?" we have steadfastly answered, "The evidence shows it works." We also added the overused tagline, "Pay now or pay a great deal later." In each instance when districts pulled back from Reading Recovery, we've seen more first graders in trouble than ever before, and we've seen falling test scores and unhappy children, teachers, and parents.

Even in moments when dire economic conditions have dictated against good practice, we've seen silver linings for Reading Recovery teachers and their students. Two examples illustrate this point. In one recent local economic downturn in San Diego Unified School District, Reading Recovery teachers were asked to serve as co-teachers in an accelerated literacy program for children who were significantly behind their peers; the children in this program were grouped for intense individualized instruction. The program called for a classroom teacher to be paired with an accelerated literacy teacher; the two teachers attended professional development sessions, administered the Observation Survey, and taught together in the service of 20 first graders (almost all of whom had been retained).

In every instance where the accelerated literacy teacher was Reading Recovery-trained, the children achieved unimaginable success, and the classroom teacher grew in the understanding of the development of literacy in young children from conversations with and observations of the partner Reading Recovery-trained teacher.

The second example is also taken from San Diego Unified School District. As the district instituted the position of literacy peer coach a few years ago, we at San Diego State University were asked to certify candidates who wanted to become literacy peer coaches. Candidates who had Reading Recovery training and reading certification were most successful in the peer coaching certification process and remain some of the most revered (and sought after) literacy coaches in the district. In addition to providing teachers with insights into how children's minds work, how they strategize, and how they integrate cueing systems, Reading Recovery also equips teachers with the skills to provide leadership roles in their schools.

We've seen Reading Recovery change with the times during the past 2 decades; it is not a static, inflexible entity. The Spanish version of Reading Recovery, Descubriendo la Lectura, was developed to meet the needs of many children whose first language is Spanish; its success closely parallels the overall success of Reading Recovery. The premise of the Spanish program is the same as the English program: to help struggling first graders through one-to-one tutorials to become on-grade-level functioning readers. The success rate of Descubriendo la Lectura after approximately 36 hours of instruction is a testimonial to the teachers and their students who have engaged themselves in the processes of improved teaching and learning.

Innovations to the initial program have included constant monitoring of success rates to establish exit standards, wider variety in text selection by encouraging new writers and publishers to produce ever more appealing books, and reforms in delivery systems. For example, the Reading Recovery teachers who participated in the district accelerated literacy program split their days in half (accelerated literacy teaching in the mornings and Reading Recovery teaching in the afternoon). This flexibility permitted the Reading Recovery teachers to continue to hone their Reading Recovery skills while sharing their knowledge and insights with school colleagues who were not Reading Recovery-trained.

Questions and issues still abound for the future of Reading Recovery in San Diego and throughout the world. The calls that have come for more writing within the tutorials—as well as more services for children who are in need yet do not qualify for Reading Recovery—have been heard, and efforts are being made to craft the program in ways that will meet each child's need; these efforts include addressing the issues of more writing and broader services.

We believe that Reading Recovery has impacted education in the United States and throughout the world in many ways. It has served many children well, and it has provided unsailable evidence for the effectiveness of one-to-one tutorials. This evidence has impacted policy and has enlightened educators, legislators, and policy leaders about the needs of struggling readers, and it has provided a strong model for effective teaching and learning.
About the Authors

James Flood, distinguished research professor of language and literacy at San Diego State University, has taught in preschool, elementary, and secondary schools and has been a language arts supervisor and vice principal. He has also been a Fulbright scholar at the University of Lisbon in Portugal and the president of the National Reading Conference. Dr. Flood has chaired and cochaired many IRA, NCTE, NCRE, and NRC committees. Currently Dr. Flood teaches graduate courses at SD SU. He has coauthored and edited many articles, columns, texts, handbooks, and children's materials on reading and language arts issues. These include the following which were codeveloped with Diane Lapp: Content Area Reading and Learning, which is in its second edition, and The Handbook of Research on Teaching Literacy Through the Communicative and Visual Arts. His many educational awards include being named as the Outstanding Teacher Educator in the Department of Teacher Education at SD SU, the Distinguished Research Lecturer from SD SU’s Graduate Division of Research, and a member of both California’s and IRA’s Reading Halls of Fame. Dr. Flood is a coeditor of The California Reader and is a member of the board of directors of the International Reading Association.

Diane Lapp, distinguished research professor of language and literacy in the Department of Teacher Education at San Diego State University, has taught in elementary and middle schools. Her major areas of research and instruction have been related to struggling readers and their families who live in urban settings. Dr. Lapp, who directs and teaches field-based preservice and graduate programs and courses, continues to team-teach in public school classrooms. Dr. Lapp has coauthored and edited many articles, columns, texts, handbooks, and children’s materials on reading and language arts issues. These include the following two which were codeveloped with James Flood: Teaching Reading to Every Child, a reading methods textbook in its fourth edition, and The Handbook of Research in Teaching the English Language Arts, second edition. She has also chaired and cochaired several IRA and NRC committees. She is currently the chair of IRA’s Early Literacy Commission. Her many educational awards include being named as the Outstanding Teacher Educator and Faculty Member in the Department of Teacher Education at SD SU, the Distinguished Research Lecturer from SD SU’s Graduate Division of Research, a member of the California Reading Hall of Fame, and IRA’s 1996 Outstanding Teacher Educator of the Year. Dr. Lapp is the coeditor of California’s literacy journal The California Reader.

Marie Clay On Acceleration in Reading Recovery

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.