

## Book Review

# *Changing Futures: The Influence of Reading Recovery in the United States*

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“Isn’t 30 to 50 hours of intensive intervention—the equivalent of 2 weeks of schooling—more economical than years of special education or remedial compensatory services?” (p. 170). This is a question posed (and answered) in *Changing Futures: The Influence of Reading Recovery in the United States*.

This book is a comprehensive review of Reading Recovery that describes its logic, history, structure, and evidence of success; it also describes the significance of its development and implementation in the USA. Reading this book it is hard to imagine why Reading Recovery is not a fixture in every school district in every part of the country. The logic and evidence are overwhelmingly compelling.

It is an important book that should be read widely, particularly by school board members, administrators, and policymakers as they consider ways of reducing the numbers of children who struggle with reading, who are retained in grades, or who are placed in special education. And it can be read widely because it is very accessibly written and well-structured. Chapters and appendixes in the book provide roadmaps for implementation, including where and when to expect complications, how to handle them, and tools for analyzing the economic implications in local conditions—both in absolute terms and in

relation to alternative intervention strategies.

Many, like me, who are outside Reading Recovery, have been waiting for a comprehensive book like this. Reading Recovery teachers and others involved in its implementation have also been awaiting a book like this with its lucid account of structures, practices, and successes. But even

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readers not interested in Reading Recovery per se, but in educational change more generally, should read this book because the principles on which Reading Recovery was founded, and is now extended, are explained and are applicable beyond Reading Recovery itself.

The book begins with two chapters that provide an overview of what Reading Recovery is (and is not), its organizing principles, and a rich historical account of its development. These chapters allow even those

unfamiliar with the field of literacy teaching and learning to grasp the concepts, context, and significance of Reading Recovery’s implementation in the United States.

An early chapter traces the history of Marie Clay’s work and offers insight into her genius: a person who constantly seeks to understand a problem and who organizes all of the social and institutional resources necessary to solve the problem and deepen understanding of it. Clay founded Reading Recovery on the basis of close collaborative study of children’s literacy learning and constant articulation of theory in teaching practice. For Clay, children’s literacy learning must be self-correcting and self-extending. The authors of *Changing Futures* show how these principles are reflected at every level of Reading Recovery—children’s learning, teachers’ learning, and organizational learning. At each level change is based on evidence and local context.

The next chapters describe in clear detail Reading Recovery’s theoretical foundation, monitoring system, teaching framework, and training and professional development. These chapters include relevant research studies that, for example, support the assessment instruments used in Reading Recovery and the power of one-to-one instruction. Two chapters

document the procedures in place for evaluating the effectiveness of Reading Recovery and review the published studies that document its effectiveness—including extensive tabular summaries—leaving little doubt concerning the effectiveness and the rigor of Reading Recovery. The final chapters in the book tackle the organizational structures in Reading Recovery, the political context, and the continuing challenges faced by Reading Recovery.

The authors note that Reading Recovery is no longer a simple intervention program. In fact, it “is hard to define or categorize. At one level it is an individual tutoring program for children. At another level it is a dynamic and intensive teacher education program. At still another level it is an international network of professionals who are dedicated to ongoing learning” (p. 205). Indeed, the program works to produce change along four dimensions: behavioral change for teachers, students, and schools, and social/political changes in funding. Nonetheless, the documentation shows a consistency at every level of Reading Recovery. The program originated with teachers observing each other through one-way mirrors and discussing the process, the logic, and the alternatives for their teaching of individual children. This individual and collaborative analysis of theory-in-practice remains at the core of the training program. It is also at the core of the organization which adaptively responds to new evidence arising from its own data-gathering process and from external sources. For example, the authors point to changes in the program including more attention to phonemic awareness and phonics, more attention to

comprehending strategies (a feature of the revised guidebook, Clay, in press) clearer differentiation between the ways teachers offer support on new and familiar texts, and more attention to fluency and phrasing instruction.

Reading Recovery is a rare case of an educational innovation thoughtfully and systematically ‘brought to scale’ from the bottom up. Although the authors give appropriate due to Marie Clay for making it possible, the book makes it clear that Reading Recovery has collaborative roots and how these collaborative roots have been preserved as the institution of Reading Recovery evolves. The architects have built into the innovation the tools and organizational structure to monitor its success and to research practice with an eye to continuing evolution.

The book also makes plain the uniquenesses of Reading Recovery, particularly in relation to standard operating procedures in the United States. For example, the programmatic commitment to responsible evaluation and responsiveness to that evaluation is uncommon. Every single child is carefully tracked. Coupled with this is the systematic resistance to overstepping capacity. When a school or district takes on Reading Recovery, they must take on the commitment to monitor quality, manage implementation, and develop expertise. Failure to fulfill these obligations can result in deregistration. Participation is not a unilateral choice but necessarily a partnership.

Although the title, *Changing Futures*, points to the most important accomplishment of Reading Recovery—the changed lives of close to a million and a half children (in

the United States)—the book reveals much more than that. It is at once a tribute to the insight of Marie Clay, to the foresight and commitment of those who brought Reading Recovery to the United States, and to the flexibility and power of the founding principles of Reading Recovery. At the same time it is a powerful tool for those who contemplate implementing Reading Recovery. Not only is it empirically and logically persuasive for those who need persuading, but it also shows what it takes to implement it so that there will be no disruptive surprises.

Above all, *Changing Futures* shows how people committed to changing the lives of children can make a difference. Of course it also shows that doing so will not be a quick fix, but that responsive, responsible innovation can be designed to survive the fickle attentions of politics.

### About the Author

Peter H. Johnston is a professor in the reading department at the University at Albany—State University of New York, and a senior researcher for the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement. He serves on the editorial boards of *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Literacy Research*, *Elementary School Journal*, and *Literacy, Teaching and Learning*, and has published eight books and numerous journal articles. He chaired the International Reading Association (IRA) and National Council of Teachers of English Joint Task Force on Assessment.



# an essential new book for everyone with an interest in Reading Recovery

Maribeth Schmitt, Billie Askew, Irene Fountas, Carol Lyons, and Gay Su Pinnell share their knowledge in this comprehensive look at Reading Recovery's 20 years of implementation and research in the United States. Policymakers, administrators, and early childhood educators will find insightful chapters that provide persuasive evidence for the power of an early investment in changing futures of children.

## Changing Futures

The Influence of  
Reading Recovery  
in the United States

Maribeth C. Schmitt  
Billie J. Askew  
Irene C. Fountas  
Carol A. Lyons  
Gay Su Pinnell

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