For more than 20 years I have admired the work of Reading Recovery — the curriculum, the training model, and the competence and passion of the individuals involved. In 1986, I recall reading and hearing about a new reading intervention program beginning at The Ohio State University. In the early 1990s we began to entertain the idea of having a Reading Recovery program at Oakland University where I was on the faculty. Colleague Bob Schwartz went to Ohio State for a year of training and our colleague Lee Skandalaris, already a marvelous public school reading teacher, journeyed to New Zealand to study with Marie Clay. The teaching facilities for the Reading Recovery program were reconfigured—including the one-way mirror for behind-the-glass teaching—and a year later with the return of our two trainers from Ohio State and New Zealand, Reading Recovery was underway at Oakland University.

Through the 1990s I was privileged to meet on several occasions with groups of Reading Recovery teachers in the Michigan area. I also noticed in my graduate classes at Oakland that Reading Recovery teachers who were electing to get a master’s degree seemed to be a level above our other very able graduate students, both in terms of their theoretical foundation and their ability to tutor students in the university reading clinic. At the same time I was working with some very competent educators in Texas, many of whom had a Reading Recovery background. In recent years I have been privileged to attend several Reading Recovery conferences as well as interact professionally with many Reading Recovery teachers, teacher leaders, and trainers in their schools and districts. It is through this lens that I share my impressions of Reading Recovery.

**Distinguishing Characteristics of Reading Recovery**

Reading Recovery represents a major initiative in literacy education, arguably the most important in the past two decades. It distinguishes itself in at least four major ways:

1. the curriculum and nature of the teaching;
2. the ability to stay true to its mission, theory, and practice;
3. the model for training Reading Recovery teachers; and
4. its community of committed teacher-scholars.

**The curriculum and nature of the teaching**

Marie Clay, the originator of Reading Recovery, remains the heart and soul of the program. To those of us who view learning to read as a language and thinking process, much of what Clay espouses is not new. The manner in which she packaged the instruction exclusively for first-grade students, however, and her model for the training of Reading Recovery teachers is unique. The theoretical foundation of Reading Recovery instruction can be captured in a few sentences. As Clay (1993) states,

> It [learning to read] assumes that a theory of reading continuous text cannot arise from a theory of word reading because it [reading] involves the integration of many behaviors not studied in the reading of words. … It assumes that the child begins to read by attending to many different aspects of printed texts (letters, words, pictures, language, messages, stories) with limited knowledge and primitive response patterns which change in two ways: 1) learning about each of these areas expands, 2) ways of working on the interrelationships of these areas develop. (p. 7)

With these statements Clay acknowledges that though learning to read is complex, one cannot take a minimalist or reductionist approach by beginning only with letters or even words. She understood that it is in the reading of continuous text from the very beginning that young learners are afforded the opportunities to figure out this complex process. In fact, Reading Recovery embraces this complexity of the learning to read process and is careful not to attempt to oversimplify the process (see Schwartz & Gallant, 2009).

For many children this process is relatively natural and smooth, but for others, the close support of the highly skilled teacher is critical. This view of reading instruction is couched in two fundamental prin-
ciples of how people learn, namely beginning with what the learner already knows and facilitating learning with conversations between teacher and learner that take on a metacognitive and self-monitoring flavor (see Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Clay also recognized the importance of early composing as well as teaching children how to look at print, and how to use multiple cues to process text. The major cues are

- sense or meaning cues, “Does it make sense?”
- structure grammar cues, “Can we say it that way?”
- visual cues, “Does that look right?”
- letter sounds expected, “What can you hear? What would you expect to hear?”

(Clay, 1993)

Coupled with this multiple cueing system is a reasonable amount of repetition in reading texts of the previous day and the reading and rereading of dictation sentences; all supported by the instructional conversations between teacher and student.

The idea that we begin with multiple cues, though comfortable to some in the literacy profession, is a troublesome concept to others. The notion that one would ask a child in the beginning stages of literacy development, “What would make sense?” is an anathema to a stage theory of reading where teachers are instructed to deal first with letters and then words and finally after an extended period of time, perhaps a year or more, comprehension is addressed (see Chall, 1967). Reading Recovery theory stands in sharp contrast to a stage theory of reading as represented by Reading First (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), for example.

Anyone remotely familiar with Reading Recovery knows that the instruction is delivered on a one-to-one basis. This has sparked some controversy regarding the cost benefits and whether the one-to-one configuration is truly necessary. While this debate continues it is given us valuable insights into the process. These very close observations allow us to see more clearly how the mind of the child is working as he figures out the complexities of learning to read. It seems less likely that these same insights would have been revealed to the highly skilled teacher if she were interacting with two or more young learners at the same time. This is not to argue that tutoring configurations of two or more students cannot be fruitful; but rather it is the one-to-one tutoring that provides us with the keen insights into the process of becoming literate.

The ability to stay true to the Reading Recovery mission

A second distinguishing characteristic of Reading Recovery is how well the integrity of the program has been maintained over the past 25 years. Often the original design of a program or methodology becomes diffused over time. Clay understood that in order to claim that you were using Reading Recovery, one had to have extensive and closely supervised training in Reading Recovery. This training had to originate at specifically designated universities that had exhibited commitment and understanding of both the theory and pedagogy of Reading Recovery. Although Reading Recovery has had continuous refinement, the basic design of Reading Recovery lessons has remained relatively consistent. This is quite remarkable when we consider that Reading Recovery is not a prescriptive program, but rather a curriculum that requires individual teachers to make preplanned as well on-the-go types of decisions every day with every child. The genius of

The genius of Clay was not only in her understanding of the learning to read process but in her ability to create a vertical organizational structure that has allowed Reading Recovery to remain true to its original mission.
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**The model for training**

A third distinguishing characteristic of Reading Recovery is the model for training teachers. Based on a strong theoretical foundation, there is continuous staff development, even after teachers are certified to teach children in Reading Recovery. The initial year of training with closely supervised mentoring is familiar to all Reading Recovery teachers, as is the practice of going behind the glass. No one is immune from peer review. In addition, the networking between Reading Recovery teacher, teacher leader, and trainer is strong and continuous. This model stands in sharp contrast to how we tend to prepare teacher candidates to teach in the U.S., for example. There is much that the larger community of teacher education can learn from the Reading Recovery training model.

**A community of committed teacher-scholars**

A fourth distinguishing feature of Reading Recovery is the quality and diversity of individuals committed to the intervention. Reading Recovery tends to draw from a reservoir of highly experienced and successful teachers. Many have advanced degrees. Many have been teaching for 15–20 or more years. Perhaps because of the rigor of the training or the professional challenge that Reading Recovery provides or the strong networking and collaborative nature of the Reading Recovery organization, or perhaps because of all of the above, high-quality educators seem attracted to Reading Recovery. Often the Reading Recovery-trained teacher is the most-knowledgeable literacy professional in a building and the site coordinator is the most-knowledgeable literacy professional in a district. It is only natural that schools and districts turn to these individuals for advice and leadership.

Reading Recovery benefits tens of thousands of children each year. Just as importantly, Reading Recovery benefits our profession at large for its scholarly inquiry of how to effectively teach children to read, as well as its exemplary model of educating teachers.

These outreach benefits of Reading Recovery are substantial and likely lead to a better use of resources available to a district. The cost benefits of this outreach cannot be calculated specifically, but certainly Reading Recovery is impacting the quality of many schools and districts in their K–8 literacy curriculum.

**Contemporary Challenges for Reading Recovery**

Where does Reading Recovery go from here? Despite its documented success, Reading Recovery is not without challenges. First and foremost, Reading Recovery must continue to stay true to its mission — namely to continue recovering first-grade children on a one-to-one tutoring basis at a success rate equal to or better than the current rate. This would seem easy enough, and yet history is replete with highly successful initiatives, institutions, and enterprises that were unable to sustain their record of success over the long term.

Secondly, Reading Recovery must continue to refine its instructional procedures as it has in the past, being very careful to maintain the factors that contribute most to student achievement and modifying those instructional components that have less positive impact.

Third, as Reading Recovery educators gain an even stronger voice in classroom instruction, we need to be mindful that the instructional components offered in the one-to-one tutoring will require modification for classroom instruction as well as in the literacy development through the grades. Clay was certainly aware of this when she stated

This means that what reading involves, what the reader is attending to, and how his mind is working on the task probably changes over the first years of literacy learning to enable the beginning reader, reading slowly and aloud, to become the fluent, fast silent reader….

There is change over time…

(Clay, 1993, pp. 7–8)

This is good advice. Though the theoretical foundation will remain relatively constant, the pedagogy will require modification across the curriculum and through the grades.

Reading Recovery will continue to be an important force in the advancement of literacy. It is an organization
of more than 12,000 highly committed and competent professionals who are closely joined by an extensive system of networking. And although they may not speak with one voice, they certainly speak a consistent language and act with a common purpose. They represent classroom teachers, administrative leaders, and university literacy researchers and scholars. Because of these factors, Reading Recovery is an empowered organization. For example, in the early part of this decade when reading instruction in primary-grade classrooms was moving towards what many of us believed to be a more-extreme position, it was Reading Recovery that played a significant role in holding the core center of beliefs. The Reading Recovery community had the data and success rates to document its position. As a literacy educator, I take considerable comfort in the fact that Reading Recovery is a testimony to excellence in literacy instruction.

Reading Recovery benefits tens of thousands of children each year. Just as importantly, Reading Recovery benefits our profession at large for its scholarly inquiry of how to effectively teach children to read, as well as its exemplary model of educating teachers. The lessons of Reading Recovery go well beyond the powerful instructional interactions between teacher and child.

References

About the Author
Dorsey Hammond is currently on the education faculty at Salisbury University in Salisbury, MD. He previously taught for 30 years at Oakland University in Michigan, where he received the Excellence in Teaching Award and was selected as a Distinguished Professor by the Michigan Governing Boards of Universities. A frequent presenter at regional and national conferences, he is a co-editor and contributing author to the monograph, Teaching Reading In the New Millennium. His most recent publication is a co-edited Salisbury University monograph entitled, Your First Years of Teaching: Beginning a Journey of Excellence.