Book Review

**Reading Recovery and Every Child a Reader**

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*Reading Recovery and Every Child a Reader*, edited by Sue Burroughs-Lange and Amanda Ince, is an academic volume, well-referenced and soundly grounded in research and theory. But to many readers, the most important aspect of the book is that it tells a story—a grand, overarching story with many embedded tales, each an adventure. As this treasure of chapters unfolds, readers are introduced to the potential of what can happen when research, excellent practice, and enlightened and farseeing policy are combined.

At one level, the volume is a story of a public policy that actually worked either *in spite of or because* it differed from other such initiatives in various parts of the English-speaking world:

- It did not offer a “quick fix” for underachievement in literacy, and
- It was not based on the purchase and provision of materials.

What Reading Recovery had to offer was much more far reaching — a combination of:

- highly effective instructional procedures to help struggling readers make accelerated progress, and
- a dynamic professional development sequence for teachers.

As a policy, Every Child a Reader provided the resources needed to put in place layers of professional activity. A group of highly trained educators and researchers delivered and monitored the actions that had the potential to assure literacy learning for every young child.

In the chapters of this volume, you will find a thorough description of Reading Recovery and the history of its implementation in the United Kingdom (see Douëtil, Hobsbaum, & Maidement) as well as a cogent description of its theoretical and pedagogical base (see Bodman & Smith). Also relevant is the description of the unprecedented system of professional development that “empowers leaders, teacher leaders (teacher educators), and teachers to become effective decision makers and problem solvers” (see Taylor, Ferris, & Franklin, p. 82).

This unique staff development system involves a one-way viewing screen. As they watch one of their colleagues teach a child, teachers talk with each other, sharing their observations and constructing a common language to discuss their practice. The discussion is guided by a highly trained leader. Through many such experiences, teachers develop a tentative theory to guide their actions. The professional development work is both transformative and generative — that is, it allows teachers to add to their own learning in a way that can form a support for others who work with struggling readers.

For those familiar with Reading Recovery, these foundational chapters offer a succinct but comprehensive account that will spark new insights. For readers new to Reading Recovery, this volume will provide a picture of what is possible when policy is guided by sound field research. Of particular interest to all readers will be the accounts of the implementation of Reading Recovery in the different countries that are part of the UK. The description of the initiative in Wales is especially interesting because of the reconstruction (rather than translation) to Welsh.

Writers of this volume make it clear: Reading Recovery implementation is not a simple matter of replication. Going “to scale” means implementation over and over in different contexts meaning that hundreds of adjustments are needed to maintain the intervention’s positive impact on children. The lessons from these chapters follow:
1. Implementing a complex system requires care and thoughtful decision making.

2. Implementing a successful intervention in a variety of contexts requires adaptation without loss of integrity.

3. A powerful professional development program is the key to successful implementation.

4. Administrators play a key role in the implementation of a successful literacy intervention.

Another helpful section of the book (see Burroughs-Lange, Douétil, & Hobsbaum) focuses on the juxtaposition of policy and research. Every Child a Reader, a national initiative in England, was initiated because of research showing the link between poor attainment in literacy and long-term personal and social problems. The ultimate financial impact of low literacy was staggering. At the same time, research on Reading Recovery continued to show it to be highly effective but difficult to scale up with local resources only. The resources were not there to lift enough children, and Reading Recovery was regarded as too costly. Was the research base in the United Kingdom sufficient to support Reading Recovery? Even though extensive descriptive data had been collected, no experimental research results were available, and these were needed to make a compelling argument for the resources.

Subsequently, a well-controlled study of Reading Recovery in 42 low socioeconomic boroughs of London (described by the authors as “a tough testing ground for Reading Recovery”) demonstrated both short-term and long-term benefits. Now, empirical data supported the impact of Reading Recovery and demonstrated its potential for preventing reading failure.

Based on all of this information, the ambitious Every Child a Reader policy was designed. It provided for the expansion of Reading Recovery as a central element of a spectrum of supports. Further, analysis revealed that “layered literacy interventions” (involving a menu of several different kinds of interventions) was a key. Reading Recovery was powerful, but more was needed, and the layers must form a coherent system. These interventions are described in the book; the important thing is that they are supported and given rigor by Reading Recovery, with outstanding results.

What followed was rapid expansion of Reading Recovery, which was a test of the potential to scale up with integrity. The lessons of this policy move are these:

- Policy decisions should be based on solid performance, shown by research.
- Policy decisions should have long term rather than “quick fix” goals.
- Centering a range of services on a proven intervention delivered by highly trained professionals gives the greatest chance of success.

But a question remains: Can an intervention be sustained beyond the initial implementation? The writers leave this question unanswered; and, indeed, that is one of the questions still looming large in educational innovation.

First, we have to think what sustainability means. If it means long-lasting existence with dedication to the essential features that make the intervention unique, then Reading Recovery worldwide has certainly proved to have sustainability. The intervention has lasted across many countries for well over 25 years. After examining the results of the first trials in New Zealand, Reading Recovery was adopted by policymakers as a national effort. It exists there today. In the United States, Reading Recovery exists in many states through linked local and state efforts. There is no central funding source. But Reading Recovery and Every Child a Reader provides an account of a government-supported implementation in a country with a large population. As such, it is subject to the fluctuations in government, which makes it vulnerable. It will be interesting, indeed, to follow the future of Reading Recovery in England.

This volume also offers insights into the problems of scaling up an educational intervention (see Amott, Hindmarsh, & Morris). Obviously,
scaling up has enormous problems in proving the support structure needed to assure that there is integrity of implementation; that is, teachers are delivering instruction that is powerful. In the case of Reading Recovery, there is no “script” or prescribed sequence of materials. That means that professional development must be intense and ongoing to assure the quality of the program. But authors of this chapter raise an additional issue: Even with careful implementation, political change and the economic climate can impede the growth of an intervention. In addition, the very process of scaling up to large numbers strains the system’s capacity.

Most reforms are created and then replicated to grow to scale. This analysis of Reading Recovery and Every Child a Reader as it moved to scale shows the complexity of scaling and argues against a linear approach. The volume provides compelling advice for innovators; for example:

- Deep conceptual understanding of the underlying theory and the model are needed at the teacher level, as well as at all leadership levels.
- There should be a balance between fidelity and creativity so that the innovation doesn’t become “lost” in the necessary changes to adjust to local conditions.
- Shared ownership for the work is essential.
- Implementers must provide evidence of impact through consistent collection of pupil data.

A clear message comes through: The goal of implementation is sustained impact. If an innovation works only as a “new” effort and declines in its quality, then public funds must then be spent again and again. Sooner or later, all such investments of public funds will be questioned.

What must happen is this: The initial “innovation” becomes established practice that is continually renewed and passed on to newcomers (see Burroughs-Lange). And, even when that happens, the challenges do not end. The authors of this volume caution that innovations must address an unknown future. Implementers must constantly examine the impact of the innovation. The authors of this book make a strong argument for a central team to guide efforts beyond the “islands of innovation” stage. And, this leadership must work against the perception that a program is hierarchical and compartmentalized.

As you enter Reading Recovery and Every Child a Reader, don’t expect a “how to do it” guide for Reading Recovery! What you will find is a virtual road map to educational innovation — at least as far as early literacy is concerned. The volume is instructive, not only as an enormous case study of a massive effort to produce higher levels of literacy, but as a powerful example of the complexities of educational improvement. The final lesson that readers may reflect on after reading the volume is this: Undertaking such an effort is daunting and requires an extraordinary constellation of expertise and hard labor. But the rewards can also be extraordinary — life changing for children, deep learning for teachers, and for elevating the educational system.

Reference

About the Author
Gay Su Pinnell is professor emerita in the School of Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University. She has extensive experience in classroom teaching and field-based research, and has developed and implemented comprehensive approaches to literacy education. She has worked extensively in clinical tutoring and early intervention for young struggling readers. She has been principal investigator for two large-scale research projects. She has received numerous awards recognizing her contributions to early literacy and is a member of the Reading Hall of Fame. Dr. Pinnell has published extensively in books and journals.