“Get Your Running Shoes On:”
Reading Recovery Moves to the U.S.

Patricia L. Scharer, The Ohio State University

Author’s Note: The following article is based on interviews done with Gay Su Pinnell, Carol Lyons, and Diane DeFord about the beginning of Reading Recovery in the U.S. Picture these three pioneers answering my questions and reminiscing with me about how each got involved in Reading Recovery and how it grew in ways none of them had imagined.

How did each of you first come to know Marie Clay’s work?

Carol: In 1979, when I was a masters’ student, Marie Clay came to OSU for a meeting with grad students. She talked about Reading Recovery, what it did for children, and the importance of understanding learning theory. By 1983, I had read everything I could of Clay’s work. I got hold of the blue guidebook and even fooled around a little bit with it with my son who was already reading. Some people would say—”all we need is the books”—and I was one of them at first.

Gay: I had read Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behaviour (Clay, 1977) and was very interested in how she observed children. Dr. Martha King, a colleague of mine, had been invited to speak at a conference in New Zealand so I went with her. We had already started a proposal for working with struggling readers in the U.S. but, as we delved into Reading Recovery, we realized that the proposal we had wasn’t going to work so we threw it out and decided to try to actually replicate Reading Recovery in this country. Marie and Barbara Watson (Marie’s New Zealand colleague) weren’t sure it would work in another country, but we wanted to try.

Diane: I first encountered Marie Clay’s work while I was a doctoral student at Indiana University (1974–1978). Martha King came to Indiana and did several presentations that I attended. She presented her research on children’s writing and cited Marie Clay’s research published in What Did I Write? (1975). I continued to follow Clay’s writing and when her new book, Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behavior was published in 1977, I was hooked on her theories. They explained so much of what I had experienced with young children as a classroom teacher, which is what led me to engage in doctoral studies — to find ways to help children at risk of failure. I took a position at Ohio State in 1983 and was excited to be able to work more closely with Dr. King. When Martha and Gay went to New Zealand during my first year at OSU, they began to plan ways they might bring Reading Recovery to OSU. I had seen it as a new faculty member and became interested. When the Ohio Department of Education became interested and funding became available, Carol, who was on the Newark campus, and I were trained as trainers during that first teacher leader training class, so OSU then had three university trainers.

So how did the Ohio Department of Education become involved?

Gay: When I returned from New Zealand, I went down to talk with Bob Bowers at the Ohio Department of Education. I knew that he was a visionary and would be interested. Charlotte Huck, another colleague at OSU, had also talked with Evelyn Luckey at Columbus Public Schools. The enthusiasm grew for accelerated progress that was unheard of before Reading Recovery. I remember that Bob called me one day and said, “Get your running shoes on!” And, with funding from an NCTE grant, Jennings, Columbus Foundation, and ODE, Reading Recovery began in the U.S.

Carol: In the summer of 1985, Ray Williams, our department chair, invited me to become part of Reading Recovery as an administrator. I was intrigued by that but was most intrigued that I could take the university trainer training from Gay and two graduate students. Clay kept coming back, so I got a little taste of her, too. I approached Reading Recovery from a learning perspective. I had taken graduate courses on neuropsychology, so on my guidebook I had written “the reticular activating system” and “intention” — all these things from that background and applied it to literacy.
Diane: Gay, Charlotte Huck, and Martha King had a long history of working with the Columbus Public Schools and were well connected to key administrators in CPS and the Ohio State Department of Education. Word of the early successes of Reading Recovery with teachers and students in Columbus reached key people in the state department of education, and the question of how much money it might take to plan and execute a statewide implementation of Reading Recovery arose. I was listening in with my fingers crossed, as my early observations of Reading Recovery had given me a sense of the possibilities for so many more children.

What was it like to work in those first years of Reading Recovery at OSU?
Carol: I was thrown in feet first because the second year, we had 24 teacher leaders, and there was a lot to do! I am a fairly organized person and phone calls started coming in. All of a sudden I was on the phone answering questions: Why do you have to come to OSU? Why do you have to teach children behind-the-glass? Why do we have to give credit? We have state department credit, why do we need university credit? That’s how it emerged that I became the first administrator of Reading Recovery at OSU. We had a very good team; we all pitched in and were problem solvers and I think the problems drove the job. I don’t want to say problems — they were legitimate school-based issues. I was committed to Reading Recovery, and I knew it worked.

Diane: It was very exciting! We had a new group of teacher leaders involved in a new concept for us in education — investing in early intervention and preparing leaders of teachers who would guide new Reading Recovery teachers in working with children who were the lowest in their first-grade class. It was a dream for me that came true! We saw immediate results from Reading Recovery with the Ohio teacher leaders. Word traveled fast, and soon we had visitors interested in sending candidates to Ohio.

Gay: By Year 3, Carol, Diane, and I had become a team. We had another 24 teacher leaders. We didn’t know then that we needed to provide continuing contact. If you don’t learn more, it becomes robotic. So, we brought them together for a summer refresher and we began to define the role of the teacher leader in the U.S.

What was your first impression of the teaching and learning during lessons?
Gay: What struck me is that here was a struggling reader who was behaving as a proficient reader. The teacher provides the scaffold to make this child a confident reader. There is a smoothness and skill to the teaching. It’s like a beautiful dance.

Carol: I only picked LD kids since that’s an area of interest, so I asked for children who were on the LD wait list. No amount of knowledge can help prepare you like teaching children. You don’t learn from reading the book; you learn from children as you read the book because the child has shown you something.

Diane: I studied with Jerry Harste and Carolyn Burke at Indiana, so I was aligned with the theoretical base. I was familiar with miscue analysis and observing young readers, so doing a running record was not a big shift. But I was just astonished at my observations of lessons taught behind-the-glass and the dynamic conversations held by the teachers observing the lesson. The way that the conversations lead by a Reading Recovery trainer helped teachers see and understand things that were very hard to accomplish in a regular university course was intriguing to me. Seeing the early assessment data of the child, and the progress that was made in a short time of one-on-one tutoring, was what convinced me I needed to be involved.

How did Reading Recovery grow so fast?
Carol: Parents were very important early on; they saw their children learning and told other people. A secretary in the House of Representatives had a grandson who learned to read quickly through Reading Recovery — this was support for continuing state funding.

Gay: Yes, I remember calling Marie and telling her that we got this money and now had 24 teacher leaders to train. Marie said, “You have it and you have to do it.” Both Marie and Barbara Watson came over from New Zealand several times to help us.

Diane: The article written by Mary Fried, Rose Mary Estes, and Gay that was published in The Reading Teacher in 1990 was instrumental in making Reading Recovery available in the professional literature so that other people became interested. We started setting up observations where people would come and see Reading Recovery in operation, and we devised a way to train teacher leaders at OSU by being in residence for a year. Then, we had an article published by the National Diffusion Network.
and it got a lot of press because it was intended for superintendents and principals as a target population. We had people come to OSU from Texas, New York, North Carolina, and Georgia. Soon we had to consider other options for training because it wasn’t feasible for all teacher leaders to be trained at OSU, so we started training trainers for other universities like Cliff Johnson, Noel Jones, Colin Dunkeld, and Trika Smith-Burke. 

**Carol:** We had calls from across the U.S. People who read about Marie’s work noticed that there was one place you could go and see it, so OSU started to get visitors. A group would come as an exploration. These were school-based people; they always had the same questions — Why do you need credit? Why does it cost so much? So, we did cost-effectiveness studies. You’re going to pay for struggling readers one way or another. But then factor in the cost of the child’s educational career — you can’t measure that! There are other children who are written off. There are throw-away kids in this country! Too many kids falling through the cracks than we want to admit. 

**What happened as more teacher leaders were trained across the U.S.?** 

**Gay:** The whole idea of teaching in front of your peers was frightening in the U.S. It was hard to convince teachers that watching someone behind-the-glass and teaching behind-the-glass was something you had to do. Even using the term “training” was offensive to many people — they associated it with animal training. You train a horse. I remember Mary Fried explaining that training means that you know what you’re doing! Being expected to talk about your observations was also foreign, as well as the idea that you were trying to get the child out of Reading Recovery in a short amount of time. The common belief was that when a child is in Title I, he has to be in Title I for the whole year or even all of elementary school. 

**Diane:** The success of the program brought more and more people as representatives of districts wanting to change their own results and reduce failure in the early grades. But it also generated more and more questions! The key components of this innovative way of teaching children was really like a wedge — it disrupted accepted practice and was so different that administrators pushed back as they considered the possibilities. Why not take children who were guaranteed to quickly become successful readers rather than serving the lowest children, who were sure to fail? Why not teach small groups of children rather than having teachers work with children in one-on-one settings? Why can’t you train a teacher leader during the summer so they can come back and start the program right away? Why do teachers continue to have contact with a teacher leader? Once they are trained, that should be sufficient! 

**Carol:** We started to see that some people wanted to be creative in how to put Reading Recovery in the schools. We saw that we needed to have a trademark, so we worked with OSU lawyers, who had never heard about trademarking an educational program! Once we got the trademark in place, it was a lot easier to say to people, here are the standards which guarantee the integrity of the program. Marie really liked that it was trademarked in the U.S. We wanted to guarantee that the children and teachers would receive the program as designed. We’re a big country; we had a lot to try to manage. I think the trademark saved us. I don’t think it would have lasted 5 years if it hadn’t been trademarked. There were too many people who wanted to create something else. 

**What do you remember most fondly about Marie Clay?** 

**Carol:** I remember sitting next to Marie at a reception even before I was working in Reading Recovery. When I leaned over and talked with her, I said that I was very interested in the brain and Reading Recovery and she said, “What! You know about the brain?” So I told her. I look back on Reading Recovery very fondly as an opportunity to work with children and apply what you have learned. 

**Diane:** The most poignant stories I remember are of Marie Clay’s ability to listen to teachers’ questions as if she had never heard that question before, and her answers were being formed as if she had never thought of that answer before. She had the ability to be a listener and she had such a warm personality. 

**Gay:** I think that she was constantly learning. Marie read voraciously and examined a wide range of research on learning and literacy. She constantly re-examined her own ideas in the light of the understandings she gained. It is not that she changed her basic theory so much as she refined and polished it to reveal deeper understanding. She continues to be an example for us all.
How has being involved in Reading Recovery affected you personally and professionally?

**Carol:** It helped me respect more and more the importance of teachers and what they are doing. The ones who really care about kids, they will dig to know what to do. That’s what I learned about adult learning. Adults are just like children — they need to have reinforcement for the good work they are doing, they deserve to be stretched. Give them a chance to talk about their children so you know where they are in their own learning. It’s not so much book knowledge; it’s listening hard to what the teachers are saying and giving them credit for what they know.

**Diane:** My involvement in Reading Recovery made a big difference in my professional life because it’s an ongoing way of learning. Every time you see a child or teacher or take a leadership role and you train university trainers, you see revolutionary change taking place. It was a different role for all of us in the sense that we began to see change as limitless, and that is transforming for everyone involved!

**Gay:** Personally, it’s been a joy. I’ve made so many wonderful friends and colleagues. There’s something uplifting about being part of Reading Recovery. It adds to your life.

**References**


**About the Author**

Pat Scharer is a professor of education and human ecology at The Ohio State University. A Reading Recovery trainer, she also is actively involved in Literacy Collaborative. Dr. Scharer’s research interests include early literacy development, phonics and word study, and the role of children’s literature to foster both literacy development and literacy achievement. Her research has been published in numerous publications and in the yearbooks of the National Reading Conference and the College Reading Association.

Diane Deford, Gay Su Pinnell, and Carol Lyons continue their work and friendships forged 30 years ago at OSU. Most recently they gathered to celebrate at the Anniversary Reception during the 2015 National Conference.