Our reflections of the 35th anniversary of Reading Recovery® in the United States highlight stellar, unparalled accomplishments in the history of literacy education in America. Imagine an innovation enjoying such endurance in our nation during times of ongoing ‘reading wars’ and quests for the ‘quick fix’ that will ensure that ‘no child is left behind.’ Reading Recovery educators have forged a unique, different path and present a remarkable story — validated by data. Resultantly, we have advanced our nation’s commitment to supporting all learners in realizing their full potential, unbridled by equal access to high-quality educational opportunities, most essential of which is literacy. For children struggling to acquire beginning literacy, Reading Recovery educators have provided the powerful instruction that ensures their access to this basic civil liberty.

While the distinction and contributions that mark Reading Recovery’s anniversary nationally are the primary foci of our current celebrations, Reading Recovery holds a prominent place on the international stage. Hence, our national story contributes to and extends an international story of development and success. There is a reciprocal relationship between international Reading Recovery implementations, and this is by design, one of Marie Clay’s goals.

The purpose of this discussion is to explore Marie Clay’s vision for the international presence of Reading Recovery, to detail Clay’s structures for international development and strength, and to highlight the collaborative role enjoyed by our U.S. Reading Recovery network. Our international story further enhances the celebrations of our remarkable, national accomplishments.

Initial International Connections
When pioneering educators at The Ohio State University invited Marie Clay to join them in Columbus to launch the inaugural Reading Recovery training class in the U.S., they were initiating international exchange, collaboration, and exploration. At that time, Reading Recovery was well underway in New Zealand and was being introduced to educators in Australia. Clay’s reaction to these new ventures, beyond New Zealand, was cautious optimism. She was very aware of the differences in mores, policies, practices, and attitudes in each new, national entity, and she recognized that such differences presented challenges to be addressed as each new intervention was initiated.

Questions included:

- Would the training for teachers be adequate?
- What implementation modifications would need to be made to accommodate for different contextual and educational factors?
- Would it work?

Identifying our nation’s unique needs, Clay determined what modifications to her systemic innovation were acceptable and what procedures had to be maintained to ensure that the replication was grounded in the established research. “Using a process of accommodation, she found adaptive ways to implement Reading Recovery without lessening the high standards that lead to optimal results for both teachers and children” (Doyle, 2009, pp. 292–293).

The answers to the initial questions of Reading Recovery’s effectiveness in the U.S. were resoundingly positive. Our Reading Recovery teachers profited from their training and achieved intervention goals. From the earliest years of implementation, annual evaluations of their student data confirmed the efficacy of Clay’s program design, including teacher training and implementation strategies. Thus, exploration of the transfer of this early intervention from New Zealand to the U.S. confirmed remarkable success and promise for international exchange and collaboration guided by astute and informed planning.

As the international presence of Reading Recovery grew to encompass additional English-speaking nations, Clay built on the models of success in New Zealand, Australia,
and the U.S. to inform these ventures. Hence, Reading Recovery teachers in each nation deliver the same Reading Recovery intervention with appropriate modifications to accommodate for the respective national, academic, and cultural realities. Their success, confirmed by annual data evaluations, reveal Reading Recovery works! This revolutionary intervention strategy, replicated across settings and countries by many teachers under different educational policies, creates new possibilities for children struggling to acquire initial literacy (Clay, 2001).

In writing about factors that contributed to the international success of Reading Recovery, Clay (2009b) asserted that “Reading Recovery professionals have learned how to hold fast to principles, practices, and rationales while at the same time allowing for variability in the education practices and beliefs and change over time in society” (p. 222). More generally, Clay (2001) suggested that design features key to the success of Reading Recovery in the U.S. and all other international contexts include

- guidelines for program delivery.
- a long period of training that prepares teachers to be decision makers.
- lesson components that support perceptual/cognitive processing.
- a complex theory of literacy learning.
- a theory of constructive individuals pushing the boundaries of their own knowledge, rather than group led through each step by a teacher. (pp. 299–301)

Hence, accommodating for these features has involved all of us in

- operating Reading Recovery implementations according to our standards and guidelines for Reading Recovery in the U.S. developed by trainers and updated on an ongoing basis;
- ensuring that all Reading Recovery training is high-caliber, graduate-level coursework delivered over an academic year — followed by continuing professional development opportunities for all Reading Recovery professionals;
- applying Clay’s Reading Recovery instructional procedures, designed to reflect her literacy processing theory, with fidelity and consistency; and
- observing and honoring each learner’s unique strengths, scaffolding instruction to ensure the learner’s construction of new learning, and creating a unique path to success for each child in one-to-one settings.

Clay observed that adherence to these key factors, directing both implementation and instruction, were essential to guard against ineffective, unproven practices that would jeopardize children’s chances of learning (Clay, 2009b). This has remained true for our 35 years of Reading Recovery.

Clay’s problem solving of U.S. issues led to very specific structures and practices for us. Among these are the establishment of university training centers (UTCs) and the acquisition of a U.S. trademark for Reading Recovery. Our UTCs are directed by trainers and serve as the coordinating unit for Reading Recovery training, implementation, monitoring, expansion, and research. This work involves both local and national concerns. Then and now, our university trainers offer the research capacity to conduct both the rigorous self-evaluations necessary to examine the effectiveness of the national implementation and ongoing investigations of complex issues that contribute to the development of new understandings.

Trainers, faculty members at a UTC, are responsible for providing the advanced, university course work that individuals pursue to secure the qualifications and expertise to fulfill the role of teacher leader. They instruct trainees in research, practical knowledge, and leadership to prepare them to train teachers effectively and to engage with their administrators and the public in explaining and advocating for Reading Recovery. Trainers also play an important role in supporting the professional learning of teachers and monitoring the implementation at all levels “to prevent massive change so that it no longer fulfils its promise” (Clay, 2009b, p. 239). As needed, this monitoring leads to problem solving with teacher leaders and administrators to ensure that the intervention will remain powerful and be sustained.

The need to seek a U.S. trademark for Reading Recovery, which is held by The Ohio State University, became important to protect Reading Recovery from look-alike, substitute programs. The trademark is an assurance of quality and protection for our schools from any program deviations to Clay’s research-based Reading Recovery. In effect, Clay knew “how destructive unlimited variants and poor training could be to an intervention which had dem-
onstrated that children who were hard to teach could succeed under a special set of conditions” (Clay, 2009b, p. 239).

Our innovation now in its 35th year is an exemplar of successfully sustaining an intervention’s effectiveness and relevance by adhering to standards for implementation and instruction with fidelity. This unwavering commitment to excellence and integrity by implementing Reading Recovery as designed is the practice that will ensure the ongoing, powerful impact of Reading Recovery in the U.S.

Organizing for International Collaboration

While working globally and supporting the successful expansion of Reading Recovery to three continents, Clay promoted international collaboration. She valued international communication and she realized the benefits accrued by sharing research, implementation challenges, and successful problem solving across borders.

For example, when U.S. educators launched Reading Recovery in Ohio, the experiences of the New Zealand and Australian educators were beneficial prototypes. Then, the successful processes for initiating Reading Recovery in the U.S. became models for the initiation of Reading Recovery in the U.K. (Burroughs-Lange, 2009). With Clay’s guidance, the successful redevelopment of Reading Recovery in Spanish (Rodriquez, 2007) established the processes followed by Reading Recovery professionals engaged in redeveloping Reading Recovery in French (Canada), Danish, and currently Maltese (Malta).

For many years (1983–2001), Clay served as the liaison, ambassador, proponent, and problem solver of Reading Recovery internationally. At the same time, her vision was to create a leadership body and structures that would weave the separate, national Reading Recovery entities into an international collaborative charged with sustaining Reading Recovery around the world. In this way, Clay transferred her global role(s) for Reading Recovery implementations to the international trainers in a well-planned way. This led to the establishment of the International Reading Recovery Trainers Organization (IRRTO) launched in 2001. Per Clay’s design, IRRTO “guides, supports and monitors every participating Reading Recovery intervention in each language in which it is available (at present, in English, Danish, French, and Spanish)” (Clay, 2016, p. 4).

IRRTO members are the trainers affiliated with all trademark Reading Recovery implementations across the globe. This organization’s leadership is vested in an elected executive board of five trainers giving equal representation to five countries. Currently, members of the board include Prudence Smith (Australia), Allyson Matczuk (Canada), Christine Boocock (New Zealand), Susan Bodman (the United Kingdom/Europe), and Elizabeth Kaye (the United States). They are supported by Executive Chair Mary Anne Doyle.

With Marie Clay’s guidance, IRRTO developed structures and procedures to assure that Reading Recovery professionals sustain implementations of Reading Recovery internationally, address ongoing change and development, and ensure that Reading Recovery’s future remains dynamic (Doyle, 2009). The specific functions of the executive board as detailed by Clay (2016) are:

- To conduct ongoing monitoring of Reading Recovery by requesting annual reports of national data collection from each of the five national trademark holders.
- To respond to challenges to the implementation of Reading Recovery at the international level and to specific national issues if these have international ramifications according to IRRTO’s set of standards.
- To support ongoing research in order to provide direction for change and growth in Reading Recovery through international collaboration and investigation.
- To consider ramifications for IRRTO member countries of a significant body of research findings.
- To consider recommendations for changes in policy, implementation, and/or practices of Reading Recovery on the basis of international collaboration and research.
- To oversee international developments including the introduction of Reading Recovery in a new country and/or re-development of Reading Recovery in another language. (p. 4)

IRRTO is designed to serve all professionals engaged in Reading Recovery. Therefore, each professional engaged in the U.S. trademark program has a direct connection to the benefits and services of IRRTO through their local teacher leader and UTC. The international trainers, IRRTO members, meet approximately every 18 months; they present an international institute for all Reading Recovery professionals and their colleagues every 3 years. Each international institute has been very successful, and
participants have reported valuing the unique opportunities to meet and engage with international colleagues in Reading Recovery. The U.S. trainers have hosted this institute in Maui (1992), Palm Springs (1995), and Baltimore (2007). The 2022 institute will also be held in the U.S.

Sharing International Discoveries

As Clay envisioned, the opportunities for international collaboration have promoted shared problem solving and beneficial discoveries resulting from the exploration of common challenges. In the earliest years of Reading Recovery’s expansion, Marie Clay monitored international developments and ensured communication of new learning across the global network. Several examples of discoveries of importance to all Reading Recovery educators relate to instructional and implementation practices (Clay, 2009b) and include the following:

- Discovery of the consistency in the amount of time needed for a child’s series of lessons, culminating in the learner’s independent, proficient literacy processing, to average from 12 to 20 weeks.
- Discovery that children’s learning did not show any differences across countries, except for those associated with age or created by different classroom programs and learning opportunities.
- Discovery that discontinuing rates depend on a number of factors, including whether daily lessons are delivered in addition to the length of the school year.
- Discovery of the challenges in training teachers due to their hidden assumptions about literacy and learning that indicate important foci of training.
- Discovery of the potential cost effectiveness for the education systems as approximately two thirds of those receiving the intervention are returned to average levels of performance in all the countries offering Reading Recovery.

These discoveries, based on observations documented repeatedly in settings across the globe, were beneficial in “providing a guideline within which to shape our expectations and policies” (Clay, 2009b, p. 233) and in confirming the soundness of decisions related to many implementation factors. The related guidelines have remained key to both established and new Reading Recovery implementations in all instances.

The discoveries that have had the most relevance for us all are those verified by the formal studies conducted by Marie Clay and by an international body of researchers who have studied key questions for over 35 years. Marie Clay has shared that the earliest studies of the Reading Recovery intervention addressed her question: “What is possible when we change the design and delivery of traditional education for children that teachers find hard to teach?” (Clay, 2009a, p. 98). Conducting both developmental studies examining instructional and training procedures and field studies verifying exciting outcomes with children, Clay established the evidence-based foundation upon which all subsequent implementations around the world have been built. Resultantly, we are confident that Reading Recovery is an optimal early intervention in literacy education. The theoretical base for Reading Recovery is robust and is supportive of our understandings of how children learn, how teachers can teach, and how a delivery system can be designed and launched in a wide array of settings (Doyle, 2009).

Most importantly, Marie Clay engaged in and inspired continuous attention to new questions and new issues. Her challenges to the international network of trainers include investigations that not only guide implementation and redesign processes, but also extend theoretical understandings of literacy processing and children’s literacy learning changing over time.

Marie Clay engaged in and inspired continuous attention to new questions and new issues. Her challenges to the international network of trainers include investigations that not only guide implementation and redesign processes, but also extend theoretical understandings of literacy processing and children’s literacy learning changing over time.
Since the early years of our implementation, Reading Recovery investigations have been conducted by our national Reading Recovery trainers as well as a number of interested researchers unaffiliated with our network. Likewise, important and informative research of Reading Recovery has been conducted by colleagues in international settings. The result is a research base of the practices and outcomes of Reading Recovery that has “been used to continuously develop and refine Reading Recovery professional practice, optimizing the outcomes of local implementations everywhere” (Schwartz, 2009, p. 162). Schwartz summarizes this body of research as follows:

- Carefully controlled experimental studies that show the efficacy of Reading Recovery in lifting students’ literacy achievement in schools.
- Evaluation studies conducted annually by each national authority that show replication of results across thousands of education settings.
- Evaluation research documenting the sustained effects of Reading Recovery instruction and the reduction of achievement gaps among subgroups of learners.
- Meta-analyses and large-scale independent assessments of the body of research arising from Reading Recovery confirming its positive effects.

A newer avenue of international research and development was introduced with Clay’s (2005a, 2005b) publication of *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals, Parts 1 and 2*. For the first time, Marie Clay confirmed the appropriateness of applications of Reading Recovery instructional procedures with two new sets of learners struggling with early literacy acquisition. These groups include special education students and English language learners, including students beyond Grade 1, up to age 9. The international Reading Recovery trainers were charged with establishing the standards and strategies for this Literacy Lessons™ intervention for their respective countries.

Clay (2016) detailed required parameters for new standards for Literacy Lessons including the requirement for an appropriate trademark in each participating nation. To date, the U.S. trainers have developed, explored, and monitored Literacy Lessons training for teachers and instruction for students making it possible for sites across the country to engage in this venture. They are also examining annual data collected on all participating students to explore the effects of the implementation. Our exciting work is available to inform our international colleagues as other Reading Recovery sites in other nations launch new implementations of Literacy Lessons. The problem solving shared by our international network will enhance implementation efforts and extend understandings of Literacy Lessons.

In summary, international exchanges provide beneficial opportunities for shared explorations, learning, and identification of new issues and research directions. Ongoing research, conducted internationally by trainers and others, must continue to inform and direct new developments.

**Future Directions**

Our national Reading Recovery, 35-year celebration is enhanced by the story of our international presence. The reciprocal nature of our collaboration and exploration with the global network of Reading Recovery professionals has enriched our work and offers promise for the future.

My response to questions about the future of Reading Recovery has always been that our future is secure because I trust Marie Clay’s processes — the carefully designed system, the strong research base, the ongoing monitoring of annual data, the evidence-based decision making, and the commitment to professional learning. Clay (2001) attributed our international success to the central tenets of Reading Recovery: tentativeness, flexibility, and problem solving. These qualities are found in how national leaders have negotiated solutions to all implementation challenges as well as how teachers have designed series of lessons for individual learners. The continued success of Reading Recovery/Literacy Lessons rests on our strong foundation created with Marie Clay and supported over 35 years with unwavering commitment to Reading Recovery’s theoretical base and research evidence.

The story of Reading Recovery, derived from our national and international efforts, details an unparalleled demonstration of a successful educational innovation on an international scale. In varying contexts found in the range of countries served, with diverse populations of students, Reading Recovery educators have successfully reduced early literacy learning difficulties. Likewise, for those students served by a redevelopment of Reading Recovery in Spanish, French, or Danish, the results are equally strong. We are therefore afforded a global view of Reading Recovery that both enhances shared understandings and informs ongoing inquiry.
The International Reading Recovery Trainers Organization formalizes our international network and provides leadership and guidance by collaborating across national entities, responding to issues, supporting growth and development, and exploring new research directions. Ongoing research efforts are needed to continue the quest for understanding multiple theoretical and implementation issues and to maintain our relevance. An exciting initiative launched by our U.S. Reading Recovery educators involves applying the investigative processes of improvement science (Bryk, 2015) to explore a range of implementation issues. U.S. and Canadian colleagues are engaged in this work; their efforts and their findings will be an important contribution to Reading Recovery internationally and continue the reciprocal relationship and sharing that Marie Clay envisioned.

In summary, the inquiries conducted by researchers within and beyond our Reading Recovery network will combine to form a vast resource of understandings and insights key to the dynamic future of Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons. This quest and future discoveries will sustain Marie Clay’s rich legacy and refine understandings that enlighten the world as to: What is possible? May the celebrations continue!

References


About the Author
Dr. Mary Anne Doyle is chair of the International Reading Recovery Trainers Organization Executive Board and is a past president of the Reading Recovery Council of North America. She is the consulting editor for the Marie Clay Literacy Trust and assists with the ongoing republication of Clay’s many texts. Dr. Doyle is a Reading Recovery trainer emeritus, former professor of education in the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut, and former director of Reading Recovery in Connecticut. Her interests include early reading and writing development, literacy assessment, and literacy instruction. She is a former editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Reading Recovery* and has served as an area editor of the *Journal of Literacy Research*. 