Celebrating 35 Years

Reflections on 35 Years of Reading Recovery in North America

Editor’s note: For this celebration of the 35th anniversary of Reading Recovery in the U.S., we asked the three professors from The Ohio State University who worked to implement Reading Recovery in Ohio and establish training centers across the U.S. to reflect on this momentous occasion.

Gay Su Pinnell
Professor emeritus and trainer emeritus
The Ohio State University
As we celebrate 35 years of Reading Recovery in the U.S., it’s fitting to reflect on how Marie Clay’s words have influenced our work. Marie Clay was a precise user of words. She thought carefully and deeply about her choices of vocabulary. Her publications were crafted with an eye to clear communication with her readers. You notice this as you read her work, but as you enter Reading Recovery training, you become even more aware of Clay’s words and your own. Marie’s attention to language over the years brings one idea to clarity: language communicates thinking and, in turn, shapes thinking.

Many of us over our years of study have found that Clay’s thoughtful consideration of language pushes us to deeper thinking and even new ideas. I’ll mention just a few examples. When we became involved in Reading Recovery, the word acceleration made an impact — not a new word but one being used in a new way to shape our expectations. We were always proud of the “progress” that our students made. But students who are lagging behind along the trajectory of literacy learning must do more than that. They must accelerate to reach the usual trajectory; otherwise, the paths will be parallel rather than converging and the gap will remain (or widen) as the years go on. That inspiring concept strikes to the heart of the purpose of what used to be called “remedial” education. Students must catch up and keep going; teachers make it happen.

Let’s try another word: strategy (later spoken by Clay as strategic actions). That word was extensively used in literacy education usually to refer to a set of teaching moves or a new study system. Clay moved our use of strategy to a consideration of the complexity of the human brain as the child becomes literate. She also wrote about how the combination of a few items and a powerful strategy truly support a self-extending system. Becoming literate is building a complex system of strategic actions rather than acquiring pieces of knowledge, such as phonograms, one at a time. Yes, the young reader does accumulate these items but learning accelerates through using information to process continuous text.

There is room for one more — conversation, an ordinary, day-to-day word. But in Clay’s work, it becomes a description of the powerful teaching interactions in which the teacher listens very carefully (and “notices”) the learner before responding in a way that will focus attention on the information he needs or an action to take. This way of working alongside the child provides succinct and precise guidance but keeps the control within the learner’s actions. It supports the strategic actions that build the system. The young learner is active in problem solving, using all of the sources of information available to him, and processing a text with proficiency and comprehension, every day. There are many more words that Clay has helped us use in a thoughtful way, revealing new insights into teaching. That is one of her greatest gifts.

Carol A. Lyons
Professor emeritus and trainer emeritus
The Ohio State University
Congratulatory greetings to the Reading Recovery community of administrators, university trainers, teacher leaders, and teachers on our 35th anniversary in North America. This is a major and significant accomplishment for all involved in the implementation of Reading Recovery because for the last 35 years, over 2.4 million children who were at highest risk of not learning to read in first grade have learned how to read. This feat could not have been achieved without 35 years of careful research and excellent teaching.

As a primary and special education teacher for 8 years before starting graduate school, I learned first-hand how difficult it is to teach struggling children how to read. It wasn’t until 1979, when I heard Marie Clay lecture at Ohio State, that I began to understand the complexities of learning in general and becoming literate.
Successfully teaching three children labeled “learning disabled” and “language/developmentally delayed” during my Reading Recovery training year in 1985–1986 convinced me that Reading Recovery works. Why? Because teachers have learned what the reading and writing processes look like over time; how to carefully observe and respond to children’s developing growth and behaviors; how to develop rationales for their decisions; and why it is important to accelerate a child’s progress so that they can catch up and join in with their successful peers. Most importantly, daily interactions with struggling first-grade readers have helped teachers to better understand and address the emotional side of learning and the idiosyncratic needs of struggling readers.

Finally, to Reading Recovery teachers everywhere … Your efforts are oftentimes not known, recognized, or appreciated, but the children you reach and teach will be forever thankful. You have prevented them from experiencing a lifetime of frustration and reading failure. On behalf of all the struggling children who have had Reading Recovery and their parents and families, thank you for making such a big difference in their lives forever.

Diane DeFord
Distinguished professor emeritus
The University of South Carolina

From my first observation of a Reading Recovery lesson early in 1985, I was captured by the astonishing progress a young reader could make with the skillful tutelage of an accomplished teacher. I could see how the teacher’s keen observations, use of supportive language, and the lesson framework that focused on both reading and writing was integral to the progress he had made. My professional journey through Reading Recovery, begun in the fall of 1985, has been the highlight of my career. It has fed my intellectual growth, deepened my theoretical understandings, impacted my teaching of children and adults, and influenced the research I’ve done. I believe the future of Reading Recovery is in the capable hands of its teachers, teacher leaders, university trainers, researchers, and school administrators who each contribute to the quality of each implementation and the results we’ve achieved. We all owe our success to the genius of Dr. Marie Clay who developed this highly effective educational innovation.

In celebration of the 35th anniversary of Reading Recovery in North America, I was asked to contribute to this special issue of The Journal of Reading Recovery. As I reread my most treasured materials, I was struck by three themes that continue to impress me: Innovation, Endurance, and Effectiveness.

Innovation is woven throughout Reading Recovery’s history: (a) from Marie’s initial research in 1966; (b) her assessment tools, originally published in 1972; (c) the research and development that led to Reading Recovery instructional procedures and professional education program; and (d) the body of research that has sustained Reading Recovery to this day. Endurance is seen in our consistency of service to schools and the growth we have achieved. Effectiveness is proven by the research that documents the quality of the results we achieve with children, teachers, and schools.

With every Reading Recovery event I attend, every lesson I see, and every new article I read, I am awed that I was granted the opportunity to participate in and personally benefit from my involvement in Reading Recovery. This comprehensive approach to literacy instruction is advancing changes in each educational system we enter, and for each child we touch. For that, I am thankful.