

The Promise of Clay's Theory of Literacy Processing: Training Literacy Lessons Intervention Specialists

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Clay's revisions of the Guidebook that resulted in *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals Part One* and *Part Two* (Clay, 2005a & 2005b) have not only signaled refinements and changes in the Reading Recovery teaching procedures but have also highlighted new possibilities for applying the theory underlying Reading Recovery instruction to the teaching of a broader spectrum of children experiencing extraordinary literacy difficulties (Doyle, 2009). In fact, the change of the title of the revised guidebook from *Reading Recovery: A Guidebook for Teachers-In-Training* to *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals* was meant to capture Clay's intent that many teachers of struggling literacy learners—beyond our set of Reading Recovery teachers—could benefit from Reading Recovery theory and instructional procedures. So, *Literacy Lessons* can serve as a valuable resource not only for Reading Recovery teachers but also for those teachers who design individual lessons to meet the needs of the special populations they teach. In Clay's words,

If children require special individual instruction, help can be gained from Reading Recovery professionals in exploratory trials. The new title for this book

[*Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals*] acknowledges that these things have occurred and implies that further exploration of working with some special education children is appropriate. (Clay, 2005a, p. ii)

Along these lines, Clay envisioned training for specialist teachers who want to expand their teaching repertoire through intensive study of the literacy processing theory that informs Reading Recovery. In this article, we describe the rationale for training Literacy Lessons intervention specialists, the historical and theoretical frameworks for its development, the culture of collaboration that optimizes learning for all children in our schools, and the current development of Literacy Lessons intervention specialist training in the United States.

The Rationale for Individual Interventions Beyond Reading Recovery: What Is Possible for All Children?

A historical note

Marie Clay's commitment to a focus on the individual learner and the need for intervention specialist support can be traced to her earliest

teaching career as a special education teacher in New Zealand. Clay had achieved success in teaching children with measured low intelligence how to read, and she reported her work as part of her master of arts thesis, *Teaching of Reading to Special Class Children*, completed in 1948. At a time when other countries had documented success in teaching mentally disabled children how to read at levels beyond their mental age, similar outcomes for these children had not been achieved in the New Zealand education system. At the time, New Zealand education policy promoted approaches to classroom instruction that valued individual learners in classrooms, but failed to adequately respond to the learning needs of the lowest-performing children in classrooms.

Clay attributed this lack of success to late referrals to special education classes, poor training for teachers of special children, uncertainty about instructional approaches, and inappropriate instructional materials. She advocated for individualized, preventive, early intervention, instructional methods and materials that would place meaning-making and language experience at the forefront of the child's learning, fostering change over time in the child's visual discrimination of print, and support-

ing the child's control over his own learning (Ballantyne, 2009, p. 11). In spite of these earlier recommendations, Clay, working as a school psychologist in the 1950s, observed that 10% of the referred children were placed in special classes, while 90% of these same children remained in regular classrooms without the essential specialist support needed to respond to their reading difficulties.

Clay consistently argued that the child challenged by literacy learning requires a skilled teacher who is professionally trained and who embraces the complexity of literacy learning required for supporting the range of diversity among literacy learners. She reiterated this view in a paper on learning disorders written in 1972:

For older children, the magic is to individualize instruction and to motivate the child to re-enter the area of previous difficulty and try again. Given these conditions, the chances of success are increased by having well-trained, sensitive teachers with a respect for the complexity of psychological functioning and for the diversity of paths which can lead to the same achievement. This eschews a misplaced faith in one type of program and one theoretical explanation for the disorder. (Clay, 1982, p. 166)

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Lessons from Reading Recovery

Clay's research into what is possible for children whose reading goes astray in the first year of school led to the development of Reading Recovery as a preventive intervention in literacy learning. Reading Recovery serves the lowest-performing first graders excluding no child for whatever reason from services (Lose & Konstantellou, 2005). Children who have been labeled as learning disabled and children who are acquiring

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English are among those who have responded successfully to Reading Recovery because teaching is tailored to their individual needs, and the instructional procedures allow for accelerated progress in literacy learning. As Clay has emphatically stated, "It is because these procedures are designed for adapting the instruction to the learning needs of individual children that they can be applied to many beginning readers who are in some kind of special education" (2005a, p. i).

Reading Recovery also serves as a diagnostic intervention that identi-

fies those children who do not make the accelerated progress necessary to meet grade level expectations and who, therefore, require longer-term support for their literacy learning needs. Clay had commented on the role of Reading Recovery as a pre-referral intervention in her seminal article, "Learning to be Learning Disabled" (1987): "Reading Recovery is a programme which should clear out of the remedial education system all the children who do not learn to read for many event-produced reasons and all the children who have organically-based reading problems... leaving a small group of children requiring specialist attention" (p. 169). It was with these children and their specialist teachers in mind that Clay envisioned instruction based on her theory of literacy learning through adaptations of the Reading Recovery training and implementation. Clay expressed clearly her thinking regarding the teaching of struggling readers needing long-term specialist help in *Change Over Time in Children's Literacy Development*.

If a policy of mainstreaming or inclusion for children with pronounced handicaps is operated and a specialist report is available, special conditions may be arranged, over and above the normal preventive thrust of the early intervention using the same theoretical and instructional model, under a label like 'literacy processing theory' but *not* labelled as RR. Work with such children proceeds for longer according to need with different rules for implementation and delivery, and the lower outcomes predicted are accepted as worthwhile. *This then becomes a treatment*

intervention for individuals, not a preventive intervention which is adopted by an education system [Clay's emphasis]; it involves longer-term treatments delivered to individuals but it uses the same literacy processing theory as RR to guide instruction for individuals who have a cluster of individual handicaps. (Clay, 2001, p. 218)

Thus, Clay suggested that children who are in need of long-term services require instruction as robust and supportive as the short-term early intervention previously provided, but with longer treatment based on the diagnostic information gathered during the intervention period and with further adaptations based on the child's unique needs.

The training of specialist teachers in Literacy Lessons would further enhance what is known as *the second positive outcome* of Reading Recovery (Jones et al., 2005), namely that Reading Recovery serves as a diagnostic intervention for those children who do not make accelerated progress. With the availability of Literacy Lessons training for teachers, many of these children will receive longer-term support from professionals who share a common theoretical foundation about literacy learning with their Reading Recovery colleagues. An early example of an innovation which demonstrated the potential of such an approach was the work of Phillips and Smith (1997), known as *the third chance intervention* for children who while they made some progress, did not reach within-average performance levels during their Reading Recovery lessons and subsequently were referred for further specialist support. The third chance interven-

tion provided additional one-to-one intensive literacy instruction by Reading Recovery professionals for a longer period of time, following the completion of the Reading Recovery series of lessons.

In addition to the children who have received Reading Recovery and require longer-term specialist support are other learners who will benefit from the intensive treatment provided by a specialist teacher trained in Literacy Lessons. These include children who may have been identified as having special needs before first grade, children who do not have access to Reading Recovery during their first-grade year, and elementary children beyond the first grade. Clay has commented on the appropriateness of designing individual lessons utilizing Reading Recovery teaching procedures for children who face

various challenges and are receiving special education services:

Children who are profoundly deaf, or have cerebral palsy, or other severe handicaps affecting eyesight, hand movements or language performance, could probably benefit from Reading Recovery instruction but they would be ideally served by a teacher with special *training* for the *child's condition* [Clay's emphasis] and additionally trained in Reading Recovery. The question of time in the program could be handled by this specialist teacher, and the resourcing of standard Reading Recovery would not be affected by this. (New Zealand Reading Recovery, 2004, p. 2)

Indeed, there have been remarkable results with utilizing such an



Marie Halpin, special education teacher at Doherty Elementary in the West Bloomfield School District in Michigan, works with first-grade student Jordan. Marie is training as a Literacy Lessons intervention specialist this year.

approach in the development of Literacy Lessons with children who are deaf whose particular literacy learning needs require the expertise of specialist teachers trained in Reading Recovery (Fullerton, 2008; Charlesworth et al., 2006).

This conception of a school's seamless approach to meeting the needs of all children with literacy challenges—including those who respond to early intervention and those who need long-term treatment—has been a long-standing, fundamental tenet of Clay's approach to literacy learning: "It supports the expectation that schools will try to succeed with all children in one way or another" (Clay, 2001, p. 219).

A common foundation:

Clay's theory of literacy processing

The work of Literacy Lessons intervention specialists who teach special populations is grounded in the same literacy processing theory that guides Reading Recovery professionals in their teaching of the lowest-performing first graders. Literacy Lessons intervention specialists receive professional development that helps them meld their own knowledge of individual differences in learners with an instructional approach based on Clay's literacy processing theory. Clay has referred to her theory as "complex" (Clay, 2005a, p. 1) and posits that, as learners engage in reading and writing activities, they assemble a system of perceptual and cognitive competencies that helps them solve problems as they arise. In Clay's words, "Learners pull together necessary information from print in simple ways at first...but as opportunities to read and write accumulate over time the learner becomes able to

quickly and momentarily construct a somewhat complex operating system which might solve the problem" (Clay, 2001, p. 224).

This theory is based on the following principles:

- Reading is a complex problem-solving process.
- Children construct their own understandings.
- Children come to literacy with varying knowledge.
- Reading and writing are reciprocal and interrelated processes.
- Learning to read and write involves a continuous process of change over time.
- Children take different paths to literacy learning.

(Schmitt et al., 2005, p. 43)

The understanding that children take different paths to literacy learning helps explain why Clay's literacy theory would be ideally suited to provide guidance for non-Reading Recovery teachers who work with struggling readers and writers. The emphasis on different paths to literacy learning suggests that variability is normal and that teaching with a view of variability enhances instruction in support of the individual learner and is more efficient and effective than one-size-fits-all instructional approaches. This view embraces the diversity in children's learning and accommodates all variants of individual learning differences; it only requires that these very different children be supported by a sensitive, observant teacher who provides them with opportunities to learn from the act of reading and

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writing (Lyons, 2003). The teacher's role in assisting children, especially those who struggle, to construct this complex literacy process is critical. Responsive instruction tailored to the most-struggling learners requires the most-skilled teachers (Lose, 2007).

Similarly, the notion that children are active, constructive learners helps dispel a 'deficit view' of the learner and proclaim that no matter how challenging literacy learning is for some children—including both the lowest-achieving first graders selected for Reading Recovery and older readers who are in some form of special education needing long-term literacy support—they all have unique strengths which teachers can build on to design appropriate instruction. Literacy processing theory fosters the flexibility needed by Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons teachers to respond efficiently and effectively on behalf of their most-challenged literacy learners.

A Systemic Approach to Literacy Teaching and Learning: Building a Culture of Collaboration Between Reading Recovery and Other Literacy Professionals

The Reading Recovery intervention has been successful in a wide variety of educational contexts. In part, this success has resulted from its flexible problem-solving approach to the multifaceted challenge of responding early to the literacy learning needs of the lowest-performing children in their second year of formal schooling. Clay placed problem-solving responsibility for children's literacy learning squarely within the education systems in which these children are educated: "I know that the literacy processing systems constructed by learners during beginning literacy are massively influenced by expectations and opportunities of the school curriculum and by the teaching practices of their schools" (Clay, 2005a, p. 3).

To assure its replication in a variety of systems, Clay conceptualized the implementation of Reading Recovery across three concentric circles: implementing, teaching, and learning. The outer circle, implementation, would ask whether an education system could put the innovation into place. The middle circle, teaching, would determine whether teachers could be trained to respond to the broad range of diverse learners. The inner circle, learning, would apply the theoretical foundation that informs the instruction that would support children's learning (Clay, 1997). Drawing on the proven success of Reading

Recovery, the same tenets of implementation apply to the development of Literacy Lessons innovations for identified exceptional learners. These successful implementations would build on a culture of collaboration within schools that offer Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons professional development for teachers to support comprehensive literacy efforts.

To optimize learning for all children, all members of the school team—administrators, classroom teachers, specialist educators, Reading Recovery teachers, and Literacy Lessons intervention specialists—would adopt this culture of collaboration and the following associated features:

- Abandoning the assumption that a lower performing child is a 'slow learner' or lacks ability to achieve literacy.

Instead, allocate resources to provide appropriately intensive, one-to-one, early treatment at the first sign of difficulty for the most struggling literacy learners and build on their strengths as the foundation for subsequent learning.

- Systematizing a comprehensive approach to literacy with proven interventions. Provide Reading Recovery on entry to first grade for the youngest literacy learners needing individual support and provide one-to-one Literacy Lessons instruction for identified special needs children for longer periods, e.g., both in the first grade and in subsequent elementary grades. Additional support can be provided to less intensively



Northwest Area Education Agency teachers in Iowa go the extra mile for Gabriela. She is supported by a group of dedicated professionals including her Reading Recovery teacher, classroom teachers, and other specialist teachers.

challenged learners by deploying well-trained teachers to provide responsive classroom and small-group instruction. Provided with instruction tailored to their needs within a comprehensive approach to literacy and with shared ownership among the members of the school team, any challenged literacy learner can acquire more effective literacy processing strategies and demonstrate progress in learning to read and write.

- Planning for a multilayered approach in response to all children as a standard educational practice in the schools that implement Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons interventions.
- Investing in training and professional development for teachers of Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons within a comprehensive approach to children's learning. By definition, a comprehensive approach means all children, not most children and certainly not the most capable or the most likely to achieve literacy success.

The development of Literacy Lessons intervention specialists meets the requirements of an effective response to intervention (RTI) approach. One of the primary goals of an RTI approach is to provide support in response to children's learning that is appropriately intensive, that avoids delays in serving children, and that will foster their continuous progress and prevent unnecessary referrals and placement in longer-term

interventions (McEneaney, Lose, & Schwartz, 2006). By providing Literacy Lessons interventions alongside Reading Recovery in the context of supportive classrooms and small-group instructional settings, educators can collaborate to achieve a seamless approach to meeting all children's needs.

The goal is to ensure high-quality classroom instruction and small-group support for more-able learners, Reading Recovery preventive services for the lowest-performing first graders, and Literacy Lessons intervention for students requiring longer-term specialist support.

Current Explorations of Literacy Lessons Intervention Specialist Training

In 2006, at the International Reading Recovery Trainers Organization (IRRTTO) Executive Board meeting, Marie Clay proposed a Literacy Lessons trademark that would protect the quality of any exploratory developments in designing lessons for individual children based on her literacy processing theory.¹ Clay suggested the inclusion of four common descriptors in the Literacy Lessons trademark application and in the development of standards for Literacy Lessons in each country that implements Literacy Lessons interventions (Doyle, 2009, p. 300):

1. Individually designed and individually delivered instruction for children
2. A recognized course for qualified teachers with ongoing professional development

By providing Literacy Lessons interventions alongside Reading Recovery in the context of supportive classrooms and small-group instructional settings, educators can collaborate to achieve a seamless approach to meeting all children's needs.

3. Ongoing data collection, research and evaluation
4. Establishment of an infrastructure and standards to sustain the implementation and maintain quality control

Exploratory trials have been undertaken by a number of Reading Recovery university training centers (UTCs) across the United States in the past few years and the reports from the field have been quite promising. In April of 2008, the North American Trainer Group, comprised of Reading Recovery trainers from the United States and Canada, compiled reports that described the kind of pilot projects undertaken by various UTCs regarding the training of specialist teachers in the theory and procedural implications of Literacy Lessons. These specialist teachers (including special education teachers, ELL teachers, teachers of the deaf, etc.) initially participated in training classes with Reading Recovery teachers but, as demand has increased, some UTCs have arranged for train-

¹ The Literacy Lessons trademark in the United States is held by The Ohio State University.

The collaboration of Reading Recovery teachers with their Literacy Lessons colleagues will help create a common language around literacy learning that will further support Marie Clay's belief that if some children are unable to learn we should continually strive to find new, innovative ways to teach them.

ing of intact classes of Literacy Lessons teachers.² Teachers who have participated in Literacy Lessons training have reported remarkable changes in their understandings and practices that have had positive effects on the learning of their special education students. They have also found that their school literacy teams benefit from the shared understandings among all participating teachers regarding children's literacy development. These are brief, initial responses. Ongoing exploratory trials will continue and findings will be studied to inform the development of standards and guidelines that will guide the training of Literacy Lessons intervention specialists and the implementation of Literacy Lessons innovations in our schools.

The collaboration of Reading Recovery teachers with their Literacy Lessons colleagues will help create

a common language around literacy learning that will further support Marie Clay's belief that if some children are unable to learn we should continually strive to find new, innovative ways to teach them. Literacy Lessons intervention specialist training presents the context for authentic dialogue around the teaching and learning of our most-challenged learners, thus realizing the promise of Clay's theory of literacy processing and her conviction that all children can learn.

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² Districts and schools interested in Literacy Lessons training for specialist teachers should contact the Reading Recovery training sites in their regions. Training sites work closely with the university training centers they are affiliated with to address issues pertaining to the training and professional development of Literacy Lessons teachers.

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Congratulations to Reading Recovery® on 25 years of success! One child at a time

My long-time friend Trika Smith-Burke called one day in the mid 1980s to invite me to NYU for a seminar led by Marie Clay, a New Zealand educator. She was to talk about a new model of support for 6-year-old children with reading tangles.

At the seminar I met Marie Clay. She told me they needed books for a pilot project in Columbus, Ohio. That led us to become US distributor of the national reading program of New Zealand. And eventually led to publishing our own Books for Young Learners.

Our association with Reading Recovery has lasted 25 years. We value the relationship. We appreciate the community. We admire the work.

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