Sensitive Observation of Reading Behavior

Running Record Professional Learning Package

PART THREE

Using Running Records to Make Teaching Decisions

Reading Recovery®Council of North America

Introduction to Part Three: A Reference Guide

What theory of literacy learning guides this professional learning package?

Marie Clay's theory of literacy processing provides teachers with language for discussing changes involved in early literacy progress. Teachers can talk about shifts in processing, referring to strategic activities happening in the learner's head. A brief overview of the complexity of literacy learning is provided below:

> *In a complex model of interacting competencies in reading and writing the reader can potentially draw from all his or her current understanding, and all his or her language competencies, and visual information, and phonological information, and knowledge of printing conventions, in ways which extend both the searching and linking processes as well as the item knowledge repertoires. 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)

Capturing changes in emerging literacy behaviors requires an *unusual lens*—carefully controlled direct observation (see Askew, 2009 and Clay, 2001). Analysis of errors and self-corrections in running records yields information from which teachers can infer change over time in a child's use of strategic activities (see Clay, 2001, p. 124). Refer to the glossary at the end of this introduction for brief explanations of processing and strategic activities.

For whom is this professional learning package intended?

This professional learning package is for classroom teachers, Reading Recovery teachers, specialist teachers, pre-service teachers, and researchers who want to learn to observe and analyze the reading behaviors of children in their early years of schooling in order to make decisions about teaching. **Participants will have completed Part One**, learning the conventions for taking running records of text reading, **and Part Two**, learning to analyze running records of text reading.

NOTE: Reading Recovery teachers will participate in intensive professional development with their teacher leaders to use daily running records to inform instruction for individual children in their Reading Recovery lessons. Part Three offers additional opportunities for Reading Recovery professional development guided by teacher leaders.

What is the purpose of Part Three?

The purpose of Part Three is to help teachers use analyzed running records of continuous text to guide their teaching of individuals or groups of children. Running records of text reading are an authentic form of observation used to assess text difficulty in order to select books for children and to group children for instruction. Running records are also used to guide teaching decisions in individual and group settings, to study the behaviors of children with particular difficulties, and to capture a child's progress over time. Running records allow teachers to examine what they may have emphasized and/or neglected in their teaching, and how their teaching may be affecting student reading behaviors.

Observation of text reading

When children read books, they engage in extensive problem solving by using their own theories of the world and of how to work with written language (Clay, 2005b). When reading continuous text, children must become constructive in actively processing information by

- finding and relating information from different sources,
- bringing this information together,
- making a decision, and
- monitoring the effectiveness of their decision.

A teacher cannot know exactly what a child is thinking 'inside the head' while reading. However, a running record of text reading allows the teacher to record the child's actions (see Part One of this professional learning package); the record can then be analyzed to make tentative inferences about the child's ways of solving problems while reading (see Part Two of this professional learning package).

Running records of text reading

*An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (*Clay, 2002, 2006) is comprised of systematic observation tasks designed to assist the teacher in observing early literacy behaviors. The tasks represent a controlled form of observation requiring systematic and objective recording of exactly what the child does on each task. There is no teaching or teacher support during the assessment.

We strongly recommend using the book, *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 2002, 2006) as a resource while using this Running Record Professional Learning Package. The Observation Survey text is **required** for Reading Recovery teachers. Classroom teachers may choose to use *Running Records for Classroom Teachers* (Clay, 2000).

One of the Observation Survey tasks is a running record of continuous text reading (see Chapter 5 in the Observation Survey book or the book, *Running Records for Classroom Teachers*). Running records are used to observe and record text reading behaviors and track changes in a child's ways of problem solving over time. Teachers can analyze those reading behaviors to inform their teaching decisions and to reflect on previous teaching decisions. Sessions with a leader who is knowledgeable about running records and practice in taking and analyzing running records will be needed before teachers can use running records as assessment tools and a guide to instruction. When using running records for assessment purposes, teachers generally use unseen text. For instructional purposes, however, teachers take running records on recently read texts.

A Brief Review of the Analysis of Running Records (see Part Two)

Analyzing errors

One of the first steps in interpreting a running record is analyzing errors. Any error or problem that does not result in a correct response is counted as an error. Analysis of each error leads us to examine what kinds of information the reader has used: meaning (M), structure (S), and/or visual information (V). Analysis reveals if a child is paying too much attention to or ignoring any one source of information and whether the child uses the sources of information flexibly and strategically in order to get meaning from the text (Johnston, 1997).

Analyzing self-corrections

When interpreting running records, analyzing self-corrections is also important. A self-correction reinforces the reader for monitoring his or her own reading and detecting a problem, for searching and finding further information, for choosing a word that best fits, and for making the correction fit well with the message thus far (Clay, 2001). As you analyze a child's self-corrections, you will consider the kind(s) of information the reader used on the error and then analyze whether the additional information the reader used to make the self-correction was meaning (M), structure (S), and/or visual information (V).

Analyzing patterns of responses

You can use the Running Record Sheet on pages 80–81 of the Observation Survey (Clay, 2002, 2006) or at the back of *Running Records for Classroom Teachers* (Clay 2000) to take and analyze running records.

As you interpret running records, you look at the overall pattern of responses in order to write a summary of the child's errors and self-corrections directly on the Running Record Sheet. This statement about sources of information the child used and neglected can guide your subsequent teaching of this child.

> Example: *Meaning and structure are used predominantly for substitutions with some attention to visual information. Repetition and more visual information led to three self-corrections* (Clay, 2000, p. 23; Clay, 2002, 2006, p. 71).

You will also make a note at the bottom of the Running Record Sheet about how the reading sounded—did you see some evidence of phrasing in fast and fluent reading?

> Example: *Read slowly but with some intonation.*
>
> Example: *Read smoothly with appropriate phrasing; good pace with some pauses to check on herself.*

Early on, you will comment on the child's control of directional movement (see top of Running Record Sheet).

> Example: *Consistently moved left to right and top to bottom on all pages*
> (Note: After directionality is under control, a check mark may be recorded.)

See Part Two of this professional learning package for information about analyzing patterns of responses.

PART THREE: Using Analyzed Records to Inform Teaching Decisions

> *In every way the information produced by systematic observation reduces our uncertainties and improves our instruction.* (Clay, 2002, 2006, p. 3)

Unlike most early literacy assessments, running records provide timely information for teachers to use in their teaching of individual children or groups of children. Running records are immediately transferable to teaching because they direct teachers' attention to how the child works on continuous texts so they can modify their teaching accordingly.

What information can you get from an analyzed running record? You can judge what the reader already knows, what he attended to, and what he overlooked. You can assess how well the reader is pulling together what he already knows about letters, sounds, and words to get to messages. With this kind of information, you will be able to prompt, support, and challenge individual learners (see Clay, 2000, p. 4 or Clay, 2002, 2006, p. 50). You can gather information that will inform you about a child's reading behaviors, including these:

- control of directional movement (Did the child go from left-to-right and top-to-bottom?)
- level of text difficulty (Was the book easy, instructional, or hard for the child?)
- phrasing in fast and fluent reading (How did the reading sound?)
- ways in which the child works at monitoring his own reading
- sources of information used for errors (meaning, structure, visual information)
- the kinds of visual information used (e.g., initial letter, letter clusters, syllables)
- checking one source of information with another source
- rereading as needed to aid in problem solving or to group things together in a phrased way
- sources of information used for self-corrections (meaning, structure, visual information)
- flexibility in using sources of information and choosing among alternatives
- information about how the child is taking on what you have been teaching

Running records provide information about *individuals*. In this learning package, attention is given to using the information when teaching a child in a one-to-one setting or in a small-group setting, with attention focused on

- assessing text difficulty,
- grouping for instruction,
- choosing books for individuals or groups of children,
- introducing books to individuals or groups of children,
- supporting the first reading of a new book by individuals or a group of children by making appropriate teaching decisions, and
- monitoring progress with running records.

Assessing text difficulty

> *. . . the difficulty level of those texts relative to the child's current skills will create or constrain the opportunities for the child to use what he or she knows in the service of independently learning more through reading, making errors and self-correcting. (*Clay, 2001, p. 207)

Running records provide a check on whether a child is working on material of appropriate difficulty—not too difficult or too easy, but providing a suitable level of challenge to the individual child. These terms used below describe how a particular child read the text, not the characteristics of the text itself (see Clay, 2000, p. 9 or Clay, 2002, 2006, p. 55):

- an easy text (95–100% accuracy)
- an instructional text (90–94% accuracy)
- a hard text (80–89% accuracy)

An instructional level (when a child reads a text at between 90–94% accuracy) indicates an appropriate level for the child to learn with a teacher beside him.

Grouping for instruction

Using the running record for informing group instruction

- teachers might group children who could work together,
- teachers could evaluate progress and see when regrouping is desirable, and
- teachers would see how different the processing of particular children was and give attention to an individual learner at the time of the group instruction.
  (See Clay, 2000, p. 28 or Clay, 2002, 2006, p. 79)

Three assumptions are implicit when a teacher groups young children for guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996):

1. Among *any* group of primary-age children, there will be a wide range of experience, knowledge, and skills.
2. In some areas of knowledge and skills, *every* child will be different from every other child.
3. Children will make progress at varying rates.

For guided reading lessons, running records are used to form small groups of children who can read about the same level of text and who, as much as possible, share similar reading behaviors. The teacher gives attention to *individual* learners during group instruction. The children are regularly assessed using running records and groups are flexibly altered based on this ongoing evaluation.

Choosing books to promote literacy processing

> *. . . observant teachers could select texts for a particular child which not only draw upon working systems which that child has in place, but also challenge these to change. (*Clay, 2001, p. 96)

> *The selection of an appropriate text in early reading provides the challenge for the reader to engage with novel features of text. It is both the opportunity for error behaviour and the control of the amount of error behaviour which provide the opportunities for self-corrections.* (Clay, 2001, p. 206)

Although choosing books for individuals and for groups of children presents unique challenges, the guiding principles remain the same. It is appropriate to select reading texts from a variety of genres with three points in mind (Clay, 2002, 2006, p. 32–33):

1. The text must be simple enough for the learner to bring his existing competencies to the current task.
2. Any and every text will contain phonemic richness.
3. The semantic and syntactic richness of the text will allow the learner to bring his speaking abilities to the synthesis and analysis of what he is reading.

Furthermore, the text should be interesting, manageable in length, and offer an appropriate level of challenge. Although children may meet some difficulties, they must also be able to overcome them. If there are too many difficulties, the reading becomes a struggle (New Zealand Department of Education, 1985).

You should have an expectation that the children will read the selected book at 90% accuracy or better on the first reading of that text. Additional considerations for early readers include page layout, picture support, language structures, vocabulary, concepts, and predictability. More supportive features than challenging ones are needed (Dorn, French, & Jones, 1998).

A successful choice of book would be well within the child's control, using what he knows or can get to with the teacher's help. Book choice determines how much problem solving the child will have to do. The book should be one that a child will want to read, can relate to personal knowledge, will succeed with, will enjoy, and will use to establish new competencies (Clay, 2005b, p. 90).

Introducing texts to support literacy processing

> *A good introduction, leading to a successful first reading by an active reader, sets the stage for a host of teaching ventures around that text.* (Clay, 1998, p. 184)

Having selected a book or story, you will think about the best way to orient an individual or group of children to this particular book because a good introduction makes a new text more accessible to the children (Clay, 1998). Each text will call for unique introductions depending on the needs of the children.

From the running records of each individual in a group, you will know what sources of information they tend to use and neglect when reading continuous text. You can then consider ways to build literacy processing during your introductions to books by providing support for children to

- use *meaning* as a central source of information (e.g., making children familiar with the story, plot, characters, and concepts in the book; activating knowledge they already have about the text; responding to illustrations; building anticipation of what will occur)
- use *language structures* (e.g., allowing children to hear and use new or unusual words or complex phrases and structures they will encounter in the reading) and
- use *visual or graphophonic information* (e.g., early on, pronouncing a word in the text and asking children to say the word, give the letter they would expect to see at the beginning of the word, and find the word; asking children to locate known and unknown words).
  (Briggs & Forbes, 2009; Clay, 2005b)

The book introduction is not about pre-teaching new words ahead of time. Depending on the language and background experiences children bring to the text, you may decide to use new or unusual vocabulary and structures during the introduction to call attention to a word, phrase, or concept in context.

Book introductions are brief (too much talk by the teacher distracts from the focus on the story), and they vary with each group; they are conversational in nature. The children should (a) know that the text will inform or entertain them; (b) have questions in mind and expect the text to answer them; (c) have some knowledge of how to overcome difficulties they will encounter; and (d) be eager to get started (New Zealand Department of Education, 1985).

You and the child/children will share the introduction to new books, preparing each child to take over the act of orienting himself to a new text (Clay, 1998, 2005b). The level of your support when orienting children to a new book diminishes as they move toward self-regulated reading. While they may need rich introductions at an emergent stage, children will begin to orient themselves to the book as they become more competent (Dorn, French, & Jones, 1998). When a book presents unique challenges, however, your introduction will need to be appropriately supportive even with competent readers.

NOTE: An excellent resource for learning more about introducing books is "Introducing Storybooks to Young Readers" by Marie M. Clay (1998).

Supporting the first reading of the book

> *Teachers are most effective when they are available to respond to a child who is making one of those [complex] decisions close to the moment when it is occurring.* (Clay, 2001, p. 96)

After the orientation to the book, groups of capable readers may be able to read the text on their own and meet with the teacher later to talk about what they have read. However, beginning readers may need to stay at the table with you, reading the text softly to themselves. While the ultimate goal is independent silent reading, a gradual shift to silent reading happens over time.

Although children may be working in groups, you are observing *individuals.* You will listen in as the children are reading to themselves, perhaps asking a specific student to read aloud softly as you look for evidence of problem solving and intervene as needed. You may interact briefly with a prompt or teaching interaction, without interfering with the meaning of the text. You may take notes to help with future teaching decisions about individual children (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

As readers reconstruct the meaning of a text, they are using processes of finding, checking, and cross-referencing information from several levels (letters, words, phrases, sentences, the gist of the passage). They are searching for and using the *meaning* of the message of the text, searching for and using the language *structures* of the text, and searching for and using *visual information* in the text. Recent running records will provide data about each child's current patterns of responses and will assist you in interacting in helpful ways.

If you help a child solve a difficulty during the reading or validate his attempt at solving, this is only a *brief* detour—the child quickly returns to the main task of reading the text mostly by himself. "It is preferable for the whole story to be read by each child—certainly not a page today and a page tomorrow, and not a page for Johnny and a page for Mary" (Clay, 1991, p. 199).

After the reading, a good question and/or a short conversation can reveal children's understandings and allow you to emphasize the message of the story. The conversation will vary according to the nature of the text itself, the introduction to the book, and the competencies of the children (e.g., children may return to their original predictions, make personal connections, engage in lively discussions about the plot, events, feelings). You may return to a part of the text to support children's processing or to talk about ideas in the story. The conversation is not lengthy and may be extended through other activities such as art, drama, or writing.

Monitoring progress with running records

> *Teachers need ways of checking on their everyday assumptions about children.* (Clay, 2001, p. 201)

> *A series of Running Records from children reading texts can provide evidence of change in reading behaviours.* (Clay, 2001, p. 104)

In classrooms or other group settings, across a period of 1 or 2 weeks, you will want to find time to listen to each child read a recently read text as you take a running record of text reading. For children having difficulty learning to read, you will want to take and analyze running records more frequently. These running records are a check on the child's processing behaviors (searching for and using meaning, structure, and visual information in effective and efficient ways; monitoring his reading; detecting and correcting errors, etc.). The records will also help you check on the appropriateness of the level of the text for the child, consider text selection, document progress, and make decisions about teaching for this particular child. Systematic collection of running records also informs you if regrouping is necessary. You can take running records any time you have an opportunity to listen to an individual read; they are not limited to guided reading.

In Reading Recovery, a running record of text reading is taken daily on the book that was introduced on the previous day. The teacher then has a way of looking for independent reconstruction of yesterday's experience and checking for things she has recently emphasized (e.g., making sense, noticing errors, checking one source of information against another, using visual information, etc.). The teacher then teaches responsively to shape up the child's processing of continuous text and uses the record to make decisions about tomorrow's new book and her next teaching moves (Clay, 2005b).

Continuing to learn

To become more proficient in using running records to guide your teaching of young readers, it is important to practice. Take time to check on your analysis of children's running records on a regular basis. Invite your leader and/or colleague(s) to discuss the running records for a particular child you are teaching. You might ask questions such as these:

1. Is the child reading texts at increasing levels of difficulty at an instructional level?
2. Am I choosing appropriate books for this child to read?
3. Does my introduction to the book support the child to make the first reading a successful one?
4. Can I see change over time in the child's pattern of responding? What information is the child using? Neglecting? What particular behaviors may be getting in the way of progress?
5. What do I need to attend to in my teaching?
6. Where can I get more help? What professional books and resources are available to help me use analysis of running records to inform my teaching?

Your leader may provide additional practice activities. Create opportunities to share your learning experiences with your colleagues.

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Glossary of terms

continuous text — a complete text or part of a complete text

Reading and writing continuous texts allows two things to come together: (1) the child must sort out what to attend to and in what order (awareness and attention); and (2) the child must call up things he already knows to meet up with the new information in the text (integration of different kinds of information). (See Clay, 2005b, p. 88.)

cross-checking on information — checking one kind of information (meaning, structure, visual information) with another and noticing that something isn't right when two sources of information yield competing alternatives

Cross-checking is an early and tentative behavior signalled by dissatisfaction with a response for some reason.

directional movement and **directionality** — following the directional rules for attending to print

Observers can record evidence of beginning readers' directional movement such as starting points, direction of scanning (left to right, top to bottom), and lapses or confusions.

fast and fluent reading — involves prosodic features of language such as rhythm, expression, phrase boundaries, pace, intonation

meaning — the message of the text (semantics)

monitoring checking on oneself

Self-monitoring and self-correction appear early and persist as good indicators of changes in inner control in oral reading for 2 or 3 years. Self-monitoring is signalled by accurate reading, verbal protests, stops, repetitions, revised attempts, and self-corrections.

phrasing grouping words together as in normal speech

Phrasing contributes to fast and fluent responding when reading.

processing "refers to getting access to and working with several types of information to arrive at a decision." (Clay, 2001, p. 80)

"referring to all the activities happening in the learner's head, brain, mind or neural networks!" (Clay, 2001, p. 124)

A processing system can only be constructed by the learner. Teachers can use running records to infer strategic activities the child is using as he builds a literacy processing system.

prompt a call for action for the child to do something within his control

A teacher's prompt should send the child in search of a response within his current network of responses (Clay, 2005a, p. 39). Prompts should be short, clear, and direct, attending to the next most helpful thing a child can do (Clay, 2005b, p. 202).

searching for information picking up and using information (meaning, structure, visual information)

Running records yield patterns of responses related to information used or neglected while reading.

self-correction a reader misreads a text and stops and corrects the error without prompting

Self-correction contributes to the forward thrust of reading competency because "the child initiates a search for more information, generates and evaluates hypotheses, and makes decisions" (Clay, 2001, p. 195).

strategic activity fast brainwork that a learner calls up to solve problems by searching for solutions (e.g., monitors, searches for information, cross-checks, discovers new things, repeats to confirm, revises, chooses among alternatives, evaluates responses, makes appropriate links, self-corrects); running records allow us to infer a child's use of strategic activities

Marie Clay used the term to refer to what goes on in any aspects of processing when the brain picks up information, works on it, makes a decision, and evaluates the response. (See Clay, 2001, p. 127.)

The goal of the teaching is to assist the child to construct effective networks in his brain for linking up all the strategic activity that will be needed to work on texts, not merely to accumulate items of knowledge. (Clay, 2005a, p. 44)

structure the structure of the language (syntax)

visual information graphophonic information (letters, clusters, words, etc.)