

The Doctoral Research Project 1962–66: From Research to Practice

Ann Ballantyne, trainer and visiting professor, The University of Auckland, New Zealand

It is hard to imagine an educational world without running records or Concepts About Print; a world in which “readiness” was a key concept and early intervention was unheard of. But this was the order of things before Marie Clay initiated her detailed longitudinal studies of young readers. Clay’s doctoral research in the early 1960s provided the evidential basis and rationales for the development of Reading Recovery but also changed the world of early school literacy forever. In the course of this research Clay developed novel tools for identifying young children who were finding initial literacy learning difficult, identified behaviours that were critically associated with early literacy achievement and described the different learning paths of high- and low-progress students. On the basis of the doctoral research findings and other detailed studies of young readers, Clay became a strong advocate for early, skilled, intervention to prevent later reading difficulties — an approach that has since been adopted by researchers and educationalists around the world.

When Marie Clay began to study young children’s reading and writing it was a desire to understand development and learning, rather than literacy per se, that guided her choice of research questions and methodology. Clay was particularly interested in atypical development and the prevention of learning difficulties, and these concerns were reflected in the question she formulated for doctoral research at the University of Auckland in the early 1960s. Having

decided (partly for pragmatic reasons) to focus on early reading and writing, Clay deliberately adopted an atheoretical, “no-hypothesis” approach to data collection. Rather than speculate about the causes of reading difficulties, she asked: “Can we see the process of learning to read and write going astray early in children’s schooling?” A pilot study in 1962 assured her that it was possible to capture the detail of young children’s responses to school literacy tasks and uncovered self-correction as an unlooked for and potentially important research variable (Clay, 1966).

During 1963–1964, Clay observed the reading and writing behaviour of 100 pupils *every week* throughout their first year of school. (New Zealand children typically begin school as soon as they turn 5, which may be any day in the school year.) The children were new entrants in five classrooms located in a sample of five city schools selected to represent different student populations and learning contexts. Using recording techniques developed and validated in the course of the project, Clay set out to capture, in a precise and objective way, each child’s responses to the reading and writing tasks that their teachers had selected for them. This research methodology, which is close kin to the microgenetic approach now prominent in the field of developmental psychology (Siegler, 2006), provided a rich account of change over time in early literacy behaviours.

Frequent firsthand observation, together with standardized tests administered at 5.0, 5.6 and 6.0, enabled Clay to identify children who made rapid progress in literacy learning, and others who struggled, went off track, became confused or passive, and made very little progress. The repeated observations provided detailed information about the many different ways that children’s literacy learning could go off course during their first year at school. In her doctoral dissertation, and in the academic publications which followed, Clay reported the different paths of progress of high-, high-middle, low-middle and low-achieving groups, and drew attention to striking differences in learning opportunities and patterns of behaviour. She found that teachers delayed the introduction of graded reading material for low-progress children; that these children moved slowly up through text levels, read far fewer words with lower accuracy rates and showed little evidence of self-correction.

Clay was able to collect follow-up data on 82 of the 100 children in her original sample 1 and 2 years later. At both test points the children’s scores on a standardized reading measure correlated strongly with their text reading levels, word test, and letter identification scores at six. The follow-up data showed that the paths of progress established in the first year of school predicted where children would be 2 and 3 years later; subsequent schooling had confirmed



rather than changed their ranking. The considerably lower correlations between measures of reading “readiness” or general intelligence and later achievement provided little support for the practice of delaying reading instruction for children who seemed poorly prepared or unready for literacy learning.

Clay’s research had urgent practical implications; it was clear that the classroom learning opportunities were less than optimal for some children and that a different approach would be needed to prevent reading difficulties. The observational tools Clay had developed in the course of her research made it possible to detect children having difficulties well before standardized tests would provide reliable information, and follow-up data confirmed what experienced teachers already knew; that without extra help these children were likely to make slow progress in subsequent schooling.

On the basis of her doctoral study Clay became a strong advocate for change in the ways school organized for early literacy. She made her data and analyses available in academic publications, prepared material for department of education publications directed to classroom teachers, and accepted offers to talk about her findings with school principals and administrators. She drew attention to the significant number of children who failed to get under way with reading during their first year at school and to aspects of school and classroom practice that were problematic for them. Clay was not advocating a change in instructional method because, in her view, any approach would have weak areas for some children; instead she argued

that difficulty with literacy learning should be detected early and additional teaching *time* made available to address the problems those children were having. Schools should consider “what special or supplementary provisions could be made for groups of children within the general framework of the present scheme” (Clay 1967a, p. 24).

Clay’s findings represented a challenge to a school system that was proud of the progressive teaching approaches used in the junior school, and Clay did not shrink from advocating the necessary changes. For example, she told an august gathering of school principals: “We have a school system which allows the good readers to get better and the poor readers to drop further and further behind...” (Clay, 1967b, p. 29) and called on them to ensure a more consistent and predictable environment for “little children in a strange new world” (p. 25). “Only by sensitive close observation of small classes can the teacher create learning conditions for new entrants that will facilitate [the] early integration of skills, and launch children successfully into their school careers” (Clay, 1967, p. 26). In publications for classroom teachers, Clay urged teachers to observe the direction and pace of change in early reading behaviours and outlined a set of “investigatory techniques” that were later published as the diagnostic survey (Clay, 1972b).

When Clay was invited to write a textbook for pre-service teachers in 1972, she was able to draw on a decade of detailed observational studies of children in the process of learning to read and write. In *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behaviour* (1972) Clay provided thoughtful

guidance to the teachers of young children based on two key assumptions: that teachers need to have a sound understanding of the reading process and to be sensitive observers of children’s literacy behaviours. She also spelled out a four-step plan to prevent reading failure; schools needed to have an organized way of monitoring and recording progress in the first year programme; a check on each child as they reached their sixth birthday; “re-teaching” for low-progress children in their second year; and attention to the staffing of early classes (Clay, 1972a, p. 110). The recommendation with respect to reteaching was very specific.

A flexible and experienced teacher, well versed in individualised teaching techniques, and especially qualified in a wide variety of approaches to reading instruction, must be available for intensive and sustained re-teaching of low progress children in their second year of school on the basis of the results of this diagnostic survey. (Clay, 1972a, p. 110)

Publication of this text was accompanied by a small book containing diagnostic procedures that schools could use to identify the children who were falling behind in reading after their first year at school (Clay, 1972b).

By the end of 1972, then, Clay had clearly articulated the idea that individualized, supplementary, and highly skilled teaching should be provided for children who were lagging behind after their first year of school and had made available the tools that would enable schools to identify children needing this help. As classroom teachers learned more about how to observe and monitor the progress

of young readers they asked for help with the children who were struggling with early literacy learning. Clay recognized that schools did not know how to provide this assistance and, in 1976, launched a new research project to explore 'what was possible' if a second waving of teaching effort was directed to young low-achieving children. And now the idea of early intervention to prevent literacy difficulties began to take shape as a specific, effective, and enduring educational innovation!

References

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Remembering Marie

I teach every child differently because of Marie Clay. I think I even stand and sit differently with them—more open, more respectful, more aware that the next thing that child says might be what helps me to understand the essential part I am missing. Or might assure me that I am on the right track. Marie Clay taught teachers the reciprocity of being with children. That they teach us while we are teaching them. That if we listen to them as Marie taught, they change us, while we give them possibility.

Once you come to understand this significance—that you don't know all you can about a child—you learn a new humility, and there is a groundedness that can come into your teaching. Marie Clay taught me to see a child's dignity, and to learn how to teach, each day fresh, to that dignity.

For years now I've referred to Marie Clay as a Zen master. And I think practitioners in Zen lineage would recognize Marie as one of their own. Teach and learn with an open heart. Never think you know the answer. Question, and question again. Recognize suffering in the world, and commit yourself endlessly to reducing that suffering. Understand that joy, compassion, love, and equanimity are immeasurable and are part of our daily life.

Though I haven't taught in Reading Recovery for 9 years, Marie Clay's presence has remained with me every day as I teach. I have spoken often to colleagues (and to school board members) about that presence. What I learned from her encouraged me to reflect, to notice who this child I am with right now is, and to have the highest standards for them and for myself.

I will miss her presence in our world.

Susan O'Leary, Wisconsin

Marie Clay was not only a world renowned scholar, literacy researcher, and developmental psychologist—she was also a lifelong student of the arts. In 2002, while a fellow of the Marie Clay Literacy Trust in New Zealand, I discovered that Marie had designed costumes for a children's play while a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Minnesota in the 1950s. While we sat in the living room of her home overlooking Waitamata (sparkling waters) Harbor, she shared the beautiful sketches of those costumes produced long ago. A few evenings later at a dinner party, I also discovered that Marie's other interests included the opera and the symphony, and that she had a beautiful soprano singing voice.

Mary K. Lose, Oakland University