

Revolutionary Contributions

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Updated from the original publication in *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, 4(2), 2005

The recent passing of Marie Clay was a great personal loss to many of us, but an even greater loss to teachers and researchers more generally. Although Marie viewed herself as a developmental psychologist, her contributions to theory, practice, and policy range well beyond the domains of literacy development (and assessment), and teaching and learning (of students and teachers). As a researcher she was a model for us all; fiercely persistent, absolutely ethical, and always open to new evidence and new possibilities.

Best known for creating Reading Recovery, a revolution in thinking that we now take for granted, it is easy to miss her many other revolutionary contributions. Describing her contributions to the theory of literacy teaching and learning through her development of Reading Recovery alone would take several volumes. Most obviously, while recognizing cognitive, perceptual, social, and cultural differences among children, she has demonstrated that none of those differences is terminal when it comes to literacy learning and that early powerful intervention can undo conceptual confusions, restructure literate processes, and change learning trajectories, as well as drastically reduce or eliminate the need to classify children as disabled or dyslexic. Her framework and accumulated evidence has inspired researchers from different theoretical persuasions to

explore these issues and, inevitably, they arrive at similar conclusions. However, parts of Marie's work developed in Reading Recovery are, I believe, revolutionary and have not yet been fully engaged by the reading research community.

To explore a single example, consider Marie's commitment to keeping the child in control of learning. This is most obvious, of course, in her insistence that we "follow the child's lead" and in her early recognition of the significance of self-correction. Keeping children in control of their literacy and learning requires that they notice when things are not quite right. It means tuning their inner ears to notice the sound of disjuncture and teaching them to interpret it as a cue for problem solving rather than as a sign of failure. Different branches of psychology have now validated her early work on this. However, there is an additional part of keeping children in control of their learning that is less well-accepted, and that is her concern about "teaching for strategies." For many theorists the concept is counter-intuitive. Common wisdom still holds that the teacher's job is to teach a strategy and have the child practice it until it is automatic. The idea that the child might generate strategies rather than have them all explicitly taught is anathema. Turning this on its head, Marie argues that keeping children in control of their learning requires that they be set up to encounter manageable problems that they can solve or partially solve alone or with support.

From this view, the teacher's job is not delivering knowledge, but

arranging for the problem to be manageable, sustaining the child's problem-solving attempts emphasizing flexibility ("What else can you do?" / "How else could you figure that out?"), and helping the child build a productive personal narrative around the event. "I like the way you figured that out" draws children's attention to their agency and persistence—spinning a narrative of personal agency. "How did you figure that out?" takes it a step further and

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asks the child to spin an agentic narrative in which the child is the active protagonist who generates strategies and solves problems. In this way, Reading Recovery and its extensions are also about building productive literate identities with resilience built into them. The identities are part of narratives of agency constructed at the point of encountering difficulty.

Because of Marie's attention to the partially correct, the agency narrative is repeatedly rehearsed even when the child's efforts are only partially successful, thus constructing an identity that resists defeat and helplessness. Teachers don't just help construct the narrative though they help children connect productive narratives and identities to the evidence in their reading and writing practice. These narratives are very different from those that turn attention to a character trait of ability or smartness, for example, which produces brittle rather than resilient learners—learners who do not deal well with difficulty.

At the same time as shifting control of problem solving from the teacher to the child, and shifting the act of reflective articulation of the process from the teacher to the child, the

process turns another aspect of common wisdom on its head. Marie argued that oftentimes conscious learning is the wrong place to start, indeed that sometimes it gets in the way. This is not only because there is limited conscious processing space, but because many processes operate more efficiently below the level of consciousness. The research community has so far neglected the significance of her questions about how and where consciousness plays a role in learning to read and write. Teaching, in Marie's view, is not just about following the child's lead, but arranging for the child to lead productively—to be in control of reading, writing, and learning processes and to have a sense, whether or not it is conscious, that they are in control.

Building Reading Recovery around following the child's lead has meant demonstrating the nature and significance of contingent instruction, and hence of teacher expertise. To teach so that children experience control in learning and literate practice, teachers must know what the child knows and can do in order to arrange for productive encounters. This requires "sensitive observers" who know books and what makes literate activities manageable and engaging. To inter-

act with children in ways that allow them a sense of full participation and engagement requires a complex balance of power. It should feel and sound like a good conversation in which the teacher listens carefully before speaking. To accomplish this requires teachers to understand themselves, their students, teaching, and literacy in very particular ways, which is why Reading Recovery teacher education is so intensive. It is about building consistent theorizing among beliefs, values, and ways of interacting and using language. As with children's learning, it is about teachers developing meaning-based, self-extending systems of teaching and learning. Indeed, Marie offered us theorizing about the process of learning to read and write continuous text—not merely words—and theorizing about teaching children—not merely cognition.

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