

Our Tribute to Marie Clay: A Pioneer of Large-Scale Education System Design

*Kenneth G. Wilson, Hazel C. Youngberg Trustees distinguished professor, Department of Physics,
The Ohio State University
Constance K. Barsky, director, Learning by Redesign, Granville, OH*

We were saddened to learn of Marie Clay's death. She was a warm friend and helpful counselor. Throughout our 17 years spent trying to make sense of the challenges of education reform, she was always available when we needed her. We are very grateful for her helping us to understand the intricacies of the development and implementation of Reading Recovery, which has played a central role in our attempts to make sense of education reform. We admired Marie as a very distinguished researcher and a unique and extraordinary figure in the history of education.

Marie's long-term persistent dedication to Reading Recovery was astonishing and was an inspiration for our own work. Through her efforts the lives of over *one million* children were changed by giving them the gift of reading. The professional lives of *thousands* of Reading Recovery teachers were also impacted by empowering them with the tools to help their students succeed. But we anticipate that the most notable accomplishment of Marie and Reading Recovery has yet to be realized. Much larger numbers of children could be impacted if education reforms were influenced by Reading Recovery's accomplishments in system design.

The most profound tribute that we can pay to Marie Clay is to assert that she was a pioneer in large-scale education *system design*. She had a unique ability to be aware of Reading

Recovery as both a large-scale system and a program with specific design details. Reading Recovery as an education system involves a vast number of details, each one of which could affect the functioning of the system. It is the very *combination* of the details of the design components that can serve as a model for future education reforms. The details embedded in the design components that we consider essential for the future of school reform include the outstanding quality of foundational research on learning, the unparalleled professional development, the innovative accountability mechanism, and the system of scale up to large numbers of schools.

One of Marie's system design challenges was to overcome the conventional wisdom that says that nearly everyone can quickly grasp what it takes to teach *any* child to read. She demonstrated that children with severe reading problems in the first grade required intervention by skilled teachers who had mastered a significant body of knowledge and practice that could only be acquired over an extended period of time. Teachers' participation in and mastery of Reading Recovery's professional development mirrors the training and education that one would expect of a discipline. This contrasts with the minimal requirements to enter an occupation—something that anyone can do with limited education and

training. We believe that Reading Recovery has some of the structure that one would expect for a nascent discipline, and this a design characteristic that sets Reading Recovery apart as one of a number of crucial precursors for a new form of education.

To expand on this concept of a discipline, we will use the example of mountaineering. If one analyzes carefully what an expert mountaineer does when climbing a challenging cliff, it is to locate, second by second and seemingly effortlessly, each new handhold and foothold that is used to make progress up the cliff. The climber must draw on a *vast mental accumulation* of knowledge about the nature of cliffs and how to distinguish which localized rock surface can serve as a reliable handhold or foothold. An expert mountaineer has acquired this mental accumulation through years of practice, with some of it likely taking place on practice rocks in the company of other mountaineers, often with different levels of climbing skills ranging from novice to expert.

On the simplest practice rocks novices develop the basic skills that form the foundation for more advanced climbing on successively more difficult rocks and cliffs. Mountaineers can spend many years practicing to improve their skills. Some eventually attain the knowledge and skills comparable to the senior leaders of mountaineering. These leaders are not only experts in climbing. They have most



importantly pioneered the development of *unprecedented skills* that have *advanced* the art of mountaineering *as a whole*. Without the process of *advancing* the art of mountaineering, which began around 1800 and continued, slowly but relentlessly, throughout the 1800s and the early 1900s, the now legendary 1953 first ascent of Mt. Everest would not have been possible.

Most recognized disciplines, such as mountaineering, have existed for centuries, accumulating advancing knowledge and skills. But could Reading Recovery be characterized as a *discipline*, albeit a very *young* one, less than 30 years old? Doesn't an expert Reading Recovery teacher draw on a huge body of knowledge about young readers and on how to help them make accelerated progress? Doesn't she need to make second-by-second decisions during an implementation session just as a mountaineer must make second-by-second decisions in order to be successful?

Moreover, could Reading Recovery have an educational equivalent of the mountaineers' practice rocks, with three grades of difficulty? The year of training for a novice Reading Recovery teacher might be compared to a year spent on an elementary practice rock. The year of training for a teacher leader might be compared to a year spent working on a more advanced practice rock; and the year spent by university faculty learning to be a Reading Recovery trainer might be thought of as a most demanding challenge on a yet more difficult practice rock.

Do some recruits to Reading Recovery find it *addictive*, the way many mountaineers become *addicted* to mountaineering? If so, do some of these devotees move on to ever more difficult challenges over time—just as dedicated mountaineers seek new challenges? Are some of these devotees eager to accept the challenges faced by the current leadership of Reading Recovery? Are they ready to develop new unprecedented skills and experiment with innovations in Reading Recovery's design that could advance Reading Recovery *beyond where it is now*?

This is the challenge of Marie Clay's legacy. While Marie could think and speak about Reading Recovery as a whole, she was always cognizant of the residual shortcomings of many of the program's design details. She understood that Reading Recovery had a system design that could and would have to change with time. We often heard her challenge her colleagues to address the problem areas in the current design without making changes that would compromise the quality of the whole.

The success of Reading Recovery now rests with the outstanding individuals who are ready to follow in Marie Clay's footsteps. Her death was a profound loss for us and for education worldwide, but we look forward to seeing her colleagues contribute to Reading Recovery's evolution and the realization of its potential.

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