Celebrating 30 Years

Marie Clay’s Influence on Assessment: A Special Beneficiary

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Let me begin with a true story dating back to the late 1980s — which at the time I referred to as the “frightening little story of Sarah.” Sarah’s series of Reading Recovery® lessons was discontinued near the end of Grade 1. I was dismayed to learn that she was being referred at the beginning of Grade 2 as “unable to read or write.” When visiting with her classroom teacher, I learned that she was a first-year teacher frantically searching for answers. The basal book test and the standardized test seemingly had already sealed Sarah’s fate.

Trying not to overreact, I offered to do some reading and writing tasks with Sarah while the teacher observed. After seeing Sarah’s performance on several tasks from An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 2013; 1993, 2002, 2005), including Running Records of Text Reading, the teacher began to realize that Sarah did know a lot about reading and writing. I then asked for the second-grade basal reader, introduced a story to Sarah, and supported her successful reading of the text. We also wrote a story together based on the story, and Sarah shined!

After this experience, the teacher was almost in tears, asking me how she could have known what Sarah could do. The following quote from Marie Clay offers an answer to her frustration:

When compared with the observation of learners at work, test scores are mere approximations or estimates that do not provide good guidance to the teacher of how to teach a particular child. At times those scores present results stripped of the very information that is required for designing or evaluating sound instruction for individual learners. Standardized tests need to be supplemented at the classroom level with systematic observations of children who are in the act of responding to instruction, observations that are reliable enough to compare one child with another, or one child on two different occasions. (Clay, 2013, p. 2)

Sarah was a passive child, easily intimidated by school tasks, which made it even more difficult for her to show her strengths to her teacher. This episode was a watershed moment for me. I had experienced first-hand the impact Marie Clay had on assessment of young children. I had gained a clearer understanding that assessment is about finding out what a child can do — and about using an unusual lens to explore each child’s literacy processing behaviors. Through Sarah, I came to grasp the power of careful and controlled observation.

A Bit of History

I think it is essential to return to Marie Clay’s seminal research study on emergent literacy to truly appreciate her influence on the literacy assessment of young children (Clay, 1966). The major aim of her dissertation research was to record in detail the emergent reading behavior of 100 urban children. A crucial requisite for accomplishing her ambitious goal was the need “to devise techniques, instruments, and ways of reporting suited to the major aim” (p. 9). Those techniques yielded many observation tasks, some of which ultimately became part of the Observation Survey.

Results of the study led Clay to conclude that individual differences that could lead to reading failure are observable in the first year of learning to read (1966, p. 90). She further concluded that a teacher can know the direction in which a child is moving if

• she knows the child well;
• she has some records which catch current behaviour in such a way that it can be referred to some weeks later; and
• besides teaching in small groups, she sets aside time occasionally for observation periods when she pays close attention to precisely what individual children are doing. (1966, p. 315)
She argued that detailed description of a wide variety of developmental progressions will probably lead to the best understanding of how and when certain children fail.

Through Reading Recovery, many of us in the 1980s were just learning about the unusual lens used by Clay to find what was possible for children with literacy problems. According to Clay,

The phrase ‘an unusual lens’ refers to any observational or research methodology which gathers detailed data on changes in the literacy behaviors of young children as they learn to read and write . . . (Clay, 2001, p. 82)

Clay’s alternative way of assessing literacy progress at the acquisition level is known as a *literacy processing view*, one that captures how the learner works at learning and how those ways of working change over time. [See chapter 3 in *Boundless Horizons: Marie Clay’s Search for the Possible in Children’s Literacy* (Watson & Askew, 2009) for more about using an unusual lens.]

Some of you may remember the mid-1980s when assessment of beginning readers was basically limited to ‘readiness’ tests or standardized group measures that sampled knowledge of selected items. We knew those tests were not reliable for children at the onset of literacy instruction. The introduction of Clay’s tools for observing and recording a child’s first steps into reading and writing, known as the Diagnostic Survey at the time, was revolutionary.

An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement

We began to realize that the tasks of *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* provided authentic and practical ways of assessing the literacy progress of young readers and writers. For the first time, schools had access to an instrument to assess literacy behaviors of young children and to record change in those behaviors over time. Some 20 years later, the National Center on Response to Intervention recognized the Observation Survey as a screening tool that is valid, reliable, and evidence-based (D’Agostino, 2012).

The six tasks of the Observation Survey give teachers comprehensive information about what a child can do. Because individual tasks typically assess only one aspect of literacy learning, they are not used in isolation. Running Records of Text Reading are an exception and can be used on a regular basis to monitor changes in the ways children use information while reading continuous text.

Peter Afflerbach’s review of the Observation Survey led him to conclude that “the detailed information that is provided by the Observation Survey helps describe individual students’ needs. The provision of immediately useful information can have profound effect on literacy instruction…” (2007, p. 116). He further concludes that the Observation Survey is “an assessment that provides rich information about different areas of students’ literacy development … and that informs teacher decision making about students’ reading and reading instruction” (p. 128).

Running Records of Text Reading

One task of the Observation Survey is the Running Record of Text Reading (Clay, 2000, 2013) that is widely used by teachers and researchers on a systematic basis to gain crucial information about the learner.

Running records capture how a beginning reader is putting together what he or she knows in order to read text. What sources of information is the child using or neglecting when reading continuous text? The widespread use of running records as a tool for observing text processing behaviors has altered our understandings of the reading process and of individual learners.

We can use running records to

- check on whether students are reading texts of appropriate difficulty,
- group children for instruction,
- guide teaching in individual and group settings,
- identify patterns of reading behaviors to help children with particular difficulties, and
- capture progress over time.
We are able to judge what the reader already knows, what he attends to, and what he overlooks. We can even use running records to learn more about ourselves — to see what we may be emphasizing and neglecting in our teaching.

Assessing Oral Language
From Clay’s extensive study of oral language, we learned that oral language proficiency contributes immensely to learning in both reading and writing. In order to help children improve their use of the English language, teachers need to know something about the structure of the language and about how structure is acquired by young children. This can be especially important for children whose mother tongue is other than English.

When New Zealand teachers asked for a simple way to assess children’s levels of language performance, Clay and colleagues (2007) developed The Record of Oral Language to help teachers observe, monitor, and understand changes in young children’s language. Developed and tested in the same way as normative, standardized tests, The Record of Oral Language is recognized as a valid way of measuring a student’s language development. It gives the teacher an objective way of describing a child’s control of oral language structures and how the child’s language development changes over time.

A companion assessment developed by Clay, Biks and Gutchis: Learning to Inflect English (2007), was designed to indicate how far particular children have come in controlling the language of their reading books.

Children who do not control some simple rules of grammar will be slower to problem solve in reading and writing. This assessment helps the teacher predict which children may need more attention to how they use the English language and enables the teacher to judge how a child’s oral language is changing.

Observation of Children’s Early Writing
Perhaps more than anyone in the field of early literacy, Marie Clay recognized the value of writing in the process of becoming literate. She included writing in the Reading Recovery lesson because of its close, reciprocal relationship with reading. Reading and writing processes both pull from the same sources of information — knowledge about letters, sounds, words, language, and meaning.

In her seminal book, What Did I Write? (1975), Clay examined children’s first attempts to write. By tracing patterns of development in actual examples of children’s work, she provided invaluable insights for those in a position to assist the learning process. The book graphically illustrates how a child’s perception of print relates to early learning and early reading.

In An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement, Clay proposed a rating technique for observing children’s early attempts to write stories. Two tasks of the Observation Survey address aspects of writing: (a) the Writing Vocabulary Observation Task that samples the child’s own personal repertoire of known words, and (b) Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words in which the child represents the sounds in words in written form.

The assessment tools used within Reading Recovery lessons for children are dynamic assessments that serve a variety of purposes. In my view, these instruments are quite revolutionary for two reasons: (a) because they inform teaching decisions so that teachers can describe, explain, and optimize development every day they teach; and (b) because the assessments were designed to further teachers’ observations of emergent learners on the cutting edge of their learning as part of purposeful activity. As children read books and write messages, they learn from the activity, engage in self-directed learning, and learn by discovery.

— Diane DeFord (2007) in a tribute to Marie Clay
Marie Clay’s Assessment Legacy

In summary, Clay’s influence on the assessment of young children has challenged the old paradigm of testing with the introduction of a dynamic notion of systematic, sensitive, controlled observation of an individual child’s literacy achievement. She described the means to sensitive observation as “knowing what to look for, remembering to arrange to observe it and making some record of the behaviour noted . . .” (Clay, 1966, p. 318). Only then can the teacher skillfully support the learning of each child.

We are beneficiaries of Clay’s observational methodology that has altered our study of literacy learning of beginners. I also consider the many ways in which my views of teaching and learning have been influenced by the use of an unusual lens.

Sarah and her teacher never knew Marie Clay, but they both benefited from her legacy. I shudder to think of the other ‘Sarahs’ who are lost in a quagmire of literacy learning without access to the tools developed by Clay. As a beneficiary of Clay’s theory, I was allowed to intervene when Sarah couldn’t. It is my wish that all teachers of young children have the understandings and tools to ensure successful literacy opportunities for all young learners.

References


About the Author

Dr. Billie J. Askew is professor emerita at Texas Woman’s University where she served as a trainer and the director of the Reading Recovery Center. She is a past president of the Reading Recovery Council of North America and the North American Trainers Group, and former U.S. representative on the International Reading Recovery Trainers Organization Board. She is co-editor of Stirring the Waters: The Influence of Marie Clay, with Jan Gaffney, and co-editor with Barbara Watson of Boundless Horizons: Marie Clay’s Search for the Possible in Children’s Literacy.