Marie Clay’s Contributions to Early Childhood Education in the United States

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Marie M. Clay’s scholarly works have made several significant contributions to the field of early childhood in the United States. But before I discuss these contributions, I want to take readers back to the state of the field of early childhood when Marie began her career. I remind readers that while early childhood educators are interested in children from birth to age 8, most early childhood specialists—at least during the 1970s and early 1980s—were concerned with children before they entered into elementary school which in those days for most children was first grade (attending kindergarten, if it existed, was voluntary).

I also want to remind readers that Clay’s (1966) dissertation focused on observing the reading and writing of 100 five-year-olds from the day they entered school in New Zealand (on their fifth birthday) for an entire year. The school experiences of these children were quite different from the school experiences of 5- and even 6-year-olds in the U.S. at that time. Shirley Haley-James (1982, p. 458) wrote of her own experiences teaching first grade most likely in the late 1960s. “In early September, twenty-four six-year-olds bent over lined paper and labored to fill their pages with the letter ‘b’ made the way the penmanship book said to make it. … At recess time…I hurriedly began to pick up penmanship papers and replace them with [reading] readiness books.” Later she related another telling memory; “Monday I reminded [Julie] to pay attention to her group’s reading readiness lesson, not to the storybook she kept in her desk.”

As Haley-James’ memories reminded us, at the time Marie was finishing her dissertation, children in first grade in the U.S. learned about alphabet letters in lessons that focused on penmanship (making lines and shapes in appropriate forms and sizes) without an opportunity to put learning about letters to work in attempting to write; writing instruction was delayed until beginning reading was well under way. Before beginning to read preprimer stories in basal readers, all children completed readiness workbooks in which they might do visual discrimination activities such as matching shapes (not letters). Children were thought not to be mature enough to learn to read until they reached the equivalent age of 6.5 years, thus reinforcing the need for reading instruction to be delayed for most children even in first grade. In sum, the concepts of reading readiness, achieving a certain level of maturity before beginning reading instruction, and delaying writing instruction until beginning reading was underway were well entrenched as traditions in early childhood education.

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Early Reading Behavior: A Period of Transition

Clay addressed all three of these traditions directly in her book, Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behaviour (1972a). Marie drew upon the results of her dissertation and a subsequent study of four groups of children from different home and cultural backgrounds over 6 months beginning when the children were 5.0, 5.6, and 6.0, and 6.6 years of age. In the first chapter she discounted reading age (reading maturity as it was called in the U.S.), reading readiness, and the concept of ‘let them bloom’ which she called “intelligence will out” (p. 7) as inadequate concepts based on the results of her studies. She argued that children around the world began to learn to read at age 5.0 in New Zealand, at 6.0 in the U.S., and at 7.0 in Sweden and Russia. Most children succeeded and a few struggled despite the difference of 2 years of age. She debunked an important concept underlying reading readiness, that children become
ready for formal reading as a result of different rates of maturing—growing from within. Of course, she asked, What is maturing or growing? She knew what grew — early reading and writing behaviors that are taught and learned within the context of reading books and writing stories. She argued that all children go through a transition period during which they move from using visual scanning which they had learned in preschool to using the particular and systematic kinds of visual scanning needed to begin reading and writing. She called this transition period the early reading behavior stage, and emphatically stated this period must not be called preparation for reading or reading readiness training or even prereading (p. 6).

It took many years for Clay’s clear thinking about reading readiness to reach the U.S. Her stance simply put was, if we waited until children seemed to mature—if we curtailed access to teaching that involved reading books and writing stories—we were denying children the opportunity to learn which was so critical to success. In the U.S. we were slow to throw off the long-accepted ‘let them bloom’ message which is so obvious in Leo the Late Bloomer (Kraus, 1971).

Concepts About Print

There were several research currents within the literature that began to make inroads in chipping away at the strongly held traditions of reading readiness, “intelligence will win out,” and writing must be delayed. I will address two of these movements in which Clay’s work played significant roles. One of these research movements was focused on understanding, measuring, and teaching children concepts about print. Clay’s publication of The Early Detection of Reading Difficulties: A Diagnostic Survey (1972b) included her Concepts About Print assessment. Several researchers in the U.S. used this new assessment to investigate how it aligned with current readiness assessments and to determine its effectiveness in predicting reading success especially among readers at different levels (e.g., Johns, 1980). Concepts About Print (including understanding what is meant by ‘word’ and ‘letter’ as well as knowing the directionality of print) were new concepts for most literacy experts, but we recognized the importance and value of this knowledge for young children’s literacy learning. I remember reading several research studies including Johns’ on Concepts About Print and thinking, “Why didn’t anyone tell me about this while I was in my doctoral program?” It energized my interest once more in young children. (My first teaching job in 1971 was as a kindergarten teacher in a private preschool—at the time the only kindergarten in Athens, GA.) I knew I was seeing just the beginning of a new and important direction for research and instruction, and little did I know that 35 years later I would look back on a career focused on young children’s emergence into literacy.

The Sign Concept

The second research movement to which Clay (1975) was an early contributor was related to young children’s writing development. Clay introduced several critical new insights about literacy development in this study. One was that the earliest entry into reading and writing was when children developed what she called the sign concept (children’s awareness that print “says” a message). The second new insight was that children’s early writing progressed from using rudimentary signs (uncontrolled scribbles and mock cursive) to mock letters (letter-like shapes) and a mixture of real letters to invented spelling which she called “trying to write down his speech, using what he knows of letter-sound correspondences in English” (p. 58). Readers should note that Read (1975) published the same year his examination of children’s early spelling attempts to which is attributed our first awareness of invented spelling.

Early childhood educators (being essentially child-centered) were captured by the notion that children could and would initiate writing during play or simply as a means to explore print or communicate with peers—what parents had long known. Haley-James was an early pioneer in
engaging kindergarten and first-grade teachers in writing programs. Her 1982 article in which she reflected on her previous teaching experiences in first grade described several approaches to writing that teachers were using in these early grades. The title of her article, “When Are Children Ready to Write?” suggested that at least some literacy experts in the early 1980s were beginning to question the need for readiness for literacy.

Three years later, Marjorie Hipple, a kindergarten teacher wrote about her experiences using a journal writing program for children who had not yet learned to read because, as she stated, “I needed to find out for myself... whether young children could write before they know how to read, as theorists in language development had been claiming” (1985, p. 255) and she quoted Chomsky (1971), Clay (1975), and Haley-James (1982) as those theorists. Hipple stated, “During that time I learned that emergent readers are indeed able to write and are eager to do so” (p. 255). I remember reading this article as a young assistant professor at Louisiana State University and being struck by the term emergent readers. I remember thinking this new term would mean something big. I did not know Clay’s work at that time beyond her Concepts About Print assessment and her book on children’s writing (Clay, 1975) in which she does not use the term emergent reading or writing. It was another year before Teale and Sulzby (1986) published their book titled Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading that firmly established the new term emergent literacy. In their introductory chapter, Teale and Sulzby brought Clay’s thoughts on reading readiness front and center. This book heralded a heady time when early childhood and literacy specialists developed courses and wrote books about emergent literacy. They paved the way for new and exciting methods of instruction in both preschool and kindergarten. No one can put a date on when reading readiness died in the U.S., but it did.

Clay’s involvement in these three outcomes—debunking reading readiness, introducing the critical value of Concepts About Print in early reading and writing development, and championing the value of starting children early into writing—had a profound impact on early childhood education in the 1980s and 1990s. Children’s experiences in preschool and kindergarten included books and writing, and teachers began to understand the importance of observing children in order to understand children’s literacy development.

References

About the Author

Lea M. McGee is the Marie Clay Professor of Reading Recovery and Early Literacy Education at The Ohio State University. She was director of two early Reading First projects and frequently works with teachers in their classrooms. Her research focuses on the problem solving of Reading Recovery children in reading and writing and the literary understanding constructed by young children during read-alouds. She is co-author of Literacy’s Beginning; Supporting Young Readers and Writers (6th ed.) and Designing Early Literacy Programs: Strategies for At-Risk Preschool and Kindergarten Children.

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