When I first began teaching in 1969, there was a popular rock song by Three Dog Night called “One Is the Loneliest Number.” The opening lyrics of the song, which reflected the title, remain as haunting as ever today. The lyrics aren’t haunting just because I’m listening to an oldies radio station and wondering where the time has gone! For me the song is timeless because of the sense of despair and desperation the lyrics convey whenever the number one stands alone among others.

Whenever I hear “One Is the Loneliest Number” on the radio, I think back to my novice days as a teacher working with high school students who couldn’t read, those who stood alone in the crowd of students who knew how to read and to use reading for a variety of purposes: to enjoy, to think, to learn, to wonder, to escape, to imagine. Not my students. They were helpless in the face of reading, defeated and alone among those who could read, mostly invisible and forgotten in school unless they got into trouble. One can be the loneliest number in a middle or high school when you can’t read.

My concern for these students led me to graduate studies in the field of reading, focusing mainly on adolescent learners, and a career as a teacher of teachers. My initial motivation for studying reading was to better understand why older students couldn’t read, why the educational system had failed them, and why those who struggled in school found it so difficult to progress as readers and become part of the mainstream of students who knew how to read and to use reading to make a difference in their lives. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, I found few reasonable answers to my questions. There were many fix-it programs for the older remedial reader including, for example, the use of controlled readers (mindless early technology) or prepackaged kits with leveled text selections and follow-up questions and skill-building exercises (mindless practice). So I began to shift away from a study of reading failure among older readers and began to study the relationships between language and reading and how young children developed as readers. And it was there that I discovered the work of Marie Clay.

Language-centered theories of reading—understanding reading as the patterning of complex behavior—provided a portal for understanding older struggling readers, why they had failed, and how a teacher might work with them. Clay taught me, among many things, that children are busy discovering written language for themselves long before formal instruction, that children are theory builders and hypothesis testers, that print awareness begins with oral language development, that writing and reading are intricately related, and that learning to read and write involve the construction of inner control.

Marie Clay put language theory, research, and practice together and the result was Reading Recovery. Reading Recovery, based on a learning-to-read paradigm that has served young struggling readers well, has spared many children the despair, shame, and desperation of being the one who can’t read like others in their classes.

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The research data on Reading Recovery overwhelmingly support the benefits of Reading Recovery in today’s schools. Nevertheless, the paradigm wars have begun under the guise of experimentally driven scientific research, the primacy of learning letter-sound relationships, and the cost effectiveness of one-to-one literacy programs such as Reading Recovery. From my vantage point, Reading Recovery is under attack in some quarters primarily because it has been so effective in recovering children from reading failure—without using a limiting paradigm based solely on letter-sound relationships.

And what’s more, Reading Recovery has touched my life in a personal way. When our oldest grandson Simon was a first grader, he soon fell behind his classmates in reading. Simon is a bright, enthusiastic learner, but he couldn’t put the process of reading together. From birth, books had been
an integral part of his life. His book experiences helped him to develop many concepts about print. Moreover, he was a paper-and-pencil kid in his preschool years, always drawing and trying to make letters. He knew that his grandparents, Jo Anne and I, wrote books about teaching reading and that we were teachers of reading teachers. There was a lot of pressure, much of it self-imposed, to become a reader in the conventional sense of the word.

But in the first grade, he ran into a brick wall with whole-class reading instruction. His enthusiasm for learning soon waned; he tried to conceal his apparent failure to learn to read in ways that his classmates were. He was sullen, sometimes belligerent, when he was asked about school. “Everything is fine,” he would say, but deep down he knew he was failing. Fortunately, he was identified early in the first grade and placed in the school’s Reading Recovery program. The rest is history. He began in Level 3 reading materials and by year’s end he had progressed to Level 30. He easily could have become the poster child for Reading Recovery. His confidence was back, the enthusiasm for learning returned, and he was smiling again. Simon was a reader, and he knew it. Today he is in the fifth grade, an A student, and a reader of both nonfiction and fiction. Thank you, Marie Clay.

**Marie Clay On the Power of One-To-One Instruction**

Why is a switch to individual instruction so powerful in its effect? It allows for a revolutionary change in teaching, devising lessons which work out from what the child can already do, and not from the teacher’s pre-selected programme sequence. When two or three children are taught in a group the teacher cannot make this change; she has to choose a compromise path, a new move for ‘the group.’ To get results with the lowest achievers the teacher must work with the particular (and very limited) response repertoire of a particular child using what he knows as the context within which to introduce him to novel things.


**Marie Clay On the Importance of Continuous Text in Learning to Read**

A theory of reading continuous texts cannot arise from a theory of word reading because it involves the integration of many behaviors not studied in the theory of reading words. It must, of course, explain the role of word reading and letter recognition within the theory of reading continuous text.


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**About the Author**

Rich Vacca is an emeritus professor at Kent State University. He is an author of Content Area Reading: Literacy and Learning Across the Curriculum, now in its eighth edition, and Reading and Learning to Read, currently in its fifth edition. He is a past president of the International Reading Association, where he also served on its board of directors with Marie Clay.