

Relating the Known to the New: Exploring Personal Perspectives on *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals*

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You relate what you hear or see to things you already understand.

The moment of truth is the moment of input,

- *how you attend,*
- *how much you care,*
- *how you encode,*
- *what you do with it,*
- *and how you organise it.*

How well you access it depends on how well you saved it in the first place. How do you become more savvy about the way you remember things? Have a good system. Notice your errors and try to fix them.

—Clay, 2005b, flyleaf,
quoting Squire, 1996

This quote from Dr. Larry Squire is the first information, beyond the title, presented to readers of *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals Part Two* (2005b), Marie Clay's new text. The quote serves to foreshadow the increased attention given to the workings of the brain and the relevance of Squire's recommendations to the teaching procedures detailed in Clay's new text. As a "vintage" Reading Recovery teacher initially trained in *Early Detection of Reading Difficulties* (Clay, 1985), I found that usage of the new text has, at times, brought with it the feelings and understand-



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ings of a novice learner. As a trainer of teacher leaders, I've had the good fortune to meet with Marie Clay and fellow trainers to discuss the texts several times. Even so, I sometimes find myself searching for the "known items" such as familiar quotes and headings that have been my tools for teaching children and supporting and coaching teacher leaders and teachers since 1993. As a learner and teacher grappling with new material, I appreciate the words that I continue to return to, "Have a good system.

Notice your errors and try to fix them." For those of us who have gone through several well-worn copies of *Reading Recovery: A Guidebook for Teachers in Training* (Clay, 1993), putting away the old text is like saying goodbye forever to an old friend. It is a somewhat daunting transition! (Fullerton, 2006).

On the other hand, as is always the case in Reading Recovery, change over time is a constant and a positive phenomenon. I suspect that the

tentativeness in which I am approaching my understanding of the procedures is important to my own professional development as well as the intervention's implementation. Currently, this tentativeness is echoed across continents. On an international level, Reading Recovery professionals are working collectively to discuss Clay's new texts, the procedures, and the implications. This has the potential to invigorate our work as we improve our understandings and teaching, our analyses of children's

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learning, and our professional development. It calls to mind the notion of an "educational redesign process" (Wilson & Daviss, 1994). Through such a process, the intervention is continually changing as a result of research. Procedures are tested and refined while professionals are equipped "with a common body of proven knowledge and skills" (p. 50) while tailoring each lesson to the needs of each child (Wilson & Daviss).

Thus, within Reading Recovery, we are always guided by a system of self-

evaluation and change, while remaining grounded in key principles of learning. One of these key principles is that of linking something new to what is already known or understood. Recently, trainers from New Zealand, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States met and shared such connections, which in turn will be shared in our respective countries and training centers. This cycle is ongoing as Reading Recovery professionals work together, using, discussing, and analyzing *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals Part One* and *Part Two* (Clay, 2005a, 2005b), texts that will now guide our Reading Recovery instruction. As we continually strive to improve instruction, the new texts serve as welcome resources for growth and rejuvenation. Truly this seems to be a model for educational reform and professional development!

In North America, plans and procedures for introducing these new Reading Recovery texts began more than a year in advance. Collaboration and discussion of new research with colleagues and with Clay at meetings and conferences foreshadowed the inclusion of new information and research evidence that will guide our teaching and learning. Transitioning from Clay's 1993 *Guidebook* and preparation for the introduction of new procedures, as well as clarification and explanation of others, started with an introduction of the new texts by Clay to the North American Trainers Group (NATG). After planning and study, trainers within North America presented an introduction and overview within their representative university training centers. This past June, all teacher leaders in the U.S. met to discuss the

text with trainers at the Teacher Leader Institute in Denver, CO. As the school year began, teacher leaders began to use this new text to provide professional development to all incoming Reading Recovery teachers as well as trained teachers in additional professional development sessions (often called *continuing contact*). Such thoughtful preparation serves as an example of the professional development and implementation within Reading Recovery. Throughout 2006–2007, as in the past, Reading Recovery professionals (trainers, teacher leaders, or teachers) will work together in professional development sessions, observing one-to-one teaching demonstrations behind a one-way glass, but this time through a new lens of *Literacy Lessons*.

Those unfamiliar with the ongoing changes that have always been a part of Reading Recovery might ask, why a new text? I recently attempted to answer that question for stakeholders and interested individuals within my own state (Fullerton, 2006), inviting them to explore *Literacy Lessons*, particularly Part One. As noted by Mary Anne Doyle, chair of the Executive Board of the International Reading Recovery Trainers Organization (IRRTO), Part One provides administrators and specially trained teachers with information that will guide their implementation of Reading Recovery and answer frequently asked questions about *why? when? and how?* in relation to this early literacy intervention (Clay, 2005a, back cover).

Within the remainder of this article, I first provide an overview of *Literacy Lessons* while also sharing my perspective on the purpose(s) of a new text for Reading Recovery. Next, the

rationales for an individually designed intervention are discussed. Thirdly, I focus on the training of Reading Recovery professionals as well as instructional considerations. Finally, I highlight implications of a few emphases within the text. Readers should note that these views come from my own distillation of the new information and are not intended to be an inclusive review of the text. Certainly, the emphases I have noted are mine alone and are not intended to encompass all key constructs. Readers are encouraged to dig into the text, develop their own “key constructs” which will certainly differ from and expand upon mine. An important point that must be made is that within Reading Recovery, new teaching procedures may take time to understand. I shared this perspective with several colleagues recently as we talked before we started our teaching. We puzzled together over one aspect of the *breaking* of words, a teaching procedure, and arrived at a tentative understanding. I noted that our discussion repeats a common experience with Clay’s 1993 *Guidebook*—we implement new procedures, refine our understandings over time, and remain tentative in our responses and conclusions while Clay graciously clarifies and refines her explanations through revisions and discussions. Increased understanding comes with study, reflection, and time. Some things never change!

Change Over Time in Reading Recovery: Why a New Text?

At first glance, educators may make the mistaken assumption that the information in *Literacy Lessons* is relevant only for Reading Recovery

professionals. Broader in scope, the new texts present ideas and issues that deserve our most critical attention as early literacy educators. As titled, the previous Reading Recovery text, *Reading Recovery: A Guidebook for Teachers in Training* (Clay, 1993) was written for Reading Recovery professionals. The new text is also a guidebook, but in two separate volumes, Part One and Part Two. Administrators and literacy educators

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who are interested in recent theory and support for young struggling readers will find the overview provided in *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals Part One* invaluable. Through clear, succinct explanations, key constructs are summarized in Part One. These constructs include reading as a complex process (as contrasted to processing that is related to any single variable or skill, e.g. phonemic awareness), the reduction and prevention of reading difficulties, the advantages of an intervention designed for individuals, as well as the theoretical

rationale for the instructional framework of Reading Recovery.

Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals Part Two was written for specially trained teachers (e.g. Reading Recovery professionals). Clay refers to Part Two as an “updating” based on recent research and ongoing instructional refinement:

The lesson activities described in this guidebook have been progressively refined and revised over 30 years. Some changes arose as I tried to clarify points of ambiguity in the guidance I had offered to teachers; other were introduced as a result of new published research; and some became necessary because of changes in education systems. As new research has become available either the teaching procedures or the explanations or both have been modified in a succession of reprints and new editions. . . . This new manual consolidates the adjustments or changes that have been made in previous years. It also tries to look ahead in directions indicated by recent research in the field of literacy learning. (Clay, 2005b, p. 1)

The Case for Individually Designed and Delivered One-to-One Instruction

Since Clay’s *Guidebook* was published in 1993, much has changed in the field of literacy. Handbooks outlining new research directions and outcomes (see Dickinson & Neuman, 2006; Neuman & Dickinson, 2002; Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, & Barr, 2000; Ruddell & Unrau, 2004), the find-

ings of the National Reading Panel, the enacting of No Child Left Behind and Reading First (as examples of change) have impacted research and practice. The attention given to the highly qualified teacher, professional development, and the funding and emphasis on literacy coaches and instructional specialists within schools would imply drastic change. As suggested by a noted researcher, the last 10 years of research has provided critical insights into beginning reading and the instructional needs of struggling readers (Pressley, 2006), and yet, we are still far from providing what is needed for *all* who are at risk of reading failure. More than a decade ago, Walmsley and Allington (1995) wrote

We already know how to prevent school literacy failure in the majority of cases.... This does not mean that we should abandon the search for better methods—the fact that even the most successful approaches still fail to meet the needs of 1 to 2 percent of the population makes it imperative that we continue our research in this area—but it does mean that schools whose literacy failure rates are high have little excuse for not rethinking their instructional support programs for children at risk. (p. 41)

This quote could have been written yesterday. So much of what we have learned through research is currently under-utilized in schools. Instead, we teach in a time where we assess and work toward “curricular mastery” as defined and reflected by the ubiquitous test, or we follow lesson plans scripted at the behest of publishing companies. In fact, there is recent evidence to suggest that

funding and instructional support for those who are most at risk can be influenced by errant review processes and panels, not to mention “behind the scenes” influence and directives by high federal department of education officials. (See “The Reading First Program’s Grant Application Process: Final Inspection Report,” issued Sept. 22, 2006, by the Office of Inspector General.) Perhaps it is relevant to situate this article within the context of time. I write this little more than a week after the Inspector General’s report was made public. I continue to think of the many hundreds of children who have not received Reading Recovery instruction in the past few years since Reading Recovery was one of the interventions shut out by the department. In a recent Washington Post article entitled “Billions for an Inside Game on Reading,” Michael Grunwald writes the following:

Five years later, an accumulating mound of evidence from reports, interviews and program documents suggests that Reading First has had little to do with science or rigor. Instead, the billions have gone to what is effectively a pilot project for untested programs with friends in high places. Department officials and a small group of influential contractors have strong-armed states and local districts into adopting a small group of unproved textbooks and reading programs with almost no peer-reviewed research behind them. The commercial interests behind those textbooks and programs have paid royalties and consulting fees to the key Reading First

contractors, who also served as consultants for states seeking grants and chaired the panels approving the grants. Both the architect of Reading First and former education secretary Roderick R. Paige have gone to work for the owner of one of those programs, who is also a top Bush fundraiser. (Grunwald, 2006)

As a result of this report, educators as well as parents may view attempts at educational reform, particularly for children who are most at risk, with appropriate skepticism. Yet, in the midst of such a political and educational maelstrom, Clay’s new texts provide much-needed guidance and clarity. She asserts that Reading Recovery can be used with any type of classroom curriculum, but is not intended for classroom use; rather, Reading Recovery has been designed by “studying only the needs of the hardest-to-teach children” (Clay, 2005a, p. i). Clay emphasizes the special training that is needed to make “superbly sensitive decisions” (Clay, p. i) about how to interact with the hardest to teach child’s responses. Such a stance makes clear that there is no magic bullet, no group activity, nor any one assessment or teaching approach, particularly when focused on a single factor theory of reading, that will serve as a panacea. Only by working within the child’s known and bringing their strengths to the forefront of teaching and learning interactions, through individually designed one-to-one instruction, can we provide what is necessary to help all children learn to read and write (Clay, 2005a, 2005b; Lyons, 2003; Wasik & Slavin, 1993).



Reading Recovery represents carefully designed instruction that begins early, builds upon what the child knows, and promotes accelerative improvement, while also emphasizing one-to-one instruction and intensive professional development.

Decades of research suggest that teacher decision making and good instruction cannot be mandated or scripted. Much depends on the well-trained teacher (Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Hoffman, 1991; Pressley, Allington, McDonald-Wharton, Block, & Morrow, 2001). Good instruction is constructive. It involves taking a child from where they are as we work with what they know. Working with more knowledgeable others is essential (Vygotsky, 1978). Clay, within *Literacy Lessons*, again makes the case for one-to-one instruction, individually designed and delivered through Reading Recovery. When teachers work with groups, often with some view of the “average” child or range, they must always make compromises as to what their next teaching move might be (Clay, 2005a). However, while instructing individuals, “the teacher can work with the limited response repertoire

of a particular child, using what he knows as a context within which to introduce him to novel things. . . .” (Clay, p. 21). Through such interactions, teachers have the opportunity to reinforce correct responses, as well as approximations (near misses). In a group or classroom setting, it is less likely that teachers will have the opportunity to notice an ineffective response and work quickly to eliminate it (Clay, 2001, 2005a, 2005b).

As indicated through the discussion above, research and pedagogical insights suggest that literacy learning is complex. Especially for children who are at risk of failure, carefully designed instruction that begins early, builds upon what the child knows, and promotes accelerative improvement so that the learner catches up to classroom peers is necessary. Reading Recovery is an intervention that represents all of the above, while also

emphasizing one-to-one instruction and intensive professional development of teachers. The case was made by several researchers in Allington and Walmsley (1995), and is still being “discovered” through recent research. For example, studies conducted by non-Reading Recovery researchers have used the design and areas of instruction that form the infrastructure of Reading Recovery with strong results (see Vellutino & Scanlon 2002; Verhoeven & van de Ven, as cited in Verhoeven & Snow, 2001). Other studies comparing Reading Recovery to small-group instruction provided strong evidence for the power of one-to-one teaching (Dorn & Allen, 1995; Harrison, 2002; Pinnell, Lyons, DeFord, Bryk, & Seltzer, 1994). A respected meta-analysis, again by non-Reading Recovery researchers, provided a comprehensive evaluation of Reading Recovery (D’Agostino & Murphy,

2004). Positive effects were noted for students who completed Reading Recovery successfully, as well as for not-discontinued students with a lasting program effect at least through Grade 2 (Schmitt, Askew, Fountas, Lyons, & Pinnell, 2005). Noting Reading Recovery's long history of research and effectiveness, Richard Allington recently wrote, "How much evidence is enough evidence?" (Allington, 2005). Data collection and demonstrated effectiveness have occurred in the U.S. for 20 years, a level of evaluation that is unparalleled in education. "It is hard to imagine why Reading Recovery is not a fixture in every school district in every part of the country. The logic and evidence are overwhelmingly compelling" (Johnston, 2005, p. 58).

Change Over Time in the Development of Reading Recovery Professionals

Besides providing support for those who are most at risk of literacy failure, schools that implement Reading Recovery have a professional connection to a rigorous and dynamic teacher education network, both locally and nationally. In addition, Reading Recovery "works to produce change along four dimensions: behavioral change for teachers, students, and schools, and social/political changes in funding" (Clay, 1987; Johnston, 2005, p. 59). As noted earlier, monitoring occurs at every level—the teacher monitors her teaching and the progress of each student, and the overall progress of children is monitored at the school, district, state, and national level. Earlier, I referred to Clay's emphasis on one-to-one instruction, a necessity if teachers are to scaffold based on the learner's unique knowledge and

abilities. What sometimes goes unmentioned in discussions of the skillfulness and reflection of Reading Recovery teachers are the ways that one-to-one instruction and observation support the teacher by providing daily representations of children's literacy "working systems" under construction. Such experience and training is cumulative—as teachers work with more children, they have increased capacity for understanding and selecting teaching procedures that are a "best fit" for each child. Also, over time, as teachers scaffold to support children's strategic behaviors, they learn to attenuate their responses, providing feedback in relation to the child's successes or near misses (thus valuing the child's approximations). They become better decision makers in determining what teaching moves are most helpful at given points in time. In turn, such responses seem to be self-tutorial, promoting increased self-regulation. Using Squire's explanation, Reading Recovery teachers have learned to establish a good system. They notice their teaching errors, and they strive to fix them.

Within *Literacy Lessons*, the teacher's role is still to support the child's developing inner control with assistance adjusted as the child begins to work more independently. (See Clay & Cazden, 1990.) There are strong suggestions about how teachers approach scaffolding and interactions. Particularly important is the issue of teacher talk while the child engages in reading work. Teaching prompts "are not just talk!" (Clay, 2005b, p. 202). Helpful demonstrations, prompting nonverbally, or short, clear, and direct talk are called for so as not to interrupt the child's processing. A wider range of prompts are provided to

encourage professionals to be tentative and flexible in their approaches with children, observing carefully to determine what works best with each individual. In addition, Clay makes clear the necessity of interrupting unhelpful behaviors, particularly those related to learning to look at print (e.g., directionality, serial order) as well as other confusions. We know that the brain is a pattern synthesizer, and as a result, it is easier to retrieve information that was previously represented in an organized sequence (Fullerton, 2001; Lyons, 2003). Therefore, it is critical that teachers observe carefully, noting, for example, where and how the child looks at print, insisting that the child consistently goes left to right in order to develop a memory trace (Clay, 2005b; Lyons, 2003). When correct directionality does not occur, the teacher interrupts the ineffective behavior before an unhelpful memory trace is established.

The teacher's skill is a critical factor in education (Darling-Hammond, 1996). What is clearly evident in this text, as well as in previous guidebooks, is Clay's recognition of the need for intensive training and professional development for teachers of at-risk learners. Her respect for teachers as effective, reflective practitioners is evident. Just as there are no quick fixes for children, there are no quick fixes for improving teaching. In Reading Recovery professional development, there are no scripts, no packaged materials, no routinized manuals or guides. Teachers are highly skilled and reflective; professional development continues as long as they remain in Reading Recovery. Therefore, teachers have the knowledge necessary to select appropriate texts and tasks, make on-the-spot

decisions, and maximize the learning of each individual based on observations of previous instruction. (Fullerton, 2002; Lyons, Pinnell, & DeFord, 1993; Rodgers, Fullerton, & DeFord, 2002). Reading Recovery promotes change in teachers as well as change in students. The introduction of *Literacy Lessons* has implications for future research as interested educators study how teachers sort and work through the new learning provided by this text, as evidenced

broader implications: reading and writing continuous texts, learning to look at print with an emphasis on serial order, and individually designed one-to-one instruction. In my opinion, each of the three are examples of Clay's "stirring the waters yet again," encouraging Reading Recovery professionals, and perhaps, even more importantly, other literacy educators to re-view, re-vision, and perhaps re-consider. (Also see Clay, 2005c.)

leagues and I observed this variability firsthand as we looked at student scores on various tasks of *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (2005d). We noted that Darrell, for example, who had difficulty with aspects of directionality and serial order in Concepts About Print and Text Reading, was more successful in reading and writing words in isolation; others from the same kindergarten class were strong in Letter Identification, some in Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words, and others in their Concepts About Print and how books work. As we examined the scores across the various tasks, it was evident that one approach would not fit all the children who came into Reading Recovery.

Each person who reads *Literacy Lessons* will certainly come away with new insights, including effective one-to-one instruction, what it means to be at risk, the role of the teacher in individual instruction, and procedures that most support the engagement and growth of struggling beginning readers. I suspect, however, that each time the text is read, new insights will be gained.

It stands to reason that, as I work with Darrell, using his knowledge as a resource while we work together to strengthen his areas of difficulty, he will progress quite differently than Tremont or Mary, other at-risk children in his classroom, or any other child in Reading Recovery. The differences in these Reading Recovery children are what Clay makes reference to in relation to no "fixed set of strategic activities" (Clay, 2005b, p. 86) or texts, or test scores that define when a child will successfully achieve equivalent status of his peers; change will occur differently for each child. This explanation provides further support for reading or writing of continuous text. While working in continuous text, there is greater likelihood that learners, even those who are most at risk, have a broader range of knowledge sources that can be brought to bear on the text; those options are greatly decreased when working only with words or letters. Students such as Darrell, as well as all children, must have literacy tasks that

through their interactions during collaborative professional development as well as teaching.

The Wider Implications of *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals*

Each person who reads *Literacy Lessons* will certainly come away with new insights, including effective one-to-one instruction, what it means to be at risk, the role of the teacher in individual instruction, and procedures that most support the engagement and growth of struggling beginning readers. I suspect, however, that each time the text is read, new insights will be gained. My goal in this final section is to briefly explore what I consider to be three interesting and important emphases that provide

Reading and writing continuous texts

As noted earlier, literacy learning is a constructive process best achieved by working on continuous text. In a time when many interventions focus on isolated sounds and words, it is not surprising that Clay is emphasizing reading and writing continuous text with increased vigor. She points out that "we should expect diversity in how Reading Recovery children work on texts" (Clay, 2005b, p. 87). Given the idiosyncratic behavior of young learners, especially those who are struggling, it is likely that each child will have difficulties within *different* areas of literacy learning, and bring *different* strengths or knowledge sources to the tasks.

Recently while working within a school, my Reading Recovery col-

focus on continuous texts, allowing them to use their knowledge and strengths in ever-expanding ways from the very beginning of instruction. While a critical understanding within Reading Recovery, this notion clearly has wider implications within early literacy.

Learning to look at print with an emphasis on serial order

Connected to this idea of continuous text is a second emphasis that seems to be highlighted by Clay—learning to look at print and the critical aspect of directionality and serial order within all aspects of reading and writing. As I work with Darrell, his difficulties reflect a number of the previous discussions, especially the rationale for one-to-one instruction using continuous text. In kindergarten, Darrell had a good teacher and he received extensive phonemic awareness training outside of his classroom, but his difficulties with directionality across lines of print as well as his haphazard approach to the order of letters within words went unnoticed. While the training that developed his knowledge of sounds will benefit him, as evidenced by his scores on Concepts About Print and Text Reading, his knowledge of sounds and their relationship to letters is necessary but insufficient. In order to become a proficient reader and writer, Darrell must read and write continuous text.

As his Reading Recovery teacher, knowing his capabilities as well as his difficulties, I will anticipate what may occur and interrupt ineffective reading behaviors when he reads top to bottom (as if the words on a page are in a list), or in writing, before he

writes *cta* (cat) or *bna* (and) in his story. I will assist him as he learns where to look, how to look, and what to look for. At times, it will be necessary to attend to the details of letters and words in isolation, but this is a brief and temporary detour that will always lead back to the written or read story. Ultimately such interactions will assist Darrell in linking his knowledge of sounds with letter sequences as a way to check the print

As a former special education teacher, I see this vision as having the potential to transform the progress of many more children who are at risk of literacy failure, as educators with varied backgrounds come together to explore *Literacy Lessons*.

(Clay, 2001). As I reflect on my own early teaching as well as observations of other teachers, I suspect that learning to look at print is an area that needed refinement and improved understanding in Reading Recovery instruction while suggesting increased research in related topics such as visual perception and memory.

Individually designed one-to-one instruction

The final implication that I discuss relates back to the case for one-to-one instruction. While continuing to call for individually designed instruction

for struggling readers, with increased emphasis on *designed*, Clay challenges us to again revise and reconsider what is possible, to broaden the safety net for *all* children, including adaptations for those with a wider range of problems. This is not a new challenge proposed by Clay, but within this text, she suggests new directions and procedures for “children diagnosed with diverse problems (as examples, diagnosis of emotional problems, learning disabilities (Clay, 2005b, p. 178), children who are deaf (p. 180), children aged 5 to 9 schooled in another language who need to make accelerated progress in English (p. 182). In my opinion, this is the most far-reaching and visionary aspect of the text. It is important to point out, however, that limiting intervention support for any particular subset of children, such as English language learners, was never Clay’s stance. Clay makes no exceptions when stating that “we must design the best available lessons for the hardest-to-teach children as early as possible” (Clay, 2005a, p. 17). Through greatly expanded sections on working with children who have particular problems, Clay again reminds us of the wider implications of Reading Recovery, calling Reading Recovery professionals, as well as all educators, to recognize the needs of any child who is struggling with literacy. As a former special education teacher, I see this vision as having the potential to transform the progress of many more children who are at risk of literacy failure, as educators with varied backgrounds come together to explore *Literacy Lessons*.

Author's note

This article is an adaptation of an earlier publication (Fullerton, 2006). Several headings and phrases pay homage to the research, writings, and quotes of Marie M. Clay, including *Change Over Time in Children's Literacy Development, By Different Paths to Common Outcomes*, and the articles, "Reading Recovery: The Wider Implications of an Educational Innovation" and "Stirring the Waters Yet Again."

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