The Reverberation of Good Practice: 
Reading Recovery’s Lasting Influence

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Last fall I found myself at the gate in an airport with work to do. I had my laptop as well as my iPhone and my Kindle (electronic book), which I would want later to read on the plane. I opened the Kindle with the intention of downloading a book. At the same time, I powered up my laptop. Soon, I noticed that the Kindle was seriously low on battery; I was advised to turn it off immediately. So, I plugged it into my laptop and it began to suck electricity. Then, I began to check email on the iPhone; I was notified right away by a red gauge that my battery power was low. I hesitated and then made the choice to unplug the Kindle and plug in the phone. These two entities took turns feeding, reminding me of the vampires that are so popular today. I then realized that they were draining the life out of my laptop. I took a deep breath, turned everything off, and took my spare book out of my bag. As I read, my mind wandered to the 25th anniversary of Reading Recovery in North America. When we began, we had no laptops, no cell phones, and no email. Those exotic technological advances were not yet affordable or available to us in Ohio. We could not make calls from our cars or handbags. We used cassette tape recorders and huge, clumsy video cameras. We did fly of course, but working on an airplane actually meant using handwriting. And books were just books.

But in spite of this archaic state of affairs, we knew that when we became involved in Reading Recovery, we were experiencing something fresh, new, and revolutionary. We still are amazed at the farseeing vision of Marie Clay. And, our observations over 25 years indicate that the sound of Reading Recovery has reverberated across the field of literacy education.

So pervasive has been the impact of Reading Recovery that it has, in effect, turned the “ship of literacy education” in a new direction. That influence may take historical perspective to detect; present-day educators, looking from the perspective of their own interests and goals, may not be aware of it. But my prediction is that some time in the future, Reading Recovery will be identified as a turning point. There may be others; often a cluster of innovations signal new directions, but Reading Recovery will be there.

After providing some background, I will identify some areas of influence that I think will be lasting. There may be many more; I’ll discuss seven concepts.

I read Marie’s work as a graduate student at The Ohio State University. Already, before the creation of Reading Recovery, she was looking at literacy learning from a new perspective. A book called Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behavior (Clay, 1972) was having an impact and researchers were following and appreciating her early research on the literacy learning of 100 young children. (Clay received the NCTE Distinguished Researcher Award for this work.) What was new? She looked in great detail at young children’s behavior while they were learning to read. She noticed what high-progress children were doing and what low-progress children were finding difficult to do. She uncovered the powerful window on learning
that error behavior could provide. At about the same time, on this side of the world, Ken and Yetta Goodman were looking at the same behaviors in older children and formulating a new theory of the reading process (Goodman, 1968; Goodman & Goodman, 1979). The field of literacy education began to realize the importance of error behavior as well as how teachers could use this method of inquiry to learn about their pupils.

It was evident that Clay was a careful and cautious researcher. She investigated thoroughly before making statements about learning. Her publications were crafted, complex, and slow in coming (it seemed) but come they did, year after year, and they have tutored a whole generation of researchers and teachers of literacy education. Clay started with assessment in response to teachers who requested tools for identifying what children knew about reading and writing; this information would be invaluable to them as a foundation for making instructional decisions. She carefully designed systematic ways of collecting observational data that would inform teaching.

Even before the advent of Reading Recovery, some teachers in the United States began to use some of Clay’s assessments such as Concepts About Print (originally published in The Early Detection of Reading Difficulties: A Diagnostic Survey, 1979). As they closely observed children’s behaviors, they noticed much more than they had before. They found evidence of learning in behaviors they had formerly considered signs of weakness; they learned to look for strengths; and they became more expert in their practice. They were acquiring some powerful tools.

On both sides of the world, teachers could identify children who were confused and were struggling as they began to learn to read. New Zealand teachers again turned to Clay asking, “We now can identify children who are already having difficulty. How can we prevent their becoming struggling readers?” Clay responded with the development of Reading Recovery as early intervention for young children who were not engaging with the reading/writing process by the age of six. (Remember that in New Zealand, children enter school on their fifth birthday.) In this process, Clay drew on her own research, her experiences as an educator of children, including special education students, and her training and practice as a developmental child psychologist.

One of the characteristics of Marie Clay was that when interested in an area of research, she spent a great deal of time examining all of the literature—both historical and current—that pertained to the topic. She did not simply create Reading Recovery as an intervention framework “on the spot.” Reading Recovery has deep roots in a wide range of research and it is superbly grounded in a theory of reading as a complex process. Every element of Reading Recovery is consistent with this theoretical stance; as a result, components work together smoothly and children receive a coherent message about what reading is.

In construction, Reading Recovery was subjected to intense trial and scrutiny. A bevy of research-based practices were tried; many were discarded; others were built into the powerful framework detailed today in Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals (Clay, 2005). Clay knew that an early intervention tutoring system...
had to be extremely accelerative, economical in implementation, precise in teaching (with no wasted effort), and engaging and successful for children. It had to be applied at the right time in a child’s life by a highly skilled professional.

And that lead to the second brilliant development — a unique form of professional development for the teachers who work with the most-struggling readers. Coming out of her formative research, Clay recognized the power of professionals talking with each other as they observed teaching and learning. The behind-the-glass teaching that will be familiar to every Reading Recovery teacher and teacher leader (tutor in New Zealand) made a watershed difference for over 20,000 teachers. Through this "talking while observing process," teachers act on their tentative theories of literacy learning, constantly adding to and revising their knowledge. As a result, they develop the habit of noticing significant behavior and acting on their tentative theory as they interact with children. The learning process for teachers supports their ability to make effective instructional moves "moment-to-moment" as they engage in conversation with students.

From these beginnings, Reading Recovery was tested in New Zealand with startling results that lead to the implementation of a national program. It is established today in most New Zealand schools. Only 3 years later, it crossed the waters to Australia and then to the United States and Canada. Marie Clay and Barbara Watson (national director of Reading Recovery in New Zealand) carefully nurtured the new implementations in very different educational systems. Without letting go of what was essential, adjustments were made so that Reading Recovery could thrive and serve children in these diverse settings. Again, the results were remarkable (see Changing Futures: The Influence of Reading Recovery in the United States, [Schmitt, Askew, Fountas, Lyons, & Pinnell, 2005]; also see www.ies.ed.gov).

Today, Reading Recovery has served nearly 2 million children in the United States, and many more worldwide. Other articles in this issue will detail the accomplishments of Reading Recovery in terms of its impact on children. My goal here is to discuss the learning that has reverberated through the educational community — making a difference for many children and teachers. Here are some understandings that will be lasting, whatever the future of Reading Recovery as a program may be.

**Lasting Understanding #1: Early Intervention**

When I see second-, third-, fourth-grade, or even older children struggling in reading, I inevitably think, “If only they could have had Reading Recovery.” It’s not that Reading Recovery “works” for every child. Nothing can make that claim. And, of course, children need continued excellent instruction even after effective intervention. But, early intervention has the best possible chance for preventing reading failure. Reading Recovery has dramatically demonstrated that if we observe carefully and intervene early—before the child has a chance to feel the full weight of failure—we can create competence and success that can last a lifetime.

Reading Recovery meets children at the level of instruction they need. In a short time (as opposed to years of remediation), they can become successful readers, able to benefit from good classroom instruction. At first grade, intervention can be short — just 30 minutes a day for a maximum of 20 weeks (a maximum of 100 lessons, but probably fewer because of short weeks). That’s only about 50 hours of instruction! The impact of those 80 to 100 lessons is huge in the life of the child. Where often educators “waited” and retained children until about Grade 3, Reading Recovery brought early intervention into the forefront of literacy education.

**Lasting Understanding #2: Accelerated Progress**

The implementation of Reading Recovery leads us to the astonishing realization that the most-struggling readers can make accelerated progress and catch up to their grade-level peers. Prior to Reading Recovery, remedial readers made progress, but less than their peers, and fell farther and farther behind. A year’s progress was seen to be excellent; and many schools received awards for that achievement; yet, those children who were behind could never catch up. Year after year they remained in resource reading and stayed at the bottom of the class.

Reading Recovery provided a demonstration that could not be denied. Struggling children were succeeding every day in their one-to-one lessons and they were changing every day. Just the other day, a veteran classroom teacher detailed to me the changes she saw year after year as Reading Recovery children participated in this extra instruction, becoming full participants in classroom literacy activities and feeling and showing their competence and
newly found confidence. It raised the bar — if accelerated progress is possible, then we must make it happen. Today, many school districts call for such acceleration and are seeking “quick fixes” to make it happen. A large amount of education dollars are spent in this way. But acceleration cannot be achieved by materials or technology. The skilled moves of a highly trained teacher are needed.

**Lasting Understanding #3: Reading and Writing as Complex Processes**

Many researchers and theorists have come up with descriptions of the reading process. Clay was knowledgeable about the contributions of scholars and deeply considered their work. From her studies of the research of others as well as her own observations and research, she developed her theory of literacy as complex processes that are developed over time. It is interesting that scholars (in different ways) have described reading and writing as complex; yet, when it comes to practice, educators (and even some of those same scholars) try to make it simple in the creation of materials and the design of instruction. Then, teachers implement programs in a way that does not take into account the complexity of an authentic reading process.

Clay took a different approach when she created Reading Recovery, and that is equally true of the way her theory should be interpreted as a foundation for classroom instruction. Watching Reading Recovery lessons can only bring the observer to conclude that the teacher and child are engaging in the authentic acts of reading and writing in all their complexity. The child is learning what reading “feels like” and what it is for. Scaffolded by the teacher’s actions (based on keen observation), the student is able to perform competently, using the eyes and mind in a way that maintains the meaning while deriving information from the print.

The perception of reading as complex behavior is coming into its own and I believe Clay’s contributions have made at least a part of the difference. Recently, the Governing Board of the National Assessment of Educational Progress released the framework for the 2009 NAEP Reading Assessment. Three definitions of reading influenced the framework (all cited in National Assessment Governing Board, 2008, p. 5):

1. A report sponsored by the RAND Study Group under the auspices of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education provided this definition: “Reading comprehension [is] the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. It consists of three elements: the reader, the text, and the activity or purpose for reading (Reading for Understanding: Toward an R&D Program in Reading Comprehension, RAND Reading Study Group, 2002, p. 11).

2. A second definition comes from Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS): “The ability to understand and use those written forms required by society and/or valued by the individual. Young readers can construct meaning from a variety of texts. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers, and for enjoyment” (Campbell, Kelly, Mullis, Martin, & Sainsbury, 2001, p. 3).

3. The third comes from The Programme for Student Assessment (PISA), an international effort to assess what 15-year-old students know and can do. Their definition is: “Understanding, using, and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2000, p. 18).

All three definitions stress that reading is an active, complex, and multidimensional process undertaken for many different purposes” (National Assessment Governing Board, 2008, p. 6). And, that is what Reading Recovery teachers learn during their initial year of training; throughout their careers in Reading Recovery, they continue to add to their understanding.
Lasting Understanding #4: The Dance of Instruction—Observation and Powerful Teaching Moves

As mentioned earlier, when teachers were introduced to Clay’s observation tools, they became better “noticers” of behavior. Today, An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 1993) becomes a powerful tool for every teacher who learns its use. But all of us have learned that our first experiences in using this tool, as exciting as they may be, are only the beginning of learning the power of observation. The survey helps us gather finely detailed information about young children’s understandings (as revealed in their behaviors). Then, instruction can start.

We soon find, however, that the demands of observation are even greater every moment that we teach a child. If you watch a Reading Recovery lesson with an experienced teacher, you will see a smooth coordination of movements. The teacher is watching the child very closely, sometimes recording behaviors, and either storing the information for later use or interacting in spare, concise, but powerful ways to scaffold the child’s learning. This interrelationship between observation and teaching decisions is the essence of teaching. It is the reason why effective teachers can sometimes make even poor materials or instructional schemes work. Teachers know how to engage children in powerful learning conversations.

Reading Recovery has been awarded the “gold standard” for effectiveness (see www.ies.ed.gov). That designation is gratifying but is based only on selected studies that met a narrow criterion. Readers of this report may assume that Reading Recovery is an excellent intervention without recognizing what really makes it work. There is a framework of effective practices that are essential, but the teaching makes the difference, as many investigations have probed the powerful teaching in Reading Recovery and drawn implications for classroom and other intervention teaching.

Lasting Understanding #5: Instruction as Conversation

We can attribute to Clay the concept of teaching as conversation—“Teaching then can be likened to a conversation in which you listen to the speaker carefully before you reply” (1988, p. 6). Conversation permeates the assessments that Clay has designed, and it delivers the scaffold for the learning in Reading Recovery lessons. Clay has made us conscious of the power of our language as teachers. We know we have to phrase our prompts, comments, and questions carefully and clearly. We have learned to be “spare” in our language so that we do not interfere with the child’s thinking. We have learned to draw children out to express their thinking about texts in a way that extends comprehension as well as acting as a foundation for writing. Prior to Reading Recovery, reading lessons often consisted of a series of questions which asked the learner to prove literal understanding. The classic (a) teacher question; (b) student answer; (c) teacher confirmation, followed by another teacher question is an unconscious ritual that exists in many classrooms today. But Reading Recovery teachers learned that a real conversation that probes the child’s thinking and even leads to sharing of ideas is the best support for comprehension. Now, classroom teachers are more conscious of creating exciting conversations with and among their students. Many educators now talk about teaching as conversation instead of interrogation.

Lasting Understanding #6: Continual Learning for Literacy Teachers

I believe that the best investment a school district, a state education agency, or the federal government can make is in professional development. Yet, there are many ideas about what professional development should be. In the past, professional development usually meant a one-day inservice session in which an expert told teachers what to do. The best-received inservices were highly practical including “tips for teaching” and “make-it and take-it workshops.” That is understandable when we consider the teacher’s busy day as well as the lack of ongoing professional development in general.

Reading Recovery training emerged on the scene as something different. In the U.S., administrators and teachers were incredulous. We got questions like, “Do you mean a year of training—once a week or every 2 weeks—is needed? And, do you really mean it goes on after that?” It was very hard to convince educators that this level of training would be essential. After a few years of Reading Recovery implementation, however, the word began to spread. The Reading Recovery experience made a difference in the professional lives of teachers. They became skilled observers and teachers who were highly
articulate in talking about their work. The experience was simultaneously very practical and highly theoretical. They taught their own students behind the one-way glass while their peers discussed what they saw. The idea was not critique but mutual inquiry. In a way, every Reading Recovery teacher was catapulted into the stance of scientific study. I know very few educators who would not describe Reading Recovery training as the most-significant learning experience in their careers. Reading Recovery educators have carried this idea of ongoing professional development into other arenas. Almost weekly, I meet literacy coaches and administrators who mention their Reading Recovery training as foundational to their actions in their current jobs. The strong professional development focus of Reading Recovery made the world of literacy education sit up and take notice of teacher learning.

Lasting Understanding #7: Systemic Intervention
Prior to Reading Recovery, districts tended to purchase a program, provide a little inservice education, and expect implementation. When Reading Recovery was first implemented in Ohio, many veteran teachers held back. They had seen new programs come and go with regularity. Some were effective and some were not, but most seldom lasted more than a few years. Why? Because no one paid attention to the quality of implementation. I often found myself confronting programs that were labeled in new ways but were almost identical to those scrapped 5 or 6 years ago. We never gathered the data to understand the circumstances under which a new program did or did not work.

Reading Recovery was different. There was a careful, deliberately designed system implementation that included the professional development first of teacher leaders (who would teach the teachers), accompanied by a well-designed facility that included the one-way glass. Teacher leaders were carefully prepared to train teachers and expectations both for the initial year and for ongoing professional development were laid out. Teaching spaces and timetables were defined as well as expectations for the reporting of data. In the “mother” computer at Ohio State, detailed information is stored on every Reading Recovery child in the United States who has been served over the last quarter of a century. Teacher leaders use these data to improve instruction and implementation in their districts. Reading Recovery works well in all kinds of settings — urban, rural, and suburban. It has huge positive impact on English language learners. We know this from the data. This consistent attention to results as well as guidelines for good implementation allowed educators to create the characteristics that allow early intervention to succeed.

Conclusion
Reading Recovery is widespread across the world. In some places it is growing exponentially; in others, it has been superseded by other agendas or fallen victim to severe cuts in funding sources. But, in a way, it is not so important how widespread Reading Recovery becomes or how it is regarded. In fact, if someone wanted to end the influence of Reading Recovery, it’s too late. Reading Recovery has already had a profound influence on literacy education. Through the voice of teachers, Clay’s thinking has reverberated across the world.

The Charles A. Dana Award was an early recognition that Clay’s achievements were changing the landscape in education in the United States. Presented in 1992, the award recognized Marie’s “pioneering achievements” in education. Her research, along with the example of Reading Recovery, has informed the thinking of a generation of teachers and researchers. Most profoundly, her work has enabled struggling young readers to make accelerated progress, illustrating that every child has the potential to become literate, with all that implies for the future. As a result,

- Teachers have powerful tools to help them observe and analyze the reading and writing behaviors of children.
- Early intervention and prevention efforts are valued and implemented.
• Children’s strengths are noticed and recognized as the avenue for helping them learn more.

• Teachers engage in collegial dialogue that helps them solve problems relative to the children they teach.

• Professional communities of learning are created so that teachers become lifelong learners.

• Even the lowest achievers in reading are seen as learners with great potential.

Beyond the specifics of Reading Recovery’s contributions, I would say this — Reading Recovery has shown us what is possible. Teachers can become highly expert. Children—even those who are struggling—can become highly proficient readers. If we can do it, then we must do it. And, that is the challenge for the future.

References
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