

Implementation: A Necessary Concept for Success

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When you ask most educational administrators about the tenure of programs in their systems, whether public or private, the response is, “Here today, gone tomorrow!” Education is known for its fads and swinging pendulums. The next question is: How has Reading Recovery managed to help struggling readers as well as train thousands of teachers and teacher leaders for 25 years in the United States and even longer in New Zealand?

I would like to propose that two neglected features of Reading Recovery may well be part of the answer to the longevity of the intervention: the systemic nature of the intervention and the important, often misunderstood and/or overlooked, concept of “implementation” that provides guidelines to move this dynamic innovation into a wide variety of systems across countries. Both features were built into the original design. As an ongoing challenge for us all to continue to remember, Clay often reminded us:

In an effective intervention the interdependence of variables demands a systemic (implementation) plan, for an innovation cannot move into an education system merely on the merits of what it can do for children. [Parenthesis added by author.] (Clay, 2009, p. 228)

Once Clay had designed the measures that eventually became *An Observation Survey of Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 2002, 2006), knew that she could monitor and evaluate change over time in children’s literacy development, and developed her grounded theory of how young children learn to read and write continuous text, she was faced with a system problem in New Zealand (and eventually in other international systems): namely, how to reduce the number of struggling readers/writers and the cost of these children to the system. Clay often wore a pendant designed by Neil Hanna made of New Zealand greenstone that reminded her of the three concentric circles that symbolized the “whole” answer to this question — the characteristics of Reading Recovery.

Most literacy professionals are familiar with the innermost circle of the pendant; the intervention (Clay, 2005) based on grounded theory (Clay, 2001) was developed to provide a series of lessons to the lowest-achieving first graders in a short period of time. It allows a high percentage of children to learn to read and write continuous texts strategically and identifies a very small percentage as needing further service, a second positive outcome. Educators also are familiar with the second inner circle, the three tiered, differentiated, staff development model that provides initial and ongoing professional development for Read-

ing Recovery teachers, tutors/teacher leaders, and trainers of teacher leaders, another hallmark of Reading Recovery.

I would like to propose that the third circle, namely the need for a systemic plan of implementation in order to introduce Reading Recovery as an innovation into a system and sustain its dissemination and expansion, is a critical set of factors that have allowed Reading Recovery to thrive over the years. Three questions lay behind Clay’s thinking:

1. Can this education system put this intervention in place?
2. Can teachers be trained to teach children and achieve change before asking the question from the inner circle?
3. What theoretical assumptions do the data on children’s learning support or challenge?

(Clay, 2009, p. 230)

Most literacy researchers have focused for many years on the third question. Currently new energy and resources are being devoted to the second question, the quality of teaching. But very few are addressing the first question concerning implementation. Educators involved in mounting major literacy reform efforts (B. Taylor and T. Raphael, personal communication, 2005) will tell you that Clay was

ahead of her time in pointing out this critical variable and that it may be the most difficult to carry out. Even with Clay's writings about implementation, the paradox is that few literacy academics bother to design implementation guidelines to support their innovations.

What are some of the key characteristics of the systemic nature and resulting implementation guidelines that have contributed to Reading Recovery's long success? Clay searched the organizational literature for concepts that would assist her in the design of Reading Recovery's implementation plan. Reading Recovery, with its emphasis on prevention, went against prevailing organizing concepts of the existing educational system in New Zealand at that time (and encountered in other countries). These concepts included "wait until the child fails," "wait until the child is ready to..." beliefs about children's ability to learn, and beliefs about the roles of professionals.

Reading Recovery professionals needed to understand that educational systems maintain their beliefs, their embedded cultural and societal values, and their organizational rules and regulations in a kind of tenuous balance, and that educational systems are most often resistant to change. Clay designed ways that would allow the system to modify itself. Dalin (1978) pointed her to the need for "...a pedagogical plan to support the innovation so that the system learns what is required and how to get it into place" (Clay, 2009). Her grounded theory and field research on Reading Recovery as well as ongoing data collection assisted in providing the "pedagogical plan" and how to modify it if necessary (Wilson &

Daviss, 1994). As she worked across countries, she also realized that various conflicts with each system would be ongoing and different; they would also change with the different phases of implementation (Clay, 2009). Dalin argued for a clear statement of goals and benefits and identified the need to create stronger institutional linkages. An additional recommendation was to build internal coherence within the innovation and external cohesion between the innovation and the receiving system. These efforts must contribute to the system, be cost effective, and successful with students and teachers. Clay concluded:

...When an innovation is taken over by another education system from the one in which it originated, it must allow for a problem-solving period while the receiving system makes its adaptations. The art in the change process is that changes should not distort or diminish its payoff and any changes made should be explicitly referred to theories of what is occurring. Compromise and unthinking adaptations can readily change the impact of the innovation and reduce its capacity to deliver effective results. (Clay, 2009, p. 228–229)

Clay saw a parallel learning process at the individual and system levels in taking on, understanding and implementing Reading Recovery. The *Standards and Guidelines of Reading Recovery in the United States* (2008) provide helpful information about the implementation plan for system administrators and Reading Recovery professionals.

Change also occurs at the level of teacher and tutor/teacher leader training as they learn to put into practice the tentative, flexible hypothesis testing and problem solving required in teaching individual children, and in implementing Reading Recovery in their schools and districts. Drawing on Goodlad (1977), Clay utilized two key concepts to support successful implementation in her design: (a) a network of peers to support the delivery of information and maintain a problem-solving orientation, and (b) the role of the tutor/teacher leader as a "redirecting" system. The tutors/teacher leaders, aware of the history of Reading Recovery and the whole operation in their systems, function as leaders of the implementation in the system by

- providing initial training of teachers and continuing to assist them in improving their teaching;
- explaining Reading Recovery to those who need to know;
- responding to criticism from both inside the system and from the outside world at large;
- presenting the rationales behind the standards and guidelines without becoming rigid, but maintaining the major principles needed for effectiveness;
- collecting, analyzing, reporting and using data to maintain and improve all aspects of implementation; and
- communicating with significant stakeholders within their schools and districts and with the public to maintain the intervention.

It is no wonder that they need a year of training to understand and learn how to put this knowledge into practice. Reading Recovery teachers, tutors/teacher leaders, and trainers who develop different areas of expertise and skill provide the network of peers to problem solve.

I would like to suggest that trainers of tutors/teacher leaders are another facet of a redirecting system. Their role in the U.S. is embedded in university settings with research capability, where they are responsible for monitoring all data collected in their Reading Recovery training sites, developing problem-solving strategies when needed, conducting research to answer questions that arise, and advocating at a policy level. They must not only be grounded in Clay's research and practice but also in oral language and literacy development, literacy instruction, teacher education and professional development, and change/implementation research by others. They play a major role in promoting quality control over initial and continuing professional development and implementation. Given the hierarchical nature of districts in the U.S., trainers also often need to communicate with district and school-level administrators to support the teacher leaders in their role.

In summary, while there is no doubt that Clay's theory, instructional guidelines, professional development model, and data collection system are the necessary foundation of Reading Recovery, the often misunderstood implementation plan that supports the systemic nature of the intervention as it moves into a district or school has been and continues to be critical to the success and longevity of this intervention. As Clay herself

pointed out, implementation may be one of the greatest challenges Reading Recovery professionals at all levels face as they work to disseminate and expand Reading Recovery.

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