

A Standard Boat in Turbulent Rivers

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Editor's note: The following article is based on the keynote address delivered by Billie Askew at the 2011 Teacher Leader Institute.

Readers may view this article as a trip down memory lane or a history lesson. Either way, we all will be reminded of the impact of Reading Recovery on literacy teaching and learning in the United States across the last 28 years.

Rewind to 1984. Reading Recovery migrated from New Zealand to the United States via The Ohio State University — with the modest expectation that some first graders in Columbus, OH, would become better readers and writers. Little could this first group of Ohio State faculty members and Columbus teachers imagine the significance of the journey they began in 1984 — and the influence it would have on literacy education in this country.

Education innovations are not expected to transplant readily to other education systems with varying contexts and cultures. So developer Marie Clay likened the transfer of Reading Recovery from New Zealand to other countries to “a standard boat tossed into several turbulent rivers and struggling to master the rapids and stay afloat in each of them” (2009a, p. 222).

In a 1991 publication, Clay shared her surprises when education system policies conflicted with assumptions that underlie Reading Recovery.

In this article, I share my observations, beginning in the 1980s, of how Reading Recovery's standard boat negotiated the rapids and stayed afloat in the United States and, in the process, how Reading Recovery may have rocked other boats in the culture and pedagogy of literacy in this country.

Negotiating Turbulent Waters

Reading Recovery, reflecting the careful research and literacy theory of Marie Clay, created new and often revolutionary conversations among educators and across disciplines and paradigms. It appeared that this new intervention was *stirring the waters* as educators, academics, and research-

ers grappled with the implications of this unprecedented innovation (see Gaffney & Askew, 1999).

Rethinking developmental learning

In the 1980s in the U.S., there was a pervasive notion that children follow a developmental sequence for learning. A common question was “What do children have to know when they come to school?” Clay argued that was not a valid question because individual differences, contexts, learning opportunities, and culture create the inevitability of different knowledge. Instead, she said that valid questions for teachers would be “What does this child already control?” “What can this child do?” “How does he or she understand the task?” (see Clay, 1998, pp. 94–95).



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Clay's seminal article, "Developmental Learning Puzzles Me" (Clay, 1998) suggests that teachers "must go to where the learner is and take him or her somewhere else" (p. 95). There is no advantage in waiting for behaviors to unfold. Rather, each child arrives at school with unique pools of knowledge that the astute, noticing teacher identifies and uses to build new competencies and new understandings.

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When teachers address individual differences, children will take different paths to similar outcomes. Rather than a map of sequence through which children should pass, the crucial factor is the body of knowledge in the heads of teachers that guides their interactions with students. Children's learning, then, depends on the tentativeness and reflective practice of their teachers. This view of learning challenged concepts of maturation and readiness that had been used to the disadvantage of learners (Clay, 1991).

Interacting with special educators

In those early years, Reading Recovery provided a response to intervention (RTI) before the concept was

labeled and commonly accepted (Vellutino, 2010). An article by Clay (1987) was a precursor to subsequent decisions about identifying children as learning disabled.

But in 1984, there was little option other than waiting for a child to fail before an ultimate identification for services. With an emphasis on *prevention* rather than *remediation*, some special education colleagues likely wondered if Reading Recovery was a threat or an opportunity. With today's emphasis on providing an intensive early intervention prior to identification for learning disabilities, it is hoped that any restless waters have been calmed and the two fields now partner to support children.

Creating a book revolution

In the mid-1980s in the U.S., basal readers and materials focusing on prescriptive and single factors were prevalent. First graders often went lockstep through readiness materials and then through each of the first-grade readers — with few provisions for facing difficulties and challenges. Little books leveled according to gradients of difficulty were all but unknown to teachers, and availability was extremely limited.

Classroom teachers often approached Reading Recovery teachers to learn how to access these books that even their lowest achievers were able to read — and to enjoy! Although 'little books' were the norm in countries like New Zealand at the time, the demand in the United States changed the publishing industry.

Tussling with unconventional research

Many researchers were challenged by Clay's incredible goal: to explore the extent to which it was possible to

undercut reading and writing failure in an education system by introducing early intervention. To answer her important question called for an unconventional research design that researchers found problematic: (a) varying lengths of treatment, (b) comparing the lowest achievers with the age cohort in the school, and (c) using 'relative' criteria for selecting children for treatment (see Clay, 2009b, pp. 35–36).

Clay's methodology was revolutionary and opened research possibilities to learn more about young learners and how to prevent failure at the onset of instruction. She gave us a whole new definition for the word inquiry! Her world and her work were tied to questions about what matters (Askew, 2008). She asked questions that have altered understandings of early literacy learning around the world. An overarching question in all of her work was, "What is possible . . .?" In her own words, Marie told us

I live in a perpetual state of enquiry, finding new questions to ask, then moving on. I do not have 'a position' or a safe haven where what is 'right' exists. Pragmatism precludes idealism. I search for questions which need answers. What exists in the real world? And how well do our theories explain what exists? (Clay, 2001, p. 3)

A few examples of the many questions she asked about emergent literacy are cited below (see Askew, 2008).

- How early could one see the process of learning to read moving off course?
- What do proficient young readers do as they problem

solve increasingly difficult texts? What evidence do we have of sequential changes in their proficiency?

- What would have to change to have all children readers and writers with average for age competencies by age 9 or 10 years?
- How do acts of processing change over time during literacy acquisition?
- What is the relationship of early writing to early reading?
- What is possible when we change the design and delivery of traditional education for the children that teachers find hard to teach?
- What enables Reading Recovery to work in educational settings internationally?

Take time to consider the importance of each question — and the significance of the potential answers.

Discovering new assessment tools

In the mid-1980s, assessment of beginning readers was basically limited to ‘readiness’ tests or standardized group measures that sampled knowledge of selected items. We knew that standardized tests were not reliable for low-scoring children at the onset of instruction. Imagine our surprise when introduced to Clay’s tools for observing and recording a child’s *first* steps into reading and writing, known as the Diagnostic Survey in the 1980s (see Clay, 1979).

The tasks of *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 1993, 2002, 2005) provided authentic and practical ways of assessing the literacy progress of young readers and

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writers. For the first time, schools across the United States had access to an instrument to assess literacy behaviors of young children and to record change in those behaviors over time. The Observation Survey has since received the highest possible ratings for scientific rigor from the National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI) as a screening tool that is valid, reliable, and evidence-based.

The widespread use of running records as a tool for observing text processing behaviors has altered our understandings of the reading process and of individual learners. We are all beneficiaries of Clay’s observational methodology that has altered our study of literacy learning of beginners.

Grappling with competing paradigms

Interestingly, critics from varying paradigms of literacy instruction tried to attach ‘labels’ to Reading Recovery. Some renewed the debate on code-based vs. meaning-based instruction by labeling Reading Recovery as whole language, while others argued that too much emphasis was placed on letters and words.

Such claims revealed a basic misunderstanding about what the intervention is. Reading Recovery is not defined as whole language, code-based, or as any ‘approach’ to literacy

instruction. Instead, Reading Recovery is based on a complex theory in which instruction supports each learner in constructing a literacy processing system that involves the use of all knowledge sources (meaning, language structure, words and word structure, letters, features of letters, and sounds of letters).

It took time to define what Reading Recovery is — and is not. We had to communicate that Reading Recovery is not an approach to literacy instruction but is a short-term, effective early literacy intervention for the lowest-achieving first graders. It is supplementary to any good classroom literacy program. Lessons with a knowledgeable teacher are individually designed and individually delivered to meet the unique literacy needs of each child.

Negotiating the political waters

Whoever would have thought that Reading Recovery, an effective literacy intervention for young children, would have to negotiate turbulent political waters? Yet during the years of Reading First, Reading Recovery was targeted and maligned to such an extent that the Reading Recovery Council of North America (RRCNA) requested an investigation by the United States Department of Education (USDE) Office of the Inspector General. Findings revealed

conflicts of interest and bias toward Reading Recovery and other interventions. The Council succeeded in exposing incorrect and flawed claims about Reading Recovery.

Subsequently, Reading Recovery received high effectiveness ratings from the USDE's What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) and has been awarded a federal scale-up grant to provide Reading Recovery to more children based on its evidence of effectiveness. Strong effect sizes for Reading Recovery were reported by the National Center for Intensive Instruction (NCII).

Pioneering unconventional professional development

When Reading Recovery was introduced in the United States in the mid-1980s, the accompanying professional development model was a far cry from the traditional 1-day in-service model. How could schools possibly implement Reading Recovery's comprehensive framework for professional development?

Administrators and teachers quickly recognized that Reading Recovery professional development represented an intensive and ongoing investment in the teachers who work with children having the greatest difficulty learning to read and write. We all knew that no packaged program could substitute for an informed teacher's design and delivery of individual lessons for each child. Reading Recovery responded by enabling teachers to analyze a student's strengths and needs, select appropriate procedures, make teaching decisions on the run, and use the results to inform subsequent teaching moves. We learned that this learning takes time, ongoing study, collaboration, and support.

Although unconventional at the time, criticism of the professional development in Reading Recovery is exceptionally rare. The model incorporates characteristics of sound professional learning for teachers (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Pinnell, 1994). The full academic year of initial professional development is followed in subsequent years by ongoing development sessions. Training consistently

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integrates theory and practice. All teachers teach lessons behind a one-way mirror, enabling colleagues to observe, discuss, and reflect on teaching and learning. They learn to analyze and discuss effective teaching and to apply new understandings to their own teaching. What a remarkable investment in teachers!

Challenging the Status Quo

In the 1980s, Reading Recovery challenged the status quo of literacy teaching and learning. We had to question many things we had always done—which was frequently uncomfortable—but always challenging and

exciting. A few of these challenges are briefly offered here.

The notion of prevention

Prior to Reading Recovery's launch in the U.S., most children with reading problems had to wait several years before special instruction was available. But by then, a child was significantly behind his peers and had consistently practiced ineffective behaviors. The gap was too great to make up and there were dire consequences for the child's confidence. Clay (2005) argued that "the most critical time in the life of a reader or writer is a year after instruction has begun" (p. 30) — or after the kindergarten year in the United States.

Although the notion of prevention rather than remediation was widely accepted in the health and medical fields, it was unusual and unsettling in education. In schools that administered 'readiness' tests, the results were not informative and no effective intervention was available for those who needed immediate attention. The struggling students continued to struggle.

But Reading Recovery offered hope for preventing failure. Farsighted educators recognized that because we know that Reading Recovery works, we have a responsibility to make it available in our schools.

The paradox of accelerated learning

At the time Reading Recovery was introduced in the United States, there was a prevalent notion that at-risk children would move slowly — making progress but unlikely to reach the goal of average class performance. No sense of urgency existed, and yet these children were falling farther and farther behind — and quickly.

With Reading Recovery, it seemed a puzzling contradiction that the lowest achievers would have to move faster than their classmates in order to catch up. Skepticism was rampant! Yet, the individually designed and individually delivered intervention did in fact accelerate the rate of progress, defying old beliefs and giving promise to a positive future for these children. Most of us would acknowledge our surprise when we first observed a child begin to work independently and discover new things for himself. What an alternative to the complacency of low expectations!

The roles of teachers and learners

For many of us, Reading Recovery dramatically changed our perspectives of *teaching* and *learning*. Marie

curriculum of competencies?” (Clay, 2001, p. 131). Reading Recovery is a demonstration of such a curriculum — with the focus on an individual child’s existing competencies or strengths. The Reading Recovery teacher is an observer who is responsive to the learner and makes effective decisions, moment by moment, based on the *child’s* responses. The ultimate goal is an independent learner. What a contrast to prescribed curricula and methods designed with no *real* child in mind!

An emphasis on reading and writing connected text

In the 1980s, reading interventions generally excluded attention to writing. But Clay took an alternative view — that the activities of reading and

Recovery was introduced in the 1980s, curricula often encouraged learning letters and words and completing worksheets on discreet skills — all in isolation from the acts of reading and writing. Reading Recovery helped us focus on the child learning to solve problems when reading or writing *continuous* or *connected* text. We discovered that children can learn to monitor their own reading and writing and to flexibly change responses as they search, select, and self-correct — which can only be achieved with massive opportunities to read and write continuous authentic texts.

Targeting the lowest achievers

At the time of Reading Recovery’s entry into American education, there was a prevailing belief that priority should be given to children who might benefit the most and that particular categories of children could be excluded. Once again shaking the status quo, Reading Recovery required that we take in the most-severe problems so as to reduce the number of learners with extreme difficulty in literacy learning. These are the children who will become increasingly confused and are most likely to need extra help; without that help they will remain a concern throughout their school years.

In the early years, some schools wanted to exclude English language learners from Reading Recovery. Yet research has shown that children who are able to understand the tasks of the Observation Survey profit greatly from Reading Recovery lessons. And Reading Recovery serves as an ideal fit for response to intervention (RTI) by providing early identification and early intervention prior to a referral for special education services.

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Clay’s focus on the individual translates to her emphasis on the *learner*. Consider her view of the teaching/learning process: “Acts of reading are acts of construction rather than instruction. Most instruction ... serves to fill out children’s knowledge sources” (Clay, 2001, p. 137). She viewed the learner as actively constructing new ways of problem solving with appropriate support from an observing teacher.

Negating a deficit model of learning, Marie Clay posed a powerful question: “Could we work with a

writing are similar in many ways and affect each other reciprocally (Clay, 2005).

The emphasis on writing in the Reading Recovery lesson confronted the status quo of traditional reading interventions. In Reading Recovery, children write messages every day, requiring them to work up and down the levels of language — message, sentence, word, letter cluster, or letter-sound.

Another challenge to the status quo was the emphasis on reading and writing *real* texts. When Reading

Selecting the lowest literacy achievers who are in a regular first-grade classroom for the first time and not being served by another supplemental literacy program ensures reliability of teacher judgment and takes care of values like children's rights, fairness and equality, and social and linguistic inequalities (Clay, 2009a). Evaluation reports in the United States validated Clay's decision to reach the lowest achievers in their classes. We learned that "all kinds of children with all kinds of difficulties can learn, and can reach average-band performance for their class" (Clay, 1991, p. 60) — defying our previous expectations.

The power of one-to-one teaching

When Reading Recovery was introduced in this country, individual vs. group instruction presented administrators with a dilemma — especially in relation to cost. It seemed that allowing a teacher 30 minutes of one-to-one teaching daily for 12 to 20 weeks was an expensive solution. But it has proved to be economical because for 20 weeks of daily lessons, the teaching is equal to 2 weeks of individual attention — a low price to pay to solve literacy problems (Clay, 2005). After exiting the intervention, most children continue to progress with their peers, yielding a savings in long-term support.

From a practical perspective, each child who is having difficulty will differ from others in what is confusing, in knowledge gaps, and in ways of responding to print. A well-designed individual intervention tailored to each child's needs offers a fast route to catching up and progressing with class peers. In fact, no

other instructional setting (e.g., small group or whole class) can accomplish the documented academic and economic benefits of one-to-one teaching offered by a Reading Recovery teacher.

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modate any and all the variants of individual differences. And when we accommodate those differences with individual lessons, children benefit — making it imperative to maintain this Reading Recovery standard.

The challenge of ongoing performance

Before Reading Recovery's debut in the United States, both practical and research evidence revealed that children generally make progress *during* an intervention, but tend to regress *after* the intervention. Again, initial

skepticism about Reading Recovery's impact reigned. Yet, national data soon demonstrated that children continued to make progress after the intervention. And numerous follow-up studies across the country have shown continued progress in subsequent years. Once again, Reading Recovery upset the status quo of past experience and expectations.

Teaming up

In the beginning, many educators viewed Reading Recovery as just another program — one to try and probably discard in the never-ending rotation of new 'quick fixes.' Reading Recovery teachers, therefore, went about their work in relative isolation. But when the status quo was indeed shaken, it became clear that Reading Recovery needed to be part of a comprehensive effort to prevent literacy failure in schools. Collaboration and commitment led to school team planning in which everyone is responsible for these low-performing children. What a bonus for children and the entire school community!

Implementing in another language

Within a few years, educators and Reading Recovery professionals recognized the need to make this effective intervention available to first graders who were struggling with literacy instruction in Spanish. The redevelopment of Reading Recovery in Spanish, or Descubriendo la Lectura, marked a shift in the status quo. A successful intervention was trialed in Spanish and results were comparable to those in English, extending options for schools and creating a literacy safety net for children learning to read in Spanish.

Mastering the Rapids

While tossing around in turbulent waters, Reading Recovery professionals found ways to calm choppy waters and master unsuspecting rapids. Examples follow.

A revolutionary accountability model

The accountability system imposed by Reading Recovery was itself a revolutionary concept. Since the inception of the intervention in New Zealand, data have been collected and reported for *every* child who has Reading Recovery lessons. Because Reading Recovery was new in the United States, and regarded by some as a passing fancy, the intervention quickly distinguished itself through the power of data.

Beginning in 1984 in the United States, data on every child served and on a random sample of grade-level peers have been reported to the International Data Evaluation Center (formerly the National Data Evaluation Center). Student outcomes from more than 2,000,000 children have been consistently positive across almost three decades of U.S. data. A high percentage of children respond to the intervention, and those who need more help are identified.

Reading Recovery has set the standard for accountability. In addition to publicly reporting performance data for all children served, process data are collected to inform stakeholders about issues related to teaching and implementation decisions.

In Reading Recovery, accountability is also a standard at the teacher-child level. Daily and weekly records not only guide subsequent teaching decisions, but also invite others to check on a child's progress and to work collaboratively with the teacher on the child's behalf. The framework for monitoring progress is an exemplar for interventions.

A compelling research base

In 1984, Reading Recovery's research base was centered in New Zealand. At the time, no one could imagine the strong and varied research efforts that would probe the practices and outcomes of Reading Recovery around the world. In the United States, the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), a branch of the United States Department of Education (USDE) and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), confirmed that Reading Recovery is an effective intervention based on scientific evidence.

The WWC found that Reading Recovery has 'positive' or 'potentially positive' effects across all four domains evaluated: alphabets, fluency, comprehension, and general achievement. Reading Recovery ranks number one in general reading achievement. The report, last updated in 2008, includes an improvement index to reflect the strength of the Reading Recovery intervention. The improvement index scores for Reading Recovery students show large and impressive effect sizes.

When the scientific evidence is considered, Reading Recovery has the largest effect size of any beginning reading intervention. Very few interventions reviewed by the WWC have the same degree of extensive evidence



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supporting its effectiveness. Compelling scientific evidence that Reading Recovery is effective with the lowest literacy achievers ensures confidence to decision makers.

A model for scaling up

When Reading Recovery began with 14 teachers in Columbus, OH, no one could foresee the rapid growth and expansion across the United States. Because of the attention given to implementation issues by Marie Clay, Reading Recovery became a model for 'scaling up.' With standards governed by a trademark held by The Ohio State University, Reading Recovery had a roadmap that ensured fidelity of implementation wherever it was adopted.

Recognized as an effective intervention, Reading Recovery received a USDE i3 scale-up grant awarded to interventions with proven records. The grant was awarded in October 2010 to The Ohio State University and involves 19 universities with the goal of training 3,700 teachers to reach more struggling readers and writers in first grade. Because of Reading Recovery's implementation framework, it is recognized as a model for scaling up. (See page 37 for an update on i3 progress.)

A network of support

In the mid-1980s, Reading Recovery in the United States was supported by university trainers at The Ohio State University. As districts around the country began adopting the intervention, it became clear that—as amazing as they were—Gay Su Pinnell, Carol Lyons, and Diane DeFord would need a wider network of support.

As we continue our Reading Recovery journey, we know there will be times that challenges may affect our standard boat. Sometimes the tide will turn, and it's possible that something unexpected will take the wind out of our sails. But we must be committed to learn the ropes, take the helm, and get all hands on deck to be sure we reach our destination.

University training centers (UTCs) were established around the country to train Reading Recovery teacher leaders and support implementation in sites in their regional networks. This structured network ensures professional support and technical assistance to schools and districts implementing Reading Recovery.

In the early 1990s, Reading Recovery professionals recognized the need for a professional organization to support the mission of Reading Recovery. A small group of trainers and supporters wrote personal checks to initiate the process. From that initial commitment, the Reading Recovery Council of North America has grown into a major force in its advocacy for Reading Recovery.

These networks ensure internal and external cohesion essential to successful innovations, making successful navigation for the future of Reading Recovery a reality.

Staying Afloat

Over the past 28 years, our standard boat has been tossed around and we have negotiated some rapids. The waters may be more tranquil now, but waters never remain calm. This is no time for complacency. In order to stay afloat, we must accept ongoing and new challenges.

Marie Clay often used sailing as a metaphor for her work. She compared her academic journey to a poem about the discovery of New Zealand — sharing that she sailed in new directions, into nameless waters, along uncharted routes, not knowing what lay ahead. She took stock of probabilities about the unknown, preparing for likely and unlikely situations as she sailed into the nameless waters of her world (Clay, 2004).

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I invite you to consider your own responsibilities for navigating the future. Then make a commitment to a safe passage for the children who depend on you!

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