

# Marie Clay's Perspective on Preschool Literacy: Wisdom, Caution, Delight

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Marie Clay's profound contributions to our understandings and practices include her literacy processing theory; a transformative model of literacy acquisition; observational tools to document a child's strengths, instructional needs, and progress; and development of an individual intervention to allow children demonstrating confusion with early literacy acquisition to recover normal trajectories in reading and writing development. As she has explained (Clay, 2001), her research and many questions were driven by her grounding in developmental psychology. To clarify, this means that as a child psychologist, she focused on describing literacy development by documenting change over time in young learners' literacy behaviors; in seeking explanations of observed behaviors; and in exploring alternative, theoretically based explanations of her research findings, or discoveries. And, this has no relationship to developmental learning that is characterized by specific, learning sequences that are assumed necessary for all children to follow in order to become successful readers and writers.

In regard to such a developmental view, i.e., a specific sequence in the acquisition of early literacy, Clay's research confirms that children construct complex literacy processing systems for both reading and writing in multifaceted ways (Clay, 2001). Therefore, children's individual records of literacy growth are unique stories with no indication of

commonly shared developmental sequences. Learners take different paths to acquiring proficient reading and writing behaviors (Clay, 1998, 2001), and their divergent trajectories start during their preschool years.

Clay's perspectives on preschool literacy are presented in many of her publications (Clay, 1991, 1998, 2001) as well as in a series of texts written

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for parents, caregivers, and teachers of preschool and kindergarten children. These texts, identified below, heighten awareness of the complexities of early literacy acquisition and the amazing accomplishments possible for young learners when they are given opportunities to pursue their natural curiosities about language, reading, and writing. Of course, adults play an important supporting role, and in these texts Clay shares

her perspectives on the rich and beneficial ways adults can respond to very young children eagerly launching their journeys to lifelong literacy.

Children's preschool experiences impact their performance in school and beginning reading/writing instruction, and among the most-valuable activities for young learners are opportunities to extend oral language development, to listen to stories and explore books and print, and to explore writing with any writing tools and paper. "Preschool experiences should develop individuality, enriching children in areas of strength and interest, . . . and building up confident children who feel adequate" (Clay, 1991, p. 43).

The key recommendations offered in her texts reflect familiar concepts about active, young learners, the special opportunities the preschool years offer, and the valuable contributions of accepting adults who observe, model, and praise. She describes preschool literacy activities that are based on theoretical orientations accounting for a constructivist theory of learning and understandings of the complexity of literacy processing. She states clearly the importance and benefits of honoring individual differences and following the interests and discoveries of the individual child.

An important aspect of the preschool child's preparation for literacy and school that is referenced in these texts is the child's oral language acquisition. From the discussions

presented, two important considerations of oral language appear most relevant. First, oral language development is paramount to literacy acquisition and is dependent upon frequent opportunities to converse with adults or other proficient speakers. Second, from such opportunities, children construct the rules that govern their oral language production independently, uniquely, with apparent ease, and in their own time frames. And, the more experiences engaged in talking with adults that they enjoy, the more mature their oral language will become (Clay, 1991). They appear to communicate meaning from their earliest attempts to talk with another

person and over time demonstrate growth in their control of the grammar of our language. This knowledge is of vital importance when children begin to read as they readily draw on their oral language expertise to ‘read’ texts with meaning. (See *Bridie Raban’s* article beginning on page 5 of this issue for a rich discussion of language development.)

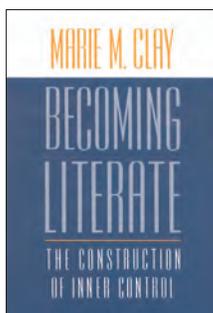
Clay’s discussions and examples clarify the possibilities and discoveries available to children as they begin to engage in reading and writing activities. Important learning involves behaviors indicative of the emergence of complex in-the-head working systems and the neural development

that is initiated as children problem solve how to record a personal message or read a little story. She reports that young learners initially respond to literacy tasks with rather low-level strategies, which she describes in other contexts as primitive working systems acquired from experiences with talking, writing, and listening to stories prior to entering school (Clay, 2001).

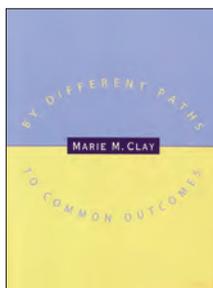
Children’s knowledge of their oral language is key — a reliable source of information for predicting messages and monitoring their reading for meaning. Likewise, their early writing experiences provide rich sources of new learning so important to processing text, including the directional movement patterns appropriate for text reading and visual scanning of words as well as knowledge of information sources available in text, including letters, sounds, words, and sentence structures.

Opportunities to listen to books and stories introduce them to concepts of print and books, make them aware of the connections between pictures and print, and alert them to such features as repeated sentence patterns. With their awareness of such concepts and their very early working systems, children are able to engage in reading as they respond to print with a series of utterances, check the pictures, match pointing and word utterance, increase attention to words using the spaces between words to guide them, and locate one or more words on request (Clay, 2001, p. 59).

Attention to the learner’s construction of working systems, which involve the verbal and perceptual processing that occurs during reading and writing, extend considerations of early literacy



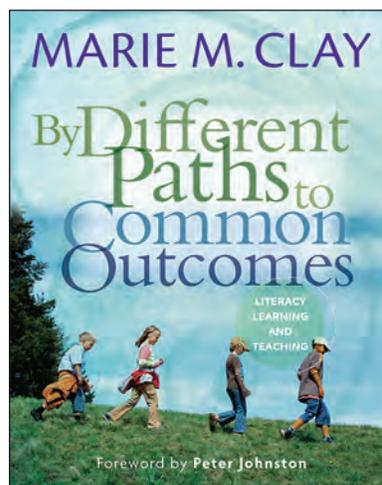
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*Clay’s perspectives on preschool literacy are presented in many of her publications (Clay, 1991, 1998, 2001) as well as in a series of texts written for parents, caregivers, and teachers of preschool and kindergarten children. An update of her 1998 “By Different Paths to Common Outcomes” with a foreword by Peter Johnston will be released this summer.*

progress beyond attention to discrete skills so often discussed by those with a simple view of early reading (e.g., sight word recognition, phonics skills, decoding) to hypothesizing about transformations in literacy processing. Development and change over time in neurological working systems needed for reading and writing are transformations Clay describes we may expect in young learners gaining proficiency in literacy. The genesis of literacy processing may emerge as preschool youngsters engage in early writing and reading experiences. Related to a focus on change and development is the importance of observing children's reading and writing processing closely and maintaining a tentative stance in hypothesizing how an individual's learning is progressing.

In summary, Clay (1991, 2001, 2014) has shared that preschool children will be well-prepared for school if they have

- developed a good control of oral language,
- learned to love books as a result of many listening opportunities,
- discovered that books offer a wide range of interesting ideas,
- taken an interest in the visual detail of their environment,
- reached the level of experience which enables them to coordinate what they hear in language with what they see in print, and
- acquired the motor coordination of hand and eye to control the directional movement patterns required for writing and reading.

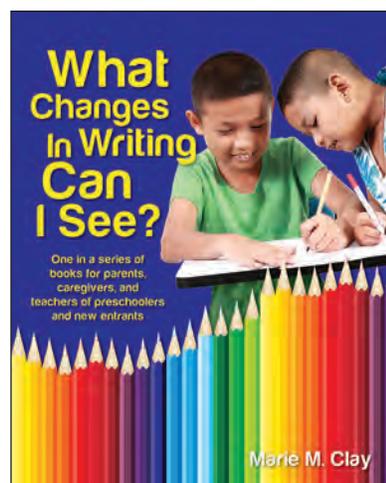
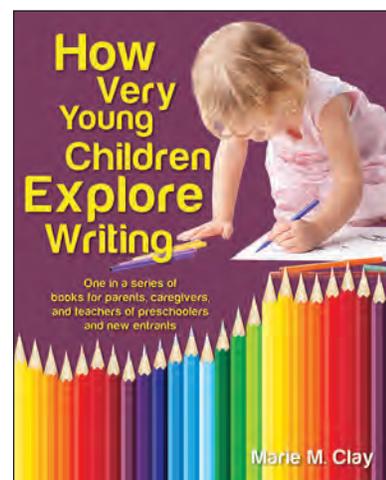
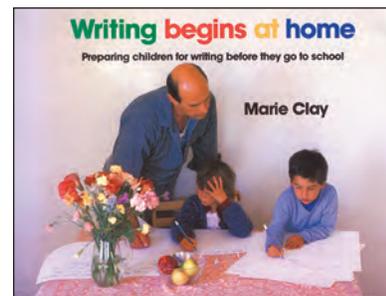
Following is discussion of the series of texts that focus separately on writing and reading and share Clay's wisdom, cautions, and delight in regard to preschool literacy and working with preschool children. While the titles appear to focus on reading and writing separately, depictions of the reciprocity of writing and reading and the power of this reciprocity for young learners are detailed repeatedly across all of the texts.

### Highlighting Texts About Preschool Writing

Marie Clay found that parents, caregivers, and many preschool teachers lack understanding of early writing and the power of the child's writing experiences for developing concepts, awareness, and behaviors key for early reading success. This is often revealed by the questions they ask:

- Why is writing important?
- Doesn't writing skill develop after reading?
- When should I start teaching the letters of the alphabet?
- When should I start correcting his writing or spelling errors?
- What if my child isn't writing at age 4?

Three titles discuss the preschool writing, presenting concepts addressing these questions: *Writing Begins at Home* (Clay, 1987); *How Very Young Children Explore Writing* (Clay, 2010a); and *What Changes in Writing Can I See?* (Clay, 2010c). These offer discussions that extend our understandings of both early writing development and appropriate expectations of the young writer. In these texts, Clay highlights the discoveries



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possible for young children, beginning with opportunities to play with writing materials and paper.

In much like the way they learn oral language, children construct theories of reading and writing which emerge from primitive beginnings and transform as a result of experience and support into more-mature behaviors (Clay, 2001). Children may begin writing by drawing, scribbling, attempting letter forms, repeating a familiar symbol (which may or may not be a letter), copying, or some variation of such behaviors. They often appear to model their parents, caregivers, or literate siblings and produce a product they intend as a letter for grandma or a story, with or without pictures, that has meaning for them. They demonstrate motivation, interest, and satisfaction with their work and their products, and they seek ongoing opportunities to continue their writing explorations. Clay confirms that “Spontaneous exploring like this should be what ‘writing’ is about in the preschool years” (Clay, 1987, p. 8).

These texts provide many charming samples collected from many preschool writers, and from them we can identify unique problem-solving strategies (like writing vertically when running out of space on one line of the page), and we can follow individual, developmental paths to more-mature writing abilities revealed by different children over time at very different ages. Clay’s descriptions of children’s progress confirm that writing experiences may involve any of the following:

- They scribble.
- They find a shape in the scribble and repeat it over and over.

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- A letter appears and is repeated.
- You can say, or name, a letter.
- Letters can make a pattern.
- People call the patterns words.
- You can find words in your ‘talk’ too.
- The order of marks in the pattern is important.
- The order of words in the message is important.

(Clay, 2010a, p. 10)

However, based on close observations of many children, Clay (2010a) confirms that this list does not represent an expected or needed sequence; children acquire more and more complex understandings in their own ways, in any order, and at any time between the ages of 2 and 6 (pages 11–12). Furthermore, a preschool writer acquires complex understandings about his written language before he learns to read and before he knows the letters of the alphabet. His

knowledge of letters of the alphabet, a demanding visual discrimination task, will increase over time and may require specific instructional attention once the child enters school. In the meantime, the potential, powerful contributions of early writing to reading acquisition outweigh the benefits of early letter knowledge. This is to confirm that writing experiences should not be delayed for any child who does not know his letters or who does not yet read proficiently.

Gradually, children gain awareness of important concepts about print: where to start writing their messages on a page, which way to go, how to proceed when they come to the edge of the paper. The young learner “needs to feel the importance of the left side of the page, and the position of his body helps him to learn this” (Clay, 2010a, p. 36). For the preschool child, approaching print consistently from left to right has a lot to do with control over body movements; and, while this new learning may be acquired in early writing, it is critically important learning for the beginning reader (Clay, 2010a).

Children work with many complex aspects of written language simultaneously, and this includes gaining awareness of how to represent sounds in words. By writing, children gain new and proficient behaviors such that their writing “can contribute to the building of almost every kind of inner control of literacy learning that is needed by the successful reader” (Clay, 2001, p. 130). Writing contributes to the learners’ awareness and understanding of

- the sources of knowledge upon which the reader must draw,
- the processes needed to search for information in print,

- the strategies used to combine or check information, and
- an awareness of how to construct a message.

(Clay, 2001, p. 17)

This learning results “without special instructional attention when children are allowed to write their own meaningful messages” (Clay 2010a, p. 52). Thus, for Clay preschool writing is not about sequenced activities, or correct letter forms, or correct spellings; it’s about the more-complex learning and the child’s discovery of understandings that we cannot teach directly.

She advises us to avoid any search for correctness in children’s products and focus on becoming astute observers who can describe an individual’s writing performance and development. *What Changes in Writing Can I See?* offers helpful ways to secure writing samples and to make descriptive accounts of both progress and change over time. This process additionally helps the observer interpret errors not as mistakes to be corrected, but rather as clues offering insights as to what the child is focusing on at the moment or what new challenge the child is ready to tackle. As in oral language development, children are comfortable giving complex, new tasks a try; they challenge themselves. And, “if the job gets difficult or the child gets tired then he will go back to what is easier, and away from what might be harder” (Clay, 2010a, p. 35) for whatever reason. Remember he is very young, a preschooler, and therefore: “That call is his to make” (Clay 2010a, p. 32).

Parents, caregivers, and preschool teachers play extraordinary roles in the young child’s quest to explore writing, and these texts offer many

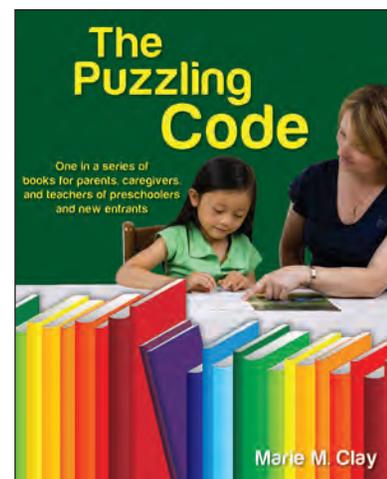
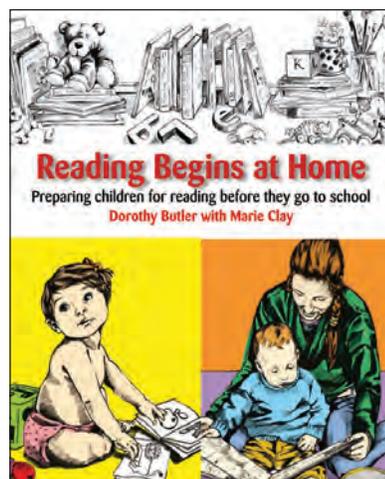
suggestions of ways to support early writing development. A brief summary of supportive actions include model your writing, provide materials and time, encourage exploration, observe closely, marvel at all attempts, focus on the child’s message, value the child’s effort, trust the learning process, answer any questions directly, treasure the products, and collect and save writing samples. Knowing her readers well, Clay also cautions against a range of assumptions and actions including expecting neat papers, expecting perfect memory of letters or words, telling too much, correcting spelling, worrying about phonics, and missing the opportunity to celebrate new discoveries, new accomplishments.

### Highlighting Texts About Preschool Reading

Two texts in her series address preschool reading and they are entitled *Reading Begins At Home* (Butler & Clay, 2008) and *The Puzzling Code* (Clay, 2010b). These books pres-

ent discussions and suggestions that highlight the enriching opportunities afforded preschool children by parents, caregivers, and preschool teachers who engage learners in a wide range of reading, and writing, activities. They emphasize that the best preparation for formal school results from opportunities for adults and children to share conversations, books, stories read aloud, songs, poems, and writing experiences in supportive, loving settings (Butler & Clay).

An additional, important focus is understanding of the complexity of literacy processing and the challenges young learners face in securing the foundational learning required for reading. This refers to developing neural networks to work tentatively and flexibly on features in the written code (Clay, 2010b). These demands represent mental functions that are not present before a child engages in reading texts and this represents learning the child must accomplish for himself. The parents of preschool



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children have limited awareness of these learning demands as revealed by their frequent questions:

- Should children be taught letters of the alphabet to prepare them for reading?
- Should children be taught phonics to prepare them for reading?
- What if he doesn't remember familiar words?
- What is the value of reading and rereading easy stories with so many pictures?
- When should my child begin to read?

Clay's explanations and examples focus on complex learning and she expresses her discomfort with many common practices directly:

- 'Teach the child letters first.' *Wrong!*
- 'Then teach him sounds linked to those letters.' *Wrong!*
- 'Then have him memorize words.' *Wrong!*
- 'Only then help him read a graded sequence of short texts.' *Wrong!*
- 'After that he will become a writer, who writes messages using the taught words.' *Wrong!*

(Clay, 2010b, p. 24)

In place of any concentration on small pieces of language (letters and sounds) and a sequence of smaller to larger units (first letters, then words), Clay emphasizes procedures for supporting the development of children's early processing strategies for reading

with meaning. As observed in her studies, new school entrants with limited item knowledge can be successful in reading texts containing familiar topics and language. They read for meaning, apply their understandings of oral language to utter complete thoughts, and rely on their emerging understandings of how books work. Key to their ongoing development are opportunities to read continuous texts and to write complete stories; and again, the reciprocity between reading and writing offers beneficial opportunities to secure new learning. Their early, successful reading behaviors emerge from their understandings of print, books, and oral language acquired before starting school.

Preschool experiences—including talking, listening, engaging with books, and writing—create the potential for initial, successful literacy processing. Thus, Butler and Clay (2008) offer invaluable suggestions for supporting reading acquisition in the preschool years. Their discussions address appropriate activities as well as common concerns. They explain how children learn to read without initial, extensive instruction in letters and sounds; how children learn to identify new words; how adults may interact productively with a child during reading at home; how to respond to inaccurate reading; and what to expect from the school's literacy program.

As children engage in literacy instruction in school, important foci become foundational behaviors for literacy processing. Briefly, these include appropriate directional schema for attending to print and the movement patterns necessary for processing text. These accomplishments represent

complex learning that builds gradually from initial, primitive working systems to effective, in-the-head working systems, the neural networks engaged for literacy processing. Clay's text offers further explanation and direction for parents and teachers regarding establishing effective, foundational habits for literacy processing (Clay, 2010b).

### Wisdom, Caution, Delight: A Summary

This discussion has focused on Marie Clay's perspectives of preschool literacy by reviewing her texts written specifically for parents, caregivers, and early childhood educators. She presents her suggestions with wisdom and cautions offered to ensure better understanding of the individual nature of preschool learning and the complexities of early literacy, and to assure adults of the amazing progress young minds achieve as a result of loving, enriching environments.

Preschool literacy learning is circumscribed by opportunities and experiences. When a child has frequent and positive opportunities to engage in any language and literacy activities appropriate for preschool children, the potential for new learning is presented. So, the first requisite is opportunity. However, while opportunity is necessary, every child will engage in reading and writing activities on a different timeline, with unique interests, noticing very different aspects of writing and/or texts, with varying attention spans. Resultantly, each child's understandings and discoveries will be individual and unique. "They are like little libraries each stocked with different books" (Clay, 2010b, p. 11) upon entry to school.

So, Clay cautions that we must anticipate children will demonstrate new understandings about reading and writing on their own time schedules. Just as parents accept varying schedules of development for such milestones as walking and talking, we cannot predict when or how early writing and reading will emerge and proceed (Clay, 2010c). Furthermore, age is no indication of what to expect or what specific leaning should take place (Clay, 2010a), and any type of comparisons of children or concern about ‘average’ progress for a given age group are practices that are “*totally wrong for preschool children*” (Clay, 2010c, p. 11). Given the idiosyncratic nature of children’s preschool learning, Clay (2010c) advocates observing learners carefully and collecting written products frequently in order to document and describe changes in a child’s literacy awareness and development.

Clay (2010c) reinforces that we can anticipate that a child will start with what is easy for him and therefore, his early attempts, which will appear very rudimentary and perhaps messy, gradually evolve into more-secure and competent literacy behaviors. Early childhood is not a time to expect or push for correct work in writing or reading; rather, adults are urged to “celebrate errors as evidence of significant learning” (Clay, 2010c, p. 28). Clay also cautions that interest in literacy activities may develop early or late, and that is to be expected. “Spontaneity, and enthusiasm that ebbs and flows, are the characteristics of early childhood” (Clay, 2010a, p. 17).

Clay (1987) advises parents and caregivers to enjoy interactions involving

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books and writing with their children and to avoid the tendency to tell, or teach. The adult’s role is to be observing, interacting, and encouraging while following the child’s lead. This means responding to what the child may be interested in or noticing currently and valuing all efforts and accomplishments. Teaching easily becomes confusing and unsuccessful as verbal directions and explanations are most often too complex for the young learner. Children do benefit from models and demonstrations, with very little talk. In the final analysis, “freedom to make trial and errors with adult approval is the best preparation . . . for learning to read and write proficiently” (Clay, 2010a, p. 6).

“Learning to read and write in school will be easier for the child with rich preschool literacy experiences than it is for the child with almost no literacy experience” (Clay, 1991, p. 28). And, this observation relates to the significant learning such opportunities create for the development of complex literacy processing. Clay (2010b) shares that her “observations of preschool children engaged in writing and reading their personal messages, and (her) studies of new

entrants engaged in building (or constructing) processing systems for literacy, suggest that children construct complex, in-the-head neural networks accounting for foundational learning as a result of their experiences” (p. 38). This significant learning results from a child’s engagement in writing and reading continuous texts not from a focus on discrete items, like letters and sounds. The exciting benefit is a mind transformed with neural networks, or working systems, for literacy processing and ongoing learning.

A final note of advice relates to the school progress of young learners who either may not show interest in literacy activities during their preschool years or may not have opportunities for rich literacy experiences in their homes. Their developmental histories and tapestries of understanding will indeed reflect their backgrounds and upon entry to school, their literacy journeys will need to accommodate for their known. Clay’s wise counsel is that such differences should not be seen as limiting. “Not knowing much about the code at school entry is no worse than late teething or late talking; children can catch up” (Clay, 2010b, p. 34), often very rapidly, and

literacy learning will not be hampered by such individual learner attributes if teachers base instruction astutely on children's strengths (Clay, 2010b). A key understanding for parents, caregivers and teachers is that a child's "new code learning will explode out of his strengths" (Clay, 2010a, p. 30).

Throughout these texts Clay shares her delight in the masterful accomplishments of preschool children who surprise us with their creativity and unique paths of discovery and development. Through her extensive research, she has confirmed the complex nature of early literacy and the complex learning children are capable of achieving (Clay, 2001). Through many examples, she demonstrates that when parents, caregivers, and teachers offer rich and interesting opportunities for children, the adults and young learners build strong foundations for literacy together (Clay, 2010a). Her repeated advice for adults is summarized in her encouraging demands: enjoy, celebrate, cherish. When children turn to you to share their joy in any discoveries in reading and writing, "(t)here is no finer reward" (Clay, 2010c, p. 8).

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### About the Author



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