



# Contributions of the Works of Marie Clay to Guided Reading Instruction

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Guided reading is an instructional setting that allows teachers to help individual children learn how to use strategic actions to process texts successfully. Our interest in guided reading was propelled by our work with Don Holdaway, an Australian writer and educator, who published *The Foundations of Literacy* in 1979. Holdaway promoted storybook reading with enlarged texts along with guided reading of little books and drew upon Clay's complex theory of reading to support engagement and effective processing of texts.

We found further description of guided reading in *Reading in Junior Classes* with guidelines to the revised Ready to Read series, published by the Department of Education in Wellington, New Zealand, in 1985. This volume defined guided reading as "an approach which enables a teacher and a group of children to talk, read, and think their way purposefully through a text, making possible an early introduction to reading silently" (p. 69). The practice of guided reading in New Zealand dates back at least to 1972, when the Department of Education published *Reading: Suggestions for Teaching Reading in Primary and Secondary Schools* which reported "mainstream" thinking on the teaching of reading.

The basic structure of guided reading is presented in both Holdaway's 1979 book and *Reading in Junior Classes*, along with suggestions for expanding

children language through talk about texts. Both present guided reading as an important instructional context within a comprehensive set of literacy practices including reading aloud to children, independent reading, shared reading, writing, and extension through art and other media. Both cite works by Marie Clay, including *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behavior* (1979), the first edition of which was published in 1972. Holdaway also cites an earlier article by Clay titled, "The Reading Behavior of Five Year Old Children: A Research Report," which appeared in the *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* in 1967. All of this points to the conclusion that across New Zealand, a powerful constellation of researchers and practitioners, working together, laid the foundation for an instructional design that built on children's language knowledge and lively curiosity and presented reading as a meaningful and rewarding experience from the time of school entry. It was an approach built on every child's right to have rich experiences with many different kinds of texts and the support of a "noticing" teacher whose keen observation lead to skilled teaching.

Of course, small-group reading instruction had been around for a long time. In a review of the research on grouping students for reading instruction, Barr and Dreeben (1991) describe *between*-class and *within*-class grouping, both of which

emerged early in the 20th Century. In the 1950s and 1960s, studies showed that grouping for reading instruction was prevalent across the United States and in many other parts of the world (Barr & Dreeben). In this same review, Barr and Dreeben draw no definitive conclusions as to the effectiveness of any kind of grouping; however, they mention several criticisms that have been leveled at the then-current practice of teaching reading in small groups, including

- basing grouping on insufficient evidence (often including prejudicial observations such as race or economic status),
- creating static groups that do not change over time and so result in a kind of tracking, and
- differential treatment of low and high groups so that children in the lower groups have less true reading experience and more worksheets and tasks.

To these cautions we would add

- basing instruction on a theory of reading that focused almost solely on letter-sound analysis or word recognition (rather than a theory of constructive learning that incorporates all systems of strategic actions), and
- a concept of teaching that involves standardized group delivery rather than the use of

facilitative language and conversation to allow individuals to build self-extending systems.

It makes sense to teachers that children need skilled guidance to build on their strengths, the opportunity to learn in social groups with others, and texts that meet their current abilities and simultaneously offer opportunities to learn more. Small-group instruction provides a context within which we as teachers can accomplish those goals. When we studied the implementation of guided reading in New Zealand, we knew we were looking at something that was quite different from current small-group instruction we had experienced; and we knew also that Marie Clay's theory contributed hugely to those differences.

Next, we comment on Marie's contributions to the instructional practice of guided reading in three categories: (a) readers and the reading process, (b) texts, and (c) teaching.

## Readers and the Reading Process

Throughout her long career, Clay as a scholar conceptualized and developed a theory of literacy learning that conceived of reading as "a message-gaining, problem-solving activity, which increases in power and flexibility the more it is practiced" (Clay, 1979, p. 6). From the first experiences with print, learners build "working systems" that enable them to problem solve written texts. Her theory leads teachers to view children as *constructive* in that they are constantly putting together information from different sources—including meaning, language syntax or structure, and the visual features of

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print—in pursuit of processing a meaningful text. This view is quite different from a theory that suggests children learn the smallest items first (letters and sounds) and then progress to large items (words) and finally to sentences and meaning of a whole text.

Clay recognized the role of partially correct responding as an indication not of deficit but as evidence of problem-solving behavior. In *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (2002), she presented a powerful set of assessment measures that enabled teachers to draw a portrait of a child's current strengths in precise detail. Assessment provides teachers with a sound basis for grouping and for precise selection of texts that are suited to current strengths. The running record—the most powerful of the observational techniques—allows teachers to capture reading behavior "on the run" in a way that enables them to respond to and support learners with facilitative language. Use of assessment, observation, and the running record are integral to the implementation of guided reading.

Clay's intense focus on the individual child and her continuous observation of the reading and writing behavior of

individual learners led to the exposition, refinement, and more elaborated explanation of her theoretical point of view of the years; but the essence of her thinking was there in her first works. "What I end up with is not a theory of instruction, but a theory of the construction of an inner control of literacy acts" (Clay, 2001, p. 46). The more we understand Clay's theory, the more we believe that literacy learning is not simply additive. It consists of transformations in an ever-increasing complexity as we have described in *The Continuum of Literacy Learning: A Guide to Teaching* (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011). Reading instruction, therefore, must support the child in the process. The goal of instruction is to support and guide children in the development of a self-extending system of literacy behaviors, with which they can learn more about reading from every text they process. This is the goal of guided reading in the early grades; and, even when children have the beginnings of such a system, guided reading supports them in further growth as literate people.

## Texts

The close study of children's reading behaviors inevitably shines a light on the texts they are given to read.

Through Clay, we learned just how important text selection is. It is a sobering thought that

the texts which a teacher chooses for a child can facilitate or constrain the opportunities that a child gets to process text information, and the difficulty level of those texts relative to a child's current skills will create or constrain the opportunities for the child to use what he or she knows in the service of independently learning more through reading, making errors, and self-correcting. (2001, p. 207)

Clay used a very powerful tool—a gradient of text—to help teachers select texts that would support rather than constrain children's reading progress. This means that the 'just right' text is one the child can process with proficiency *with the support of a skilled teacher* and one that offers the opportunity to learn more. The idea is that the text must not be so hard that the reader struggles through it, comprehending little, but it must be challenging enough to engender problem-solving behavior. In answer to the question, "Can a gradient of text difficulty induce change?" Clay says this:

Children can use their control of oral language and knowledge of the world, and as-yet-limited literacy knowledge to move up through a gradient of difficulty in texts. They are aided by teachers who arrange their opportunities and support their efforts. As texts are read and written different kinds of learning are drawn together, coupled, integrated or changed. New items of vocabulary are added, frequently constructed from familiar bits,

roots, prefixes, patterns, clusters, chunks and analogies. In the short time it takes a budding reader to read through many texts on an increasing gradient of difficulty...the network of strategic activity gets massive use, expands in range of experience, and increases in efficiency. This happens providing the reader is not struggling. (2001, pp. 132–133)

This quote captures an essential principle of guided reading: *Teachers select books with readers in mind*. Based on close observation and systematic assessment, teachers select from a rich collection organized by level of difficulty, those that will best support their readers at this point in time. As Clay says, "richer texts themselves provide supporting structures" (2001, p. 105).

## Teaching

Though she did not specifically set out to define methods or processes of instruction, Clay's theory reveals the dynamic interactions through which teachers can support children in developing the self-extending systems. In *Change Over Time in Children's Literacy Development*, Clay summarizes necessary features of instruction for learners to be successful:

- Teachers work to make maximum use of each child's strengths.
- Teachers select appropriate tasks, share them with children, and engage in conversation that supports their efforts.
- Teachers expect and support active problem solving on the part of the child.

- Teachers set the level of difficulty to ensure both high rates of correct responding and appropriate challenge. (2001, p. 225)

These principles are the foundation of teaching in guided reading. Adding to this, Clay helps teachers see how the careful and thoughtful use of language supports children's thinking. She describes an "economy of language" with prompts and questions that respond precisely to the child's actions. As Clay says, "teaching . . . can be likened to a conversation in which you listen to the speaker carefully before you reply" (1985, p. 6). Teachers of guided reading select and use questions and prompts that evoke thinking on the part of their students.

In an unusual move for the time, Clay applied these principles to individual tutoring in early intervention, with the remarkable achievement of Reading Recovery. Thus, we can see that underlying principles of learning apply to the support of all children. We do not teach them all in the same precise way. We see them as individuals. And whether they are fast progress literacy learners or those who need intervention to make fast progress, all should be viewed as active constructors of learning who deserve the best of texts and instruction we can give them in schools. Without fanfare, that is the principle that Clay stood for throughout her professional career, and so her impact is without measure.

*Not armies, not nations have advanced the race; but here and there, in the course of ages, an individual has stood up and cast his shadow over the world.*

– E. H. Chapin

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## About the Authors



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Irene C. Fountas is a professor in the School of Education at Lesley University in Cambridge, MA. She has been a classroom teacher, language arts specialist, and consultant in school districts across the nation and abroad. She has been involved in extensive field based literacy projects and has received several awards for her contributions to literacy. She works extensively in the literacy education field and directs the Literacy Collaborative in the School of Education at Lesley.

## About the Cover

In addition to helping the lowest-achieving students make progress in reading and writing, Reading Recovery-trained teachers also share their expertise by providing extra support in literacy learning during the other part of their day. Alora Stafford, who began first grade reading at Text Level 3, now reads

fluently and has good comprehension. In addition to her classroom literacy instruction, Alora and three other students met for daily half-hour sessions with Marcia Scales. "I remember that Alora always showed an eagerness to read and reread her books," Marcia said.

"She also enjoyed writing stories about the holidays and things she did with her brother (who was a Reading Recovery student) and with her family." Now a successful second grader, Alora is active in karate and enjoys art class — when she's not reading, of course!

