

Anniversary Luncheon Special Guest Speaker Gay Su Pinnell

Learning How to Make a Difference

If we begin at the real beginning, in a little house on the campus of the University of Auckland, Reading Recovery is closing in on its fifth decade of service to a particular group of children — the youngest in school and the most vulnerable. They exist in a demanding environment where they find it hard to know what is expected of them. Somehow, they are not “keeping up” and they don’t know why. Families are equally bewildered. They need to “recover” a satisfactory trajectory of progress so they can thrive in a classroom rich with literacy and in a world where there are demands for a high level of literacy.



Picture it — the 1970s, (one of my favorite decades). Marie Clay and her colleagues were watching a teacher working with a child behind a one-way glass screen. They described in detail the teacher’s moves and the child’s

responses. They noted evidence of shifts in learning. They challenged each other and engaged in analytic thinking about teaching and learning.

Clay was an expert observer of young readers’ behaviors. She received prestigious awards for her detailed observational studies of young children’s interactions with print. At the request of teachers and the national department of education in New Zealand, she created the Diagnostic Survey, a checkup at age 6, after the child in New Zealand had completed 1 year of schooling. I took this training electronically, and that’s how I was able to learn running records and teach it in my classes. Later I had the honor of learning it again and the orange Early Detection was my guide. (The first version predated even me.) Technology wasn’t at a peak in New Zealand. The first 30 minutes was a tutorial on how to use a cassette tape recorder. But professional inquiry and noticing children’s behavior were at a peak and stayed there.

Every teacher in New Zealand learned to individually administer the Diagnostic Survey and the effect was that of a volcanic eruption. They could see better, see more, as

they worked with children. They could identify children who were confused. And, they challenged Clay to help them with the children who were confused, who weren’t becoming literate on a normal trajectory. These children were bright, intelligent, but something was going wrong. What can we do? That was the challenge for Marie and her colleagues and the reason they spent so many hours watching through the one-way screen.

Marie was a special education teacher and a cognitive psychologist. She knew the field and the repertoire of teaching approaches. With expert teachers, they tried every technique and approach. The remarkable results were documented through careful research; they were reproducible across New Zealand, then Australia, then the United States, Canada, Great Britain. They were reproduced in Spanish, French, and Danish.

Marie said afterwards that what she and her researchers left out of the lesson framework was as important as what they kept in it. They tried 45-minute lessons and found them no more effective than shorter ones. What they boiled it down to was an extremely effective, tight, fast-moving 30-minute, daily lesson that could save a child’s life. And, it inspired nations of literacy teachers.

The foundation of Reading Recovery is deep. It is rooted in Clay’s theory of reading as highly complex brain activity. The reader is intelligent and active; she uses everything at her disposal—language, perception of the world, grapho-phonemic information, the sounds of language, intonation patterns—to move through a written text with on-the-run problem solving, accuracy, and understanding. I first read Clay’s *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behavior* as a graduate student the night before my 3 days of qualifying exams — not the first time I’ve read all night; it shifted my thinking and my writing on those exams. But not as much as Reading Recovery training.

There, I was deeply involved in my own observations of children with a direct connection to my teaching. The result was humbling, but the connection with my colleagues and the deep discussions we had were most important. I have to say that an almost equally important outcome of Clay’s work in Reading Recovery is the teacher training. We observe each other — not to critique but to challenge ourselves to analyze the teaching and learning. It was unique; it is unique. We take our work seriously.

In doing so, each of us enters the world of those early researchers. We stand beside them.

We have learned to look, to observe behaviors in detail, to learn what they know and need to know, and to act in response within a structured experience that involves real reading of engaging texts, writing and work with words — all of this tailored to the individual child.

We pieced together five different grants, including a distinguished professorship for Clay. And so to Columbus, OH, where a screen was waiting for Marie and her colleague Barbara Watson — a real screen, like a window screen. You see people here had never called glass a screen. But, it was soon rectified and we set out to accomplish miracles. We got very excited with our results, perhaps too much early on, but it was impossible not to be thrilled. And colleagues joined us from all over North America.

I am sometimes credited with bringing Reading Recovery to Ohio. But the hero of Reading Recovery in Ohio is someone you may not have heard of if you are “young.” G. Robert Bowers, associate superintendent of education in Ohio, brought Reading Recovery here and thus was instrumental in spreading it across North America. He was the guy who communicated, who made tough decisions, who acquired and superintended the money. He saw us through the first challenging years and advised me for years after that. What did I do? I told him about it. He saw the potential immediately. So, one day at the end of a meeting, when he said “Let’s do it.” I knew something would happen.

The future was uncertain then. It is uncertain now and always will be. Literacy researchers and educators are a fiercely divided community. We have critics. Marie’s work has been criticized—even attacked—by every side in this great debate. I think that is because she is so hard to categorize; she sees learners as using letters and sounds, using meaning, using content knowledge, noticing patterns, using syntax to make sentences work like language, and many other sources of information. Her theory is complex.

Of course, our greatest criticism is not philosophical but cost related. And our greatest challenge is to look at our own work with critical eyes. We must make our work fulfill its promise; and I believe it can. Marie said to us many times, “Pick up the stones and look at the creepy crawl-

ly things underneath.” A group is working hard to put improvement science to work in Reading Recovery and I hope many of you will become involved.

My assignment here is not to read the future but to look back and reflect. What is important about Reading Recovery? Why does it deserve a place in literacy education history and a place in the future? In addition to the obvious contribution of teaching so many thousands of initially at-risk children to read, I offer two.

Marie taught us how to look—really look—and notice. She gave us a new lens for the detailed observation that helps us make teaching decisions, those moves that result in shifts for the learner. It’s amazing.

And, she taught us to feel the power of our teaching. We learn through teaching; we are amazed to see evidence that we are making a difference every day. One of the first articles on Reading Recovery in the U.S., written by Mary Fried, Rose Mary Estice, and me, was titled “Learning How to Make a Difference.” I wish that for every teacher.

These two contributions are priceless, and they are life-lasting. Classroom teachers, administrators, parents and grandparents, once you have the eye, you can’t escape noticing, and you don’t want to. Awareness creates a moral imperative. Once you know that powerful teaching is possible; you must work to provide it to every child and constantly work to make it better.

I thought of Marie when I read this poem by the beloved Ohio poet Mary Oliver who died last year. The title is *When Death Comes*; I won’t read it all, just the end.

When it’s over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder
If I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened,
Or full of argument.
I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.

Mary Oliver didn’t simply visit this world. Neither did Marie M. Clay. And if you have taught even one child to read, neither did you.

Congratulations! I hope the next decade is as amazing as the last four.