Reflecting On Our Practices When the Child Has a Limited Repertoire

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Authors’ note: All children’s names are pseudonyms.

Reflecting on the events of these past 2 years, the words of Marie Clay in this quote have never resonated more: “All children are ready to learn something, but each starts their learning from a different place” (Clay, 2016, p. 27). The many disruptions to students’ learning are clear to us. Many of you have experienced the inconsistencies of virtual learning, student attendance, illness, and overall emotional toll over the past 2 years. We also know this burden is not evenly distributed, as educational outcome measures often mirror those in other sectors of our society. However, the purpose of this article is to remind you that we have the tools and resources to address these challenges. As a community of Reading Recovery® educators, we have long dedicated ourselves to delivering responsive and individualized instruction suited to each child’s specific needs.

In this article, we will share the important lessons we have learned from students who enter Reading Recovery with a limited repertoire of literacy skills. We define limited repertoire as a low supply of literacy skills and knowledge that students can draw upon and use to read and write continuous text. We understand that each lesson sequence will be different for each child. However, we hope our reflections can assist you and that you use this article to reflect on your teaching of Reading Recovery students.

We begin with a discussion about Clay’s literacy processing theory, the theory that guides instructional decisions. Next, we highlight important conceptual understandings related to instructional elements that are necessary for all Reading Recovery students; however, absolutely critical for students who enter Reading Recovery with a limited repertoire. Finally, we end each section with reflective questions for you to consider.

Grounding Ourselves in Theory

From the very beginning of her time in Reading Recovery, Julia came into the room eager to engage in conversation. She loved telling stories about her family and the things she was looking forward to engaging in at school. Teaching Julia was a joyful experience, but it was also overwhelming. Julia began her Reading Recovery lesson series with very little solidified item knowledge, and she had many confusions. What it appeared she knew one day would be easily thrown off the next day. Julia would insert long, sophisticated sentences while reading a page of text that had just four words. Because Julia presented so many needs, it would have been easy for her teacher to get mired in the details of everything she needed to learn. Unfortunately, at these challenging times, teachers often move away from theory and make questionable teaching decisions to get through the discomfort.

In her 2018 article, “What’s So Important About Theory?”, Billie Askew explained her own revelation about Clay’s emphasis on theory, stating, “In all my years of studying Marie Clay’s work, I found new insights when working on this article. I didn’t realize how often she explicitly challenged us to keep theory at the center of all our decisions” (p. 5). Whether consciously aware or not, theories drive our thoughts and behaviors. This is true in life and certainly in education. Knowledge of educational theories provides an understanding of why certain instructional practices are chosen over others and why some practices are more effective for specific students at certain times. Without a firm foundation in theory, it would be like throwing darts while wearing a blindfold. Sometimes we would hit the mark, but we would have no idea how it got there or why the technique worked. Consistently observing, monitoring, and evaluating teaching decisions supports teachers to stay consciously aware of theory and meet Clay’s repeated challenge to stay curious, or in other words, tentative and flexible (Clay, 2015).
As Reading Recovery teachers, the sensitive observation of students’ literacy behaviors provides information with which to examine our theories. As Clay (2015) stated, “it is my suggestion that teachers can become sufficiently expert in observation to use what they see children doing as a way of checking on their own theories” (p. 232). Similarly, Pressley et al. (2001) found that highly effective teachers are astutely aware of the relationship between practice and theoretical beliefs. When teachers are aware, they can name and label their theories, think about them, talk about them with others, and compare their own theories to alternative ones. In essence, the teachers Pressley et al. described align their theories to instructional practices and thereby make more intentional and informed decisions.

Reading Recovery training has unique qualities and experiences that prime teachers to become consciously aware of their theories and practices. However, this necessary awareness becomes easier said than done when emotions are high. As previously mentioned, Julia’s many confusions were often overwhelming and led to the teacher’s uncertainty while making in-the-moment teaching decisions. These decisions did not consistently align with the practices associated with literacy processing theory. In hindsight, theory was often abandoned to ease uncomfortable feelings of uncertainty. However, in these moments, grounding ourselves in theoretical beliefs would be beneficial to ensure tentativeness in our developing theory about the child’s ways of responding (Clay, 2015).

**Observable Features of Instruction**

In *Change Over Time in Children’s Literacy Development*, Clay (2015) lists the features of instruction we can observe when teachers are operating from a literacy processing theory:

- The teacher would make maximum use of the existing response repertoire of each child, and hence every child’s lessons would be different.
- The teacher would support the development of literacy processing by astute selection of tasks, judicious sharing of tasks, and by varying the time, difficulty, content, interest and method of instruction, and type and amount of conversation within the standard lesson activities.
- The teacher would foster and support active constructive problem solving, self-monitoring and self-correction from the first lesson, helping learners to understand that they must take over the expansion of their own competencies. To do this the teacher would focus on process variables (how to get and use information) rather than on mere correctness and habitual responses, and would temporarily value responses that were partially correct for whatever they contributed toward correctness.
- The teacher would set the level of task difficulty to ensure high rates of correct responding plus appropriate challenge so that the active processing system could learn from its own attempts to go beyond current knowledge. (p. 225)

These four bullets provide direction to guide instruction. As soon as the child’s progress causes concern, Clay (2016) advises teachers to review their teaching as a first step. Turning to this list would be especially beneficial in that review process. Additionally, developing a regular routine of questioning, monitoring, and evaluating teaching decisions against this list would be beneficial for overall practice and pedagogy as teachers. However, keeping these features of instruction in mind is especially vital when working with students who enter their program with a limited repertoire.

In the remainder of this article, we discuss several items from this bulleted list in relation to important conceptual understandings critical for students beginning their Reading Recovery lesson series with a limited repertoire.

**Reflection**

Take a moment to reflect on aligning your theoretical understandings to your instructional practice. How often do you prioritize time to question, monitor and evaluate your teaching decisions against the theoretical model of literacy processing? How might prioritizing time to reflect change your practice or teaching?
Maximizing the Child’s Repertoire

Clay’s research and resulting theory focused on direct systematic observation. Her observations occurred in classroom settings as children were reading and writing and validated that students take different paths in literacy learning (Doyle, 2018). Knowing the child as a learner and an individual can support the diverse paths of students (Watson & Askew, 2009). For Reading Recovery teachers, observation begins during the administration of An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 2019) and extends into Roaming Around the Known and subsequent lessons, as working relationships develop.

John Hattie’s ongoing Visible Learning research, synthesizing over 1,500 meta-analyses, lists “teachers’ estimates of achievement” as one of the major influences on student success (Bennett, 2020). Hattie’s research underscores the importance of teacher expectations. Clay (2016) also accentuated this, stating, “Some teachers might predict quite early in the lesson series that they do not expect a particular child to complete his series of lessons successfully. That lowered expectation immediately produces detrimental effects” (p. 169, emphasis added). It is indeed crucial to remain critically aware of our expectations of students and continuously hold the belief that all students can become literate.

In Gholdy Muhammad’s acclaimed book, Cultivating Genius (2020), she stated, “Before getting to the literacy skill development such as decoding, fluency, comprehension, writing, or any other content-learning standards, students must authentically see themselves in the learning” (p. 69). This sentiment aligns with why Roaming Around the Known makes a good starting point. As Clay (2016) stated, “Child and teacher have an opportunity to get to know each other and develop useful ways of interacting” (p. 30). Furthermore, as referenced in the first bullet of observable features of instruction, making “maximum use of the existing response repertoire of each child” (Clay, 2015, p. 225) means truly taking time to understand the child as an individual learner first so that all of the child’s resources for the new task of reading and writing can be used. This is especially important considering the variety of experiences children bring to school. Children with a limited repertoire often engage in risk taking and are ingenious problem solvers in many areas of their lives …

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in Roaming Around the Known with Julia was not well spent. In an attempt to get her to acquire the “literacy things,” Julia’s teacher did not let go of preconceived ideas, which impacted her instructional decisions.

Clay (2016) directed teachers to offer students “many opportunities to learn on a wide range of easy tasks and observe carefully how he engages with them” (p. 29, emphasis added). Creating an environment where reading and writing were easy for Julia was a struggle. Teachers often lament similar concerns when working with students who enter their lessons with a limited repertoire. Clay (2016) directed teachers to share the tasks by reading to and writing for the child. This “judicious sharing of tasks” (Clay, 2015, p. 225) is also referenced in the second bullet of observable features of instruction. Furthermore, Clay (2016) directs teachers to repeat activities often during Roaming Around the Known and intersperse reading and writing activities throughout the lesson.

Prioritizing time in reflection and evaluation allowed for the opportunity to see Roaming Around the Known with a new lens. While planning each session, Julia’s teacher reflected: “How will this opportunity help bring Julia to a high level of confidence and flexibility?” “How can she engage in reading and writing with ease?” “Is there room for discovery?” Additionally, the Roaming Around the Known diary moved from a mere list of what was done to noting how Julia engaged and responded (Clay, 2016). How Julia learned and problem solved became the focus.
Reflection

In the next sections, we delve further into the focus on processing. However, take a moment to reflect on the alignment of your theoretical understandings to your instructional practice. In what ways have you used a child’s out-of-school strengths as assets to maximize their existing strengths? When examining your Roaming Around the Known notes, what do you notice? How do you customize Roaming Around the Known for each student?

Attend to Processing Immediately

Expanding a student’s knowledge of print is critical. Likewise, the extension of letter and word knowledge provides the essential footholds for acquiring and developing literacy proficiency. However, it is the effective problem-solving processes that contribute to acceleration. As Clay (2015) explained:

A few items and a few powerful strategies can set a beginning reader on a path towards a self-extending system quite early. Theoretically, I assume that it is not the items that lift the children to new levels of text difficulty but the strategic power to use what is known in the service of problem-solving the unknown. (p. 129)

This concept is further explained in the third bullet of observable features of instruction, as Clay (2015) directed teachers to “foster and support active constructive problem-solving, self-monitoring and self-correction from the first lesson” (p. 225).

Careful observation of how the child responds begins in Roaming Around the Known, as previously discussed, and provides essential information to guide teachers’ work in supporting active constructive problem solving. This sensitive observation is important for all students, but especially critical for students who begin their lesson series with a limited repertoire.

Clay (2015) provided direction for how teachers can foster and support active constructive problem solving, stating, “To do this the teacher would focus on process variables (how to get and use information) rather than on mere correctness and habitual responses” (p. 225). When reflecting on Julia’s lesson records, the notations focused on her error behaviors and items. There was not a good system to note how Julia responded. In a conference presentation, Betsy Kaye (2021) explained the importance of creating a system for noting responsive teaching actions (Figure 1).

In the Observed column, the lesson record notes the student stopped reading at the word “milkman” and did not have an attempt. The back-and-forth arrows illustrate the interactions between the child and teacher. For example, in the Prompted column, the teacher responded to the child’s stopping by recording, “D y kn wd. starts w/ this letter?”, shorthand for “Do you know a word that starts with this letter?” The arrow indicates the student’s response to that prompt, “mom,” followed by the sound /m/.

As noted in the multiple teaching actions shown by the back-and-forth arrows, the child’s attempt did not render an accurate response, but at this point in this child’s lesson series, it appears the teacher understood an important conceptual understanding of literacy processing theory. /M/ was a known sound for this student. The prompt directed the child to search for and use what was known to assist with the unknown (“milkman”; Clay, 2015, p. 225). The teacher prompted the child to “try that again and see what makes sense and looks right” (TTA + see what M + V). The student responded “man,” a good attempt for “milkman.”

Figure 1. Julia’s Lesson Record

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEW TEXT</th>
<th>STRATEGIC ACTIVITIES ON TEXT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The milkman parked his truck on a hill &amp; it rolled down. All the people near the shop were surprised when it crashed.</td>
<td>milkman → by kn wd. starts w/ this letter?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man? ← did you say this?</td>
<td>TTA + see what M + V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>girl &quot;no&quot; → gd. chky!</td>
<td>told, close!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“but” but the truck went on until it crashed.</td>
<td>lady &quot;no&quot; → gd. chky!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;the box went on&quot; (hard)</td>
<td>why expect... but v went v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;time&quot; sc ← what cold w/ &quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teaching Reflection

The previous example demonstrates the observable feature of instruction explained in the third bullet. The teacher prompted the child to locate and use known information to initiate problem solving. The teacher also valued the child’s partially correct response. Take a look at your lesson records. How are you noting the process variables of how the child gets and uses information on your lesson records? How do you record teacher and child interactions?

Establish Rapid Visual Perception

Researchers in dyslexia and science of reading communities focus on the need for alphabetic knowledge, including rapid naming of letters (Piasta & Wagner, 2010; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008.) Read Harmey & Bodman’s 2020 article in The Journal of Reading Recovery to learn more about letter-sound relationships.

Throughout Chapter 3 of Literacy Learning Designed for Individuals (2016), Learning to Look at Print, Clay wrote of the importance of children being able to access visual information quickly. The learner needs to create links between what they see and hear, whether the visual information is a letter, a cluster of letters, or a word (Clay, 2016). When working with students who begin their lessons with a limited letter and word knowledge repertoire, it is imperative to assess whether they are attending to print, what they notice, and what they ignore (Clay, 2019). Students need opportunities in reading and writing to solidify looking across print to access visual information and increase their letter and word knowledge. However, it is important to remember that the end goal isn’t for the child to be able to identify letters and words in isolation. Students need to be able to use what they know to read and write so they can understand and share meaningful messages. Clay (2016) wrote:

Young constructive readers and writers work at problem-solving sentences and messages, choose between alternatives, read and write sentences, work on word after word, with the flexibility to change responses rapidly at any point. As they attend to several different kinds of knowledge, they are searching, selecting, rejecting, self-monitoring, and self-correcting. (p. 7)

Using a variety of mediums keeps the task of increasing letter and word knowledge novel and engaging. Magnetic letters, or other multisensory items such as sand or a whiteboard, allow children to work with letters and words in isolation and then apply what was practiced within reading and writing continuous text. As what is known becomes more rapidly retrieved and consistent, the child can “attend to novel things. When this occurs at an ever-increasing rate, accelerated learning occurs” (Clay, 2016, p. 21). Teachers must be careful observers of changes occurring and shift their teaching accordingly.

Extra Power from Writing

DeFord (1997) analyzed the writing section of Reading Recovery lessons and discovered that teachers of higher-outcome students fostered independence in writing early in the lesson series. Reading Recovery teachers recognize the usefulness of writing but may not be sure how to engage reluctant writers to support that independence. Clay (2015) wrote:

Writing is of critical importance for learning to read in an early literacy intervention because writing prevents learners from neglecting or overlooking many things they must know about print, and reveals things about the learners’ ways of working that their teachers need to know about. (p. 18)

Although careful observation can inform teachers about ways to build on strengths, observation must extend well beyond children’s item knowledge to support their writing. Notice which topics appear to draw the child’s attention. Create opportunities
The child’s stories are an avenue for readers and writers who are reluctant because the topic is something that matters to them. The language structures are accessible because it is their story. One story could be a springboard to future writing opportunities.

for students to discuss those topics, compose their stories, and transcribe the messages. The child will start to notice that what they say is important and can be written and read by others.

During writing, allow space for children to contribute anything they know and encourage them to write what is known more quickly. It may be the word “I” or the sound the word starts with, but each opportunity promotes engagement and confidence. That’s the first step. In *Stirring the Waters* (Gaffney & Askew, 1999), when writing about a self-extending system, John Guthrie wrote, “It seems self-evident that self-improvement is associated with the desire to be competent and the belief in one’s capacity for increasing competence” (p. 150). In other words, competence builds confidence.

**Lucy**
From the first time the teacher met with Lucy in March, oral language was a strength she brought to her learning. She often talked about the stories she had read and written. She participated in and initiated conversation. At the same time, she was hesitant to write anything she did not know and did not appear to understand how to even approach the writing task. Lucy’s Observation Survey indicated a score of 12/37 in Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words. Most words were represented by the initial or dominant consonant sound. On the Writing Vocabulary task, Lucy recorded eight words including her name, “mom,” “dad,” “zoo” and a few other two-letter words.

During Roaming Around the Known, the goals were to allow her space to write what she knew, initiate problem solving, and do for her what she could not yet do herself. It was critical that Lucy understand that her ideas could be written down and read by her or someone else. She needed to start to see herself as a writer and a reader.

DeFord’s (1997) analysis of the writing portion of Reading Recovery lessons revealed that teachers with high student outcomes created opportunities for students to write about their lives and about the books students read. Students were encouraged to use the working page and solve words in various ways. The prompts weren’t limited to sound-letter relationships but extended

- to say the word slowly,
- to reread,
- to check on their work,
- to identify a sound or sounds they had heard, and
- to write in their text.

(Lyons et al., 1993, p. 139)

Each Roaming Around the Known session would include multiple writing episodes to provide Lucy with the opportunities described above. For example, Lucy loved the book, *The Missing Earrings* (Dufresne, 2005). While talking one day, Lucy was asked where she thought Father Giraffe was so eager to be that he was rushing Mother Giraffe. She quickly responded that they were going to Lou Malnati’s, a favorite Chicago

**Figure 2. Lucy’s Message**

“Finally we can go to Lou Malnati’s!” said Father Giraffe.
pizza restaurant. In response to what Father Giraffe might say now that Mother Giraffe was ready, Lucy said, “Finally we can go to Lou Malnati’s!” After the message was transcribed, it was added to the end of the book (Figure 2). In that exchange, Lucy learned more about hearing and recording sounds in words, reread her story, and had opportunities to record known words (“we,” “can,” “go,” “to”) more quickly. In addition, she became aware that writing had a purpose in her life, and she could share with others the stories she had to tell.

The child’s stories can be a source for familiar reading. Teachers can read the stories to the child, hang them on the wall to be read and seen as valuable, or send copies of the stories home and to the classroom for the child to share. The child’s stories are an avenue for readers and writers who are reluctant because the topic is something that matters to them. The language structures are accessible because it is their story. One story could be a springboard to future writing opportunities.

Reflection

Take a look at your lesson records: Do you notice a variety of writing genres and topics? Is the child engaged in the conversation about what they will write? Is the child learning to problem solve in a variety of ways? Who is doing the work? How do you know?

Conclusion

Reading Recovery professionals are well-prepared and grounded in a strong literacy processing theory that informs how children acquire literacy. At the beginning of Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals, Clay (2016) included a quote from Dr. Larry Squires:

“You relate what you hear or see to things you already understand.

The moment of truth is the moment of input,

• how much you attend
• how much you care
• how you encode
• what you do with it, and
• how you organize it. (p. x)

Squire’s quote is typically considered in relation to how students learn and access what they have learned; however, reflect on this quote in relation to your teaching. What you attend to and care about influences your lens for observation. How you interpret the child’s behavior reflects your theoretical understandings.

Reflection

Reflect on your teaching practices: What are you attending to during lessons? How are you recording observations and analyzing that data to inform instruction? What would you do differently?

Reading Recovery teachers have the knowledge and resources to support students’ accelerated learning. When we find ourselves straying from theory, we must notice and recover our course through observation and careful planning. These actions, grounded in Clay’s literacy processing theory, support thoughtful and purposeful reflection as well as student success.

References


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