



## Fact Check: Three Things Hanford Got Wrong about Dr. Marie Clay

Emily Hanford, journalist and ‘science of reading’ advocate, posted a podcast specifically about Marie Clay’s theory and research. The content is fraught with inaccuracies, misrepresentations, and cherry-picked quotes that cannot go without challenge. The following information responds to several inaccuracies and provides a factual response.

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***Hanford stated that Marie Clay, ‘had an idea.’***

***Fact: Marie Clay developed a theory of literacy processing based on scientific study.***

Marie Clay was an ethical and meticulous researcher who studied beginning literacy over many years. Her seminal research posed questions that no one had previously explored. She sought an understanding of the development of initial literacy over an academic year rather than pursuing preconceived notions, or ideas, of learners and instruction. Her goal was to document through scientific processes what occurs as young learners gain literacy skills and learn to read in the program offered by their schools.

This was groundbreaking work and involved the close observation of children reading and writing in their classrooms. These students included a broad range of school entrants, not only struggling students. Her study procedures included reliable, standardized measures to gather the evidence needed to describe reading skill development. The results of this work allowed her to identify and substantiate the processing of these young readers and served as the basis of her theory of early reading and writing acquisition, a theory of reading and writing continuous texts. Over many years, she conducted multiple studies to test her theory and to evaluate the implications of her discoveries for instruction.

One result of her extensive body of investigations is the early intervention designed to assist children struggling with initial literacy instruction, Reading Recovery. From the initial trials of instruction designed for struggling readers, Marie Clay offered researched findings to support both her theory and her recommendations for instruction.

Both the quality and the scope of Clays’ research and work firmly established her reputation as a major contributor to the field of education, and more specifically to the field of early literacy. Marie Clay’s integrity, values, tentativeness, and commitment have been widely recognized and celebrated. In fact, in 2000, the report of a survey of members of the prestigious National Reading Conference (the current Literacy Research Association) revealed that Marie Clay was the only scholar identified as a major influence across three decades (1970 – 1999). The academic community certainly recognized Clay’s three decades of research as more substantial than a mere “idea.”

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***Hanford stated, “Clay was describing the way poor readers read . . .and in schools all over the country, kids are actually being taught these strategies” and “look at some of the letters, make a good guess. That’s how Marie Clay described skilled reading.”***

***Fact: Marie Clay’s definition of skilled reading accounts for perceptual and cognitive processing.***

Marie Clay defined reading as a message-getting, problem-solving activity. Her definition acknowledges the directional constraints of written language, the verbal and perceptual behaviors that must be directed to identify sequences of information visually in text, and the expectation that meaning is the goal. Her definition confirms that instruction must account for both perceptual (visual) and cognitive in-the-head processing as reading involves many working systems in the brain that search for and pick up verbal and perceptual information governed by directional rules; other systems which work on that information and make decisions, other systems which monitor and verify those decisions and systems which produce responses (Clay, 2001., p.1) .

Thus, Clay considered that progress in learning to read and write involves the development of a network of complex neural processing systems, perceptual and cognitive working systems, engaged in searching, monitoring, confirming, and self-correcting. This definition of skilled reading, which absolutely includes the critical role of phonics, is complex.

In the first year of her seminal research, Clay looked at the behaviors of 100 children just learning to read and documented important evidence about how they were processing print. The assessment tools developed by Clay allowed her to uncover what children knew, how they read, and how they were changing over time. Studying

the detailed accounts of the reading behaviors of the proficient readers in this study, she identified evidence “of the changes that may be expected over time, of the track that most children take, of the variability to be expected, and of different developmental paths” (Clay, 1998, p. 255).

Effective instruction must lead to more efficient literacy processing, including the visual decoding of words letter by letter, left to right. She stated clearly that the child’s detailed control of print information, including phonological information, is an essential goal of early reading instruction and development (Clay, 2001), as detailed in the section below.

Briefly, Clay’s literacy processing theory is a theory of assembling a complex, in-the-head network of perceptual and cognitive working systems for reading or writing continuous text. And, while phonics is clearly an essential focus, it is only a part of this complex system. The key to the acquisition of an effective literacy processing system needs to include more than instruction in phonics.

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***Hanford stated that “Marie Clay did not believe in phonics instruction.”***

***Fact: Marie Clay believed phonics instruction is a critical aspect of learning to read proficiently.***

Clay’s research and observations led to conclusions that emergent reading and writing share common ground, and both are strengthened by phonological and orthographic instruction. Writing plays an important role in ensuring emergent learners attend closely to features of letters and sounds of letters as they write words. Teaching strategies for emergent writers incorporate both phonological and orthographic practice and aligns with the research of [Goswami and Bryant](#), [Cazden](#), [Pearson](#), and others.

Clay’s research and work in Reading Recovery acknowledge the importance of phonics knowledge as a component of reading and writing. Reading Recovery lessons incorporate phonics knowledge in isolation and in the context of reading and writing authentic texts daily.

Phonics skills are taught explicitly, often using multisensory techniques. The focus of word analysis instruction is based upon close observation of what an individual reader knows and needs to learn next. Clay’s instructional recommendations include teaching:

- Visual scanning of individual words, letter by letter, left to right
- Recognition and discrimination of letters of the alphabet with increasing speed
- Linking sounds to letters and letters to sounds
- Developing phonemic awareness
- Analyzing the sounds of words in writing
- Hearing syllables and larger chunks (suffixes, prefixes)
- Identifying a new word using analogy
- Taking words apart during text reading
- Identifying key sight vocabulary words.

### **Summary**

Clay’s literacy processing theory requires careful study to understand and explain. This response introduces concepts rudimentary to an erudite explanation. One cannot gain a full understanding from excerpts taken out of context. Without a complete and careful study of Clay’s full body of work, a journalist’s observations, assumptions, and conclusions lack credence. The assumptions of Clay’s theory and research and the related implications offered in the podcast are faulty and do not lead to the conclusions offered by the journalist. Emily Hanford got it wrong.

### **References**

Clay, M. M. (1998). *By different paths to common outcomes*. York, ME: Stenhouse.

Clay, M. M. (2001). *Change over time in children’s literacy development*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.