

Spring 2015

Marie Clay's Search for Effective Literacy Instruction: a Contribution to Reading Recovery and Small-Group Teaching

Salli Forbes
University of Northern Iowa

Linda J. Dorn
University of Arkansas at Little Rock

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©2015 Salli Forbes and Linda J. Dorn. The copyright holder has granted permission for posting.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/ci_facpub



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Forbes, Salli and Dorn, Linda J., "Marie Clay's Search for Effective Literacy Instruction: a Contribution to Reading Recovery and Small-Group Teaching" (2015). *Curriculum & Instruction Faculty Publications*. 27. https://scholarworks.uni.edu/ci_facpub/27

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Curriculum & Instruction Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Marie Clay's Search for Effective Literacy Instruction: A Contribution to Reading Recovery and Small-Group Teaching

Salli Forbes, University of Northern Iowa

Linda J. Dorn, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

This year Reading Recovery® celebrates 30 years in the U.S., where more than 50,000 Reading Recovery-trained teachers have served over 2.2 million children in Reading Recovery lessons during this time period. In addition, these Reading Recovery teachers have instructed approximately 8.8 million other children in small group or classroom settings during the same 3 decades. Reading Recovery has a solid research base that is recognized by the USDE What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) as the strongest of all beginning reading programs reviewed (WWC, 2008, 2013). The benefit and effectiveness of Reading Recovery are widely recognized—as demonstrated in reviews by the WWC, the National Center for Response to Intervention, and the National Center for Intensive Intervention—as well as by other researchers in the field of literacy (Allington, 2005; Johnston, 2005a, 2005b).

Several research studies reveal the effectiveness of the instruction Reading Recovery teachers provide, in which the teacher must “design a superbly sequenced series of lessons determined by the child’s competencies, and make highly skilled decisions moment by moment during the lesson” (Clay, 2005a, p. 23. See also Pinnell, DeFord, & Lyons, 1988; Pinnell, Deford, Lyons, Bryk, & Selt-

zer, 1994; Schwartz, 2005). Reading Recovery teachers provide powerful one-to-one instruction for the lowest-performing students at the optimum time in their literacy development and schooling (Schwartz). While the most-effective literacy intervention by far is Reading Recovery, the influence of Marie Clay’s discoveries goes beyond the one-to-one Reading Recovery intervention. The theories and processes upon which Reading Recovery is based have wider implications for reading instruction in general, including instruction in small-group settings.

The reality is that most Reading Recovery-trained teachers provide instruction to children in other settings the other part of their teaching day, including small-group reading intervention, special education, ESL, and classroom. They deliver instruction to struggling readers across multiple grade levels and they share specific principles, procedures, and assessments with classroom teachers. The Reading Recovery teachers’ expertise, developed through Reading Recovery training and their experience in teaching many children with unique paths to literacy, informs the teaching they do in other settings and their interactions with other teachers. In a research study by Pinnell et al. (1994), Reading Recovery was the most effective of the four intervention

treatments, but small-group instruction taught by trained Reading Recovery teachers was the second most effective. The expertise of the teachers, developed through Reading Recovery training, also contributed to the effectiveness of the teachers’ instruction of students in small groups.

Strategic Activity Versus Items of Knowledge

In order to recognize the influence of Clay’s contribution to the instruction of struggling readers, it is important to revisit what is known about the instructional practices for struggling readers prior to implementing Reading Recovery in the U.S.

Richard Allington’s (2011) examination of reading interventions over time provides educators with a historical glance at the influence of policy and research on instructional programs for struggling readers. In his study of remedial programs, Allington (2006) identified common beliefs and practices associated with teaching low-performing students. From his early observations, he concluded that remedial practices consisted primarily of students’ completing skill lessons in workbook or worksheet activities with the teacher serving as a manager. In this role, the remedial reading teacher offered little or no construc-

tive feedback to promote students' self-correcting behaviors. And to make matters worse, struggling readers were asked to read texts that were too difficult, thus denying them the opportunity to develop reading proficiency through successful practice. Based on this simple theory, remedial instruction focused on curing deficits within the student, in contrast to building on the student's strengths. The notion of observing students' reading behaviors to inform teaching decisions was simply not a part of the instructional landscape.

Beginning with her dissertation study, completed in 1966, Marie Clay's research focused on the observation of children's reading of continuous text. In that study she collected data from 100 students in their first year of formal schooling. These observational data revealed the reading behaviors and patterns of high-, high-middle-, low-middle-, and low-performing students (Clay, 1966, 1991). By observing and recording students' reading of little books (continuous text), she was able to capture patterns in the reading behaviors of both proficient and low-performing students. The patterns of the readers in the high group revealed that they read long stretches of text correctly, making only one error in 37 or more words. "Error was embedded in long stretches of correct reading," (Clay, 1991, p. 297). The high-performing readers also self-corrected errors far more frequently than the lower-performing readers.

As a result of this study and other research she conducted, Clay emphasized the importance of providing all students with the same experiences that the better readers had been given. This included providing

students with the opportunity to read continuous text, which they could read at 90% accuracy or better, and valuing their self-correcting efforts. These recommendations have influenced instructional and assessment practices in both small groups and classrooms, as well as in Reading Recovery. Teachers use running records, which Clay developed as a research data collection tool for her dissertation study, to not only iden-

Prior to the implementation of Reading Recovery, the notion of observing students' reading behaviors to inform teaching decisions was simply not a part of the instructional landscape in the U.S.

tify students' accuracy percentage and instructional text levels, but also their self-correcting ratios. The objective is for students to have a self-correction ratio between 1:2 and 1:5, the range that Clay found that the good readers in her dissertation study exhibited (Clay, 1966, 1991).

Clay introduced the concept of observing closely reading behaviors to determine what sources of information a child may be using or neglecting to self-monitor, problem solve at point of difficulty, and self-correct while reading continuous text. This systematic observation provides the teacher with the opportunity to prompt the reader to use neglected sources of information, which also

encourages the reader to engage in strategic activity. Instructional decisions, based on the observation of a student's reading, allow the teacher to scaffold the student's development of independent self-regulation of strategic activity and development of inner control of the reading process.

There are several key instructional concepts, which Clay included in the development of Reading Recovery, that support the reader's development of effective strategic processing. Those concepts include creating ample opportunity for the student to read and write continuous text; facilitating the reciprocal learning from reading and writing; providing book introductions to orient the reader to the text in order to provide the optimal opportunity for a successful first reading; teaching with precision and an economy of language; and organizing for the development of fast recognition or production of letters, letter clusters, and words that the reader knows. All of these concepts, which are features of Reading Recovery instruction, are also important components of effective small-group instruction.

Only through reading continuous text does the reader have the opportunity to develop early behaviors (one-to-one matching, directionality, and locating known words) and to develop strategic activities (self-monitoring, searching, cross-checking, and integrating sources of information). While reading continuous text, the reader practices problem-solving and decision-making processes using different kinds of information. Through this frequent practice, the reader acquires automaticity in assembling strategic working systems, which leads to more-efficient and flexible

processing (Clay, 2001). Effective group instruction embraces ample opportunities for students to read continuous text, including rereading familiar books to develop orchestration of these working systems and applying decision-making strategies for solving problems in new texts. The reader then becomes self-regulating and the learning is self-extending.

Reading Recovery teachers develop their understanding and practice to support each student's active engagement with reading work and development of independence on what the student knows and knows how to do. Reading Recovery teachers continuously work on observing teaching and learning to refine their scaffolding of each student's development of independence. Teachers of reading intervention groups can also teach for students' active learning and development of independence and mastery of what they learn. Interventions, such as those in the Comprehensive Intervention Model (Dorn, Soffos, & Doore, 2015), teach within a cognitive apprenticeship approach that includes explicit teaching and modeling, guided practice, scaffolding, and independent practice.

In Reading Recovery and effective small-group instruction, teachers provide scaffolded instruction which both calls on students to use what they know independently and to develop independence with new learning. Teachers provide opportunities for students to engage in independent work throughout the series of lessons. "In Reading Recovery independent work in reading and writing is passed to the child in the first week of the programme for any part of the child's tasks that he or she already controls," (Clay, 2001, p. 220). The



The influence of Marie Clay's discoveries goes beyond the one-to-one Reading Recovery intervention. The theories and processes upon which Reading Recovery is based have wider implications for reading instruction in general, including instruction in small-group settings like this one in Texas.

focus on developing independence is extremely important for all intervention instruction. Developing independence with new learning requires the teacher to both support each student's reading and writing work and to continuously teach in such a way so that there is a release of responsibility for the learning to the student.

Providing introductions to new books orients children so that their first reading is successful and they can extend their problem-solving competencies. The teaching on that new book is purposeful, with the intention of determining the level of contingent support that each child needs to both produce a successful reading and learn strategic activities and skills that can later be transferred to other reading. Taking a running record of the second reading of the new book provides the teacher information about whether the student assumed responsibility for the learning that

was the focus of the teacher's instruction before, during, and after the first reading. While this description of instruction is familiar to Reading Recovery teachers, it is also applicable to effective small-group instruction.

Reading volume is essential to reading success. Struggling readers need to read a lot because it is during the actual reading that they can practice flexible strategies and skills for constructing meaning from the text. The theory of volume reading is evident in the Reading Recovery lesson, where Reading Recovery children read 4–5 books daily with the potential to read over 400 books during a 20-week series of lessons. In the process, reading proficiency develops through strategic activity on texts that increase in complexity and difficulty over time. Clay's theory of text reading has influenced small-group interventions in significant ways, including the need for students to read whole

books with teacher scaffolding and to practice fluency and independence on easy texts.

Effective literacy instruction includes a writing component to optimize the advantages of the reciprocal learning between reading and writing. Several models of group instruction do include writing. Some of those models recognize the changing reciprocal benefits of writing to reading development as students advance in literacy achievement. In early interventions, such as those which include a version of interactive writing, the writing facilitates the emergent and beginning reader's learning of early behaviors of one-to-one word-print matching, directional movement, left-to-right visual scanning, and sound analysis to problem solve unknown words. As the reader progresses or for those students who receive intervention beyond the early levels, writing provides opportunities for learning and using various language structures, particularly those that are literary or genre specific. Writing also gives the learners opportunities for using and developing knowledge of new vocabulary, expanding and clarifying distinctive features of various genres, and deepening their understanding of the topics or concepts from their reading.

All of these contributions from Marie Clay have shifted instructional practices of many teachers from a remedial model for low-achieving readers—as described by Allington (2011) in which progress was slow—to the intervention model which focuses on accelerated learning and closing the gap between not proficient and proficient readers and writers. Accelerated learning must be

the goal of any literacy instruction for students who are not proficient in reading and writing. To achieve accelerated learning, teachers must reflect daily on their teaching decisions and students' responses to their teaching moves. Teachers must reflect on the level of independence students demonstrate in all of the items and processes they are learning, with a focus on looking for change over time in students' control of what they know and processing they can do. Simply put, teachers must teach for independence and transfer, which means avoiding a strict sequence, while acknowledging the scope of what students need to learn. They must continuously bear in mind the capabilities of proficient readers and writers at that grade and age level, as a goal for the learning of the students they teach in interventions.

Closing Thoughts

From the beginning, Clay incorporated the observation of teaching and collaborative learning in the design of teacher training in Reading Recovery. The coconstructed understanding, checked against actual observation of teaching and learning, develops the expertise of teachers' understanding and instructional decision making. This same approach to teacher training has been included in effective small-group training models. It is essential for teachers to engage in collaborative learning communities in which they observe teaching and learning, while developing and expanding their understandings and expertise through articulating what they observe.

Over the past 3 decades, thousands of Reading Recovery-trained teachers

have served in reading positions as interventionists, classroom teachers, literacy coaches, and special educators. These individuals have assumed leadership roles in supporting effective literacy instruction in the classroom and designing small-group interventions for struggling readers. Their influence within schools can be observed in instructional decisions such as matching books to readers, using observational data to inform instruction, prompting for strategic activity, teaching for independence, and building on the strengths of the learner.

Teaching and learning are reciprocal processes, and any meaningful change within a school begins with a significant change within the teacher. The teacher's beliefs about low-performing students will affect the methods she uses to assess and instruct her students. Ask most any Reading Recovery teacher, whether former or current, about how Reading Recovery has influenced her instructional practice and you will frequently hear, "I will never view teaching in the same way." We believe that to focus only on Reading Recovery as a one-to-one intervention for low-performing first-grade children is to overlook the systemic nature of its professional development design and the wider implications of teacher knowledge on reading instruction.

References

- Allington, R. L. (2005). How much evidence is enough evidence? *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, 4(2), 8–11.
- Allington, R. L. (2006). *What really matters for struggling readers: Designing research-based programs* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Allington, R. L. (2011). Research on reading/learning disability interventions. In S. J. Samuels & A. Farstrup (Eds.), *What research has to say about reading instruction* (4th ed.) (pp. 261–290). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Ballantyne, A. (2014). Five foundational ideas: Still at the cutting edge. *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, 14(1), 5–18.

Clay, M. M. (1966). *Emergent reading behaviour*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Auckland, New Zealand: University of Auckland Library.

Clay, M. M. (1991). *Becoming literate: The construction of inner control*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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

Clay, M. M. (2005). *Literacy lessons designed for individuals part one: Why? when? and how?* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Dorn, L., Soffos, C., & Doore, B. (2015). A comprehensive intervention model: A diagnostic, decision-making process for closing the literacy gap. In L. J. Dorn, S. Forbes, M. Poparad, & B. Schubert (Eds.), *Changing minds, changing schools, changing systems: Comprehensive literacy design for school improvement* (pp. 27–38). Los Angeles: Hameray Publishing Group.

Johnston, P. (2005a). Revolutionary contributions. *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, 4(2), 3–4.

Johnston, P. (2005b). [Review of the book *Changing Futures: The Influence of Reading Recovery in the United States*.] *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, 5(1), 58–59.

About the Authors



Dr. Salli Forbes is the director of the Richard O. Jacobson Center for Comprehensive Literacy at The University of Northern Iowa, where she oversees both the Reading Recovery Program of Iowa and Partnerships in Comprehensive Literacy Model program for Iowa. Dr. Forbes' interests include teaching for and assessing fluency, student engagement and motivation, responsive teaching, and educational change. She is co-editor of the books *Changing Minds, Changing Schools, Changing Systems: Comprehensive Literacy Design for School Improvement* (Hameray, 2015) and *Research in Reading Recovery Volume Two* (Heinemann, 2004), and the author of several articles on topics related to early literacy. She is currently vice president of the North American Trainers Group.



Linda Dorn is a professor of reading education at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, where she is the director of the Center for Literacy. She is a Reading Recovery trainer and is former president of the Reading Recovery Council of North America. Dr. Dorn is recognized nationally for her contributions to literacy education and has presented at over 300 conferences at international, national, and state levels. She has published widely with eight books on literacy instruction, book chapters, articles, and media publications. Among her most-recent books is *Changing Minds, Changing Schools, Changing Systems: Comprehensive Literacy Design for School Improvement* (Hameray, 2015), co-edited with Forbes, Poparad, and Schubert.

Pinnell, G. S., DeFord, D. E., & Lyons, C. A. (1988). *Reading Recovery: Early intervention for at-risk first graders*. Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service.

Pinnell, G. S., Lyons, C. A., DeFord, D. E., Bryk, A. S., & Seltzer, M. (1994). Comparing instructional models for the literacy education of high-risk first graders. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 29(1), 8–39.

Schwartz, R. M. (2005). Literacy learning of at-risk first-grade students in the Reading Recovery early intervention. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 97(2), 257–267.

What Works Clearinghouse (2008, 2013). *Beginning reading intervention report: Reading Recovery*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.