

Achieving Literacy

How Children Learn to Read and Write

A theory of *literacy processing* is the foundation upon which teaching in Reading Recovery is based. Marie Clay's research focused on the formative years of literacy learning in particular the literacy behaviors of young children as they learned to read and write continuous text over a period of time.

The principles listed below, evolving from Clay's theory of literacy processing, serve to guide teaching and learning in Reading Recovery:

Reading and writing are complex problem-solving processes.

When children read and write, they pick up and use information from a variety of sources, work on it, make a decision, and evaluate the response in a continuous cycle of learning. Readers and writers take the initiative to solve problems as they acquire and practice in-the-head strategic activities.

Reading and writing are reciprocal and interrelated processes.

A complex theory of literacy learning acknowledges that writers have to know how to do certain things that overlap with things that readers have to know or do. The two processes are concurrent sources of learning and contribute to each other in early literacy learning.

Literacy learning involves reading and writing continuous text.

Readers and writers read continuous text — not just letters, sounds, or words in isolation. Reading and writing continuous text requires the integration of many behaviors essential for meaningful communication.

Literacy learning involves continuous change over time.

As children learn to read and write, their processing systems are changing as they make new links and learn more each time they read or write. Close and careful observations inform teachers about changes in a child's literacy behaviors over brief periods of time. Daily recording of behaviors enables teachers to make helpful teaching moves.

Children construct their own understandings.

The child must actively work on printed messages using all his current abilities and knowledge, while a teacher supports the child as appropriate.

Children come to literacy learning with varying knowledge.

What children can do when entering school is closely related to their prior opportunities to learn. Therefore, children begin their learning journeys in many different places.

Children take different paths to literacy learning.

Children enter the literacy learning process with differing profiles of competencies and will, therefore, take unique paths to literacy learning. Marie Clay describes this as different paths to common outcomes.

Building on strengths makes it easy for children to learn.

Teachers must know a child's strengths in order to work with existing competencies and make maximum use of each child's current literacy repertoire to support accelerated learning.

Learners extend their own learning.

With massive opportunities to read and to compose and write messages pitched at an appropriate difficulty level, children learn more and improve their literacy processing.

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.

Jones, N. K., & Smith-Burke, M. T. (1999). Forging an interactive relationship among research, theory, and practice: Clay's research design and methodology. In J. S. Gaffney & B. J. Askew (Eds.), *Stirring the waters: The influence of Marie Clay* (pp. 261-285). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Schmitt, M. C., Askew, B. J., Fountas, I. C., Lyons, C. A., & Pinnell, G. S. (2005). *Changing futures: The influence of Reading Recovery in the United States*. Worthington, OH: Reading Recovery Council of North America. (See Chapter 4)

Watson, B., & Askew, B. (Eds.) (2009). *Boundless horizons: Marie Clay's search for the possible in children's literacy*. Auckland, New Zealand: Heinemann. (See Chapter 3)