

REDUCING READING AND WRITING DIFFICULTIES

Whatever their origins, reading and writing difficulties have a large learned component. They limit achievement in school learning. They get worse if untreated and many pupils get further behind their classmates over time even when they receive available treatments. Surprisingly, although what is difficult about reading differs markedly from child to child the programmes they have been placed in have often been prescriptive and general.

If the young school entrant has not been able to learn in the classroom programme after one year at school, what happens if the education system organises to provide him with individual instruction each day in a programme which starts with what he can do and takes him along his own particular route into reading and writing? At the organisational level that is what the Reading Recovery programme does. Research has shown that a large percentage of children who were the poorest readers in their schools after one year at school responded quickly to such an approach. Resources saved by the rapid progress of these children to average levels of performance can be directed to the very small percentage who need help for a longer term.

Reading Recovery is based on two assumptions. The first is that a programme for a child having difficulty learning to read should be based on a detailed observation of that child as a reader and writer, with particular attention to what that child can do. The programme will work out of these strengths and not waste time teaching anything already known. The second assumption is that we need to know

- how children who become readers learn to read
- how children who become writers learn to write.

Understanding this we are then in a better position to help children who are having difficulty. The progressions will vary slightly from one education system to another depending on the programmes and the ways in which they are delivered.

A STARTING POINT

My research observations of successful children learning to read have, over the years, led to my view of reading acquisition expressed in *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control* (Clay, 1991a). This is a general theory of learning to read which makes several assumptions.

- It assumes that a theory of reading continuous texts cannot arise from a theory of word reading because it involves the integration of many behaviours not studied in a theory of reading words. (It must, of course, explain the role of word reading and letter recognition within the theory of reading continuous text.)
- It assumes that the child begins to read by attending to many different aspects of printed texts (letters, words, pictures, language, messages, stories) with limited knowledge and primitive response patterns which change in two ways: 1) learning about each of these areas expands; 2) ways of working on the interrelationships of these areas develop.
- It assumes that tasks which require the learner's close attention at first gradually require less and less attention (unless some local problem arises and needs to be solved). This means that what reading involves, what the reader is attending to, and how his mind is working on the task probably changes over the first years of literacy learning to enable the beginning reader, reading slowly and aloud, to become the fluent, fast silent reader who is

about nine years of age. There is change over time, not only in what is known, but also in how reading is carried out.

The observation procedures outlined in the Observation Survey (Clay, 1993) provide a basis for describing what a particular child has learned about reading and writing, and to some extent, what changes are occurring in the way the reader works on texts.

Longitudinal observation of children in the first years of school reveals children who are low in achievement compared with their average classmates. This may occur for many different reasons. Experience with the Reading Recovery programme shows that many of these children can respond to a supplementary programme in such a way that they can catch up to their average classmates. So the general theory about learning to read described above can be played out in a particular way to address this problem. From the general theory two distinct sets of implications for teaching can follow: one for classroom practice with children making successful progress in the school's programme, and another for the children who are the lowest achievers in the age group, not excluding any child in an ordinary classroom for any reason.

What is required for a second-chance programme for these lowest achievers?

INDIVIDUAL INSTRUCTION

The gains recorded for the Reading Recovery programme have been made with individual instruction. It sounds like an expensive approach but has proved to be economical for two reasons. Firstly, many children move through the programme very quickly, on average in 12 to 15 weeks, and their places are then taken by other children. Secondly, after leaving the programme almost all the children have been able to move forward with average children in their classes over the next three years and very few have needed further help. There is therefore a saving in special education costs. The economy lies in mounting a high-quality programme.

Why is a switch to individual instruction so powerful in its effects? It allows for a revolutionary change in teaching, devising lessons which work out from the things the child can already do, and not from the teacher's pre-selected programme sequence. When two or three children are taught in a group the teacher cannot make this change; she has to choose a compromise path, a next move for 'the group'. To get results with the lowest achievers the teacher must work with the particular (and very limited) response repertoire of a particular child using what he knows as the context within which to introduce him to novel things.

Individual instruction also allows the child who does not know when his attempts are good and when they are poor to be reinforced by the teacher immediately he makes an appropriate response. The teacher's close supervision will also allow her to detect an interfering or handicapping type of response when it creeps in, and to swiftly arrange for a better response to occur. She may structure the task (for example, provide a masking card or a pointer) or she may note the need to teach some new basis for making choices between words. Throughout the 30-minute lesson the teacher's attention is tuned to the responding history of this one child. One teacher per pupil is the only practical way of working with children who have extreme difficulty in learning to read.

The result of individual programming is that programmes differ from child to child.

ACCELERATION

The child requiring help with early reading and writing has been making very slow progress

and has been dropping further and further behind his classmates. In order to become an average-progress child he would have to make fast progress, faster than his classmates, to catch up to them. Acceleration refers to this rate of progress.

To say that the slow-progress child who cannot be pushed or placed under stress should now learn at an accelerated rate seems to be a puzzling contradiction. However, I have already discussed two important factors which help this to occur. He will get one-to-one teaching and the programme will start with his strengths and proceed according to what *he* is able to discover about reading and writing. He will get help but his teacher will follow his lead.

In addition, whenever possible the child will read and write text. He will not be diverted from printed texts to pictorial material or puzzles but will be taught what he needs to learn in the context of continuous text. (There might be good reasons for a rare exception to this.) The new letter or a high-frequency word or a spelling pattern is used in the same lesson in text reading and text writing, and the learner interacts with the teacher about the relationships of detail to continuous text.

Acceleration depends upon how well the teacher selects the clearest, easiest, most memorable examples with which to establish a new response, skill, principle or procedure. For example, the child trying to recall how to use the 'ing' verb ending may be helped by the first example of an 'ing' word that he learned. The teacher needs to select examples which are very productive: that means they occur often or relate easily to many other things. Productive examples lead to further reading or control in a number of different ways.

With problem readers it is not enough for the teacher to have rapport, to generate interesting tasks and generally to be a good teacher. The teacher must be able to design a superbly sequenced programme determined by the child's performance and to make highly skilled decisions moment by moment during the lesson.

The child must never engage in unnecessary activities that waste learning time. If the teacher judges that a child can make a small leap forward, she must watch the effects of this decision and take immediate supportive action if necessary. An expert teacher will help the child to leap appropriately; she will not walk the child through a preconceived sequence of learning step by step.

Acceleration is achieved as the child takes over the learning process and works independently, discovering new things for himself inside and outside the lessons. He comes to push the boundaries of his own knowledge, and not only during his lessons. The teacher must watch for and use this personal searching on the part of the child.

Achieving acceleration is not easy but it must be constantly borne in mind. During Reading Recovery training a teacher is challenged if she seems to be wasting the learner's time, especially when her peers notice that she is teaching something the child has already shown that he can do.

Two kinds of learning must be kept in balance: on the one hand there is performing with success on familiar material which strengthens the decision-making processes of the reader as he works across text, and on the other there is independent problem-solving on new and interesting texts with supportive teaching. Texts need to be chosen with these two kinds of learning in mind. Both will contribute to acceleration.

The teacher will foster and support acceleration as she moves the child quickly through his programme, making superb decisions and wasting no unnecessary time, but the teacher cannot produce or induce it. *The teacher cannot decide that the time has come and she will now accelerate the rate of progress.* It is the learner who accelerates because some things which no longer need his attention are done more easily, freeing him to attend to new things.

When this happens at an ever-increasing rate acceleration of learning occurs.

DAI LY I NSTRUCTI ON, I NTENSI VE PROGRAMME

Reading Recovery lessons are given daily. In that way even the child who cannot remember from day to day can be helped. The teacher acts as the memory of what his response was yesterday, and prompts him accordingly. (Twice-weekly lessons are a weak approach to meeting special learning needs. Twice a week with a group of children *makes it impossible* to design the programme to meet the needs of the individual learner.)

The power of the programme to effect change is diminished

- when the child is not attending regularly (and therefore Reading Recovery teachers contract with parents before the programme begins to have the child at school)
- when the teacher is not available to teach (because she is ill, allocated other duties, away on inservice courses).

When daily, intensive programming is not achieved the quality of the teaching and the outcomes of the programme are seriously affected.

The principles of an intensive programme allow the close supervision of the shifts in the child's responding. Short lessons held often are important for success. This allows the learning to be carried over from one day to the next.

GETTING DOWN TO DETAIL

In learning to read the child making normal progress picks up and organises for himself a wealth of detailed information about letters, print, words and reading with a spontaneity that leads teachers to believe that many things do not have to be taught. There is evidence that this attention to print in the environment, in books, and in early attempts to write begins early in the pre-school years for some children. Others, however, may have given it little thought.

From time to time the child having difficulty in learning to read may have to pay attention to the detail of print. Letter learning must be done, *although book reading can begin when only a few letters are known*. There will be a gradual accumulation of letter knowledge as the child reads and writes. Some children will need particular attention to letter formation, not 'to get it right' from the point of view of good writing but because these few children cannot analyse the form into its parts, or cannot find a learned routine for producing it.

If a child knows most of the letters one cannot assume that he has access to this knowledge while reading continuous text. One of the problems often encountered is a child not seeing any relationship between letters he recognises in isolation and what he is looking at in continuous text in a reading book. He has yet to learn how to use one source of knowledge in another context.

And, if the children selected for this programme seem to be reading quite well, one cannot assume that letter learning will 'fall into place' as it seems to do with children making average progress.

When the teacher becomes involved in teaching for detail the principle of acceleration is seriously threatened. (So also is the child's ability to use his language knowledge and the meaning of the text, as part of his information base for decision-making.) The child cannot afford to spend much time practising detail, and he may become addicted to such practice and find it difficult later to take a wider approach to the reading act. *Tuition on detail* may

aim to fill a small gap, or to clear a confusion; it *should be a detour from a programme whose main focus is reading books and writing stories*. The detour may be taken to pay attention to some particular aspect of print in the clear realisation that knowledge of the detail is of very limited value on its own. It must in the end be used in the service of reading or writing continuous text. Details must receive attention but always in a subsidiary status to message-getting.

TEACHING SEQUENCES

Every school and classroom has some teaching sequence by which reading is presented to children. For the child who has become a reading failure in that setting it will probably not be sufficient to change to a different teacher, different material and a different approach to instruction.

This remedy is often suggested, but I have not found it sufficient. Failing children differ more among themselves in response to curriculum than average children. They are a heterogeneous group whose strengths and weaknesses are different and whose learning tangles may need quite different programme details to untangle them. Programmes and teaching sequences of any standard kind are unlikely to meet the needs of severely retarded readers. While a commercial kit may be a slight improvement on nothing, the ideal programme will have activities individually selected to meet the needs of a particular child.

It therefore rests with the teacher to know the way in which reading skill develops, the teaching sequences that are possible and the short-cuts that are permissible. To be able to pick and choose among teaching techniques and learning activities, the teacher must be very familiar with her subject. *An experienced classroom teacher brings a great deal of knowledge to her Reading Recovery training because she has an inner awareness of the progressions in the classroom programme around which she can vary her particular lessons*. She has some sense of the endpoint and can bring the learners by different routes to similar outcomes.

Most school programmes will have established a series of books as the gradient of difficulty through which their children progress, and they refer to children's progress levels in terms of such books. Other programmes may leave children free to read story books, graded roughly for difficulty, and will assess progress by some other means, such as a standardised text or an informal prose inventory on a graded set of text material.

A Reading Recovery teacher wishing to bring her students to the levels of achievement of their average classmates will need to have some sequence of difficulty through which she attempts to move her students. Our programme uses many different books but an attempt is made to grade these simple story books against some benchmark series. A book may be selected because it can contribute to a particular child's learning problem of the moment but the teacher knows the level at which that book can be equated to the benchmark series. The instruction needs to be related to the progressions in the reading series used in the school or the classroom programme, but it need not take place on that series of books. Teachers can keep a child for weeks on one level, choosing books of parallel difficulty until the child is ready for the next step. On the other hand the teacher may help the child to jump forward two or three levels, support his initial uncertainty and be able to conclude that the acceleration was justified. In both these cases the child would not usually be reading the graded material of the classroom series but material known to be of equivalent difficulty (see Clay, 1993).

RECIPROCAL GAINS OF READING AND WRITING

The child who has failed to learn to read is often also struggling to write stories. Often remedial lessons exclude the teaching of writing as this is seen either as some extension

that comes after reading or as a different subject. An alternative view sees both reading and writing in the early acquisition stage as contributing to learning about print. (They are separated by educators for timetables and curricula.) A case can be made for the theory that learning to write letters, words and sentences actually helps the child to make the visual discriminations of detail in print that he will use in his reading (Clay, 1982).

Children in Reading Recovery write stories every day. It is in the writing part of the daily lesson that children are required to pay attention to letter detail, letter order, sound sequences, letter sequences, and the links between messages in oral language and messages in printed language. It is particularly important that children learn to hear the sounds in words they want to write, and find appropriate ways to write these sounds down. The writing knowledge serves as a resource of information that can help the reader. However, this reciprocity does not occur spontaneously. The teacher must remember to direct the child to use what he knows in reading when he is writing and vice versa. The child comes to control a high-frequency vocabulary for writing and learns strategies for spelling more and more words in his language. Reading and writing are interwoven throughout the Reading Recovery programme and teaching proceeds on the assumption that both provide cues and responses which facilitate new responding in either area.

The simple 'stories' or sentences which Reading Recovery children write are viewed critically by some educators. They want these children to run before they can crawl. Daily writing shared with the teacher helps these children to understand more about the task, to learn to compose (simple though the composition may be), and to emerge from their programme with great resources for making the most of writing opportunities in the classroom.

Reading knowledge tends to draw ahead of writing knowledge after a while but at the beginning of school what the child can write is a good indicator of what the child knows in detail about written language.

This article is an excerpt from the book

Reading Recovery

A Guidebook for Teachers in Training

By Marie Clay

ISBN: 0-435-08764-9

This article offers an introduction to the Reading Recovery approach – an early intervention programme designed as supplementary assistance for children who have not responded well to literacy learning in their first year at school. Marie Clay has been a teacher of young children, a teacher in special education, a school psychologist and a teacher of school psychologists.

The article is taken from the book "Reading Recovery" which introduces teachers to ways of observing children's progress in the early years of learning about literacy.