

Pre-1984 New Zealand: A Well-Documented Miracle



“I began a two-year research and development project in 1976. Six teachers with special interests in literacy issues formed a research team, and each week one taught a child behind a one-way screen while the rest of the team talked about what was occurring. They discussed the child’s difficulties and how the teacher responded, relating this to collective knowledge of theory and practice. The one-way screen was so useful that it became a technological requirement for training Reading Recovery teachers.”

*Marie Clay
from the Eighth Annual
Charles A. Dana Awards
1993 Yearbook*

Marie Clay’s interest in early literacy began when she was a lecturer and doctoral student at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. She asked the question, “Can we see the process of learning to read going off-course close to the onset of instruction?” Her doctoral dissertation, *Emergent Reading Behaviors*, examined how all children were learning to read and write in their first year of instruction. Because she studied and recorded the entire span of change for children at all levels of progress, she began to understand what to try to teach the low achieving children to do. At the time, she could not have imagined that her work would be the beginning of an early intervention literacy program that would spread to three continents by the end of the century.

In 1976, after Clay had become a professor and head of the Department of Education, she embarked on observational research that led to the development of Reading Recovery. For a full year she observed and recorded how a teacher in an old lean-to building on Wynyard Street worked individually with hard-to-teach students. After a year of detailed observation and record keeping, she recruited a team of six additional people – teachers, supervising teachers, reading advisers, and senior university students – to determine what teaching activities worked in which situations.

As they observed, the team discussed pupil and teacher interaction. After each lesson, observers asked the teacher to explain why a particular technique or book was chosen. During these discussions the teacher’s implicit assumptions had to be explained verbally rather than remaining intuitive hunches. Clay wrote, “A large number of techniques were piloted, observed, discussed, argued over, related to theory, analyzed, written up, modified and tried out in various ways, and most important, many were discarded.”

This work with 6-year-old learners revealed that the children had diverse problems with print, and they also had diverse strengths and skills. Building on strengths, teachers discovered they could design individual instruction to accelerate learning. Marie Clay wrote of this time, “By the end of 1977 we had a well-documented miracle full of surprises.”

Timeline

1966

Marie Clay completes her dissertation, *Emergent Reading Behavior* at The University of Auckland.

1972

Clay's books *The Early Detection of Reading Difficulties*, *Sand*, and *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behaviour* are published in Auckland by Heinemann, NZ.

1976

Clay begins the Reading Recovery development research.

1977

The New Zealand research team is enlarged to seven, and Reading Recovery techniques are developed.

1978

Reading Recovery is given a field trial in five New Zealand schools.

1979

Heinemann, USA begins distribution of the second edition of Clay's books.

One hundred more teachers train in Auckland.

1982

A team of professors from The Ohio State University journey to New Zealand for an international reading conference. While there, they meet with Clay and observe Reading Recovery in action.

One year follow-up study of Auckland school is published.

1983

National implementation of Reading Recovery begins in New Zealand.

1984

Reading Recovery emigrates to Australia, and ...

After 2 years of development, Reading Recovery was put to the test in 5 diverse Auckland schools. The schools agreed to field trial the program with children who were falling behind their classmates. Teachers were prepared for mounting the program in their schools and for designing individual lessons for these children.

This initial field trial laid the groundwork for training Reading Recovery teachers, and for many teaching activities that have become standard in Reading Recovery. By the end of the year, the majority of low-performing students had been brought into the average band of their class and their lessons were discontinued. The program expanded to 48 Auckland schools, and the lesson time was standardized to 30 minutes. Results for the second year of implementation revealed the same rate of success in bringing low-performing students up to the average band of their class. Follow-up studies revealed that Auckland students who had a full series of Reading Recovery lessons were able to maintain their gains and continue to perform in the average band of their classmates.

As a result of Reading Recovery's strong success in the Auckland school district, the program was implemented across New Zealand between 1981 and 1988. By 1990, the intervention had emigrated to Australia, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.



Marie Clay and Barbara Watson come to The Ohio State University in September 1984 to begin training the first North American Reading Recovery professionals.