

Policy into Practice



What is reading?

Patricia L. Scharer, PhD
Professor
The Ohio State University
College of Education and Human Ecology

A simple view of reading has much appeal. Wouldn't it be nice if learning to read was just a matter of learning 26 letters and 26 sounds? Some languages, like Spanish, are fairly consistent in letter-sound relationships, but in English, it just isn't so. First, although it is certainly important for readers of all ages to have knowledge about how letters and sounds relate, English is much more complex. Some words are phonetically regular like "cat" or "man," while others require much more complicated understandings such as whether the word starting with the letters "ch" came from French, as in "chateau," or Greek, as in "choir" (and then there's "chair"). Second, reading is more than decoding individual words. As an adult reader, I am fairly certain that I could "read" a paragraph in German, but alas, my understanding would be totally absent (as well as my accent, I fear).

"Understanding," "knowledge," and "comprehension" are words we often use to describe what we want to achieve through the act of reading. Letters and words are, of course, vehicles required for understanding. But the act of comprehension takes place, not on the page, but in the brain. Marie Clay's definition of reading provides a framework for discussing our goals for reading instruction. She writes, "I define reading as a message-getting, problem-solving activity which increases in power and flexibility the more it is practiced" (1991, p. 6). Let's take those three ideas one at a time while considering the implications for instruction.

Policy into Practice is a series of briefs created to support the efforts of districts to achieve the Ohio Third Grade Reading Guarantee. Each brief will focus on a question about literacy teaching and learning and provide a response to the question, implications for teaching, questions for further discussion, and suggested readings. *Policy into Practice* briefs are intended to support conversations among educators leading to quality instruction and increasing literacy achievement.

Implications for teaching

Message-getting. Message-getting focuses on the role of the reader in making meaning. Thus, reading without meaning is not really reading—like my reading of a German text. I may say the words, but I will not understand what I have said. By defining reading as “message-getting,” we commit to a focus on the creation of meaning in the reader’s brain. So it’s essential to have appropriate, meaningful texts for children to read and lots of those texts. Children need quality stories that they find both interesting and within their capacity to read and understand to find success as a reader.

Problem-solving. As adult readers, we have developed ways to successfully approach unknown words. We may look at parts of a word and think about other words we know to consider the word’s pronunciation and meaning. Or we may use a glossary or other resource to learn more about the word. Children need to know that it’s their job to figure out unknown words based on what they know about letters, sounds, words, language, and texts. Young children can learn to look at the picture, think about the meaning of the story, and link that to the first letter or parts of the word to read it. They can also learn to look at parts of the word that they know or think about a word that is similar. For children to be both independent and successful, it’s important to teach them to reread—to try again—to use what they know about the meaning, the sentence, and the word to figure it out.

The notion of problem-solving, however, assumes that the reader

notices the problem in the first place! So many readers, particularly those who struggle, see reading as “getting as many words as I can so I can get done,” rather than a time to notice when the meaning-making breaks down due to unknown words, unfamiliar sentence patterns, or limited background information. Teaching children to monitor their reading ensures that they will notice when their understanding isn’t quite right—or if a word doesn’t look quite right—and do something about it.

Increases in power and flexibility the more reading is practiced. Clay’s definition emphasizes the need for children to have many, many opportunities to read engaging texts. It’s simply not enough to read a paragraph or two during small-group instruction each day, a context some may call “criminal print starvation”! I once visited a kindergarten classroom where the children knew exactly what to do when entering the room—move your clothespin to show your lunch status, hang up your coat, put your book bag away, and read quietly using your own box of books until the teacher indicates that it’s time to finish. Independent reading needs to be full engagement with books, which requires the teacher to have a wide selection of books and to teach students how to select books that they can read successfully and independently. The amount of time when the class is reading independently can gradually grow until reading books and writing about



their reading are the focus of the individual children’s work while the teacher is with small groups.

In contrast to reading a small bit of text, one at a time during small-group instruction, children read the entire text to themselves during guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) as the teacher listens to individuals and provides instruction based on students’ needs. The whole class can enjoy a story or poem through shared reading with enlarged texts. And a school-home book program, like the inexpensive KEEP BOOKS® designed by OSU literacy experts (www.keepbooks.org), will encourage children to read at home—to their parent, to the dog, to their stuffed animal, or to their baby sister! Every reading experience builds on the one before to strengthen the abilities of the reader. Each of these reading contexts can provide important practice time for readers to increase their reading in both and abilities power flexibility.



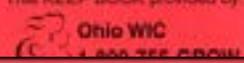
KEEP BOOKS®
 The Ohio State University
 807 Kinnear Road
 Columbus, OH 43212
 (614) 292-2869
 (800) 678-6884
 fax: (614) 688-3452
 www.keepbooks.org

My Happy Heart



Written by Kecia Hicks

Words Count 39
 Read pre-K

This KEEP BOOK provided by:
 Ohio WIC
 1-800-785-8909

Is your heart happy?



Here are some suggestions from KEEP BOOKS at The Ohio State University as you begin to start reading with your child. Be sure to follow your child's interest and pay attention to the things he/she notices about the book as you look at it and read it together.

- Read the book with your child. Be sure to make the experience fun. Designate a special reading place and time in your home, so that your child looks forward to reading time.
- Invite your child to talk about the pictures. Point out the pictures and the word that goes with it.
- Read the book several times so that your child becomes familiar with the language in it.
- Invite your child to join when he/she knows the book.
- If your child notices a certain word or letter, encourage him/her to find more of that word or letter throughout the book.
- Use colored pencils to color the pictures in the book together.

The suggestions above were taken from the parent guides included in every KEEP BOOKS K&E's box. For more information on how to help your child take the first steps to reading with you, please go to www.keepbooks.org.

KEEP BOOKS®
The Ohio State University

Time to rest my happy heart.



Here are some fun activities to do after reading this book with your child several times.

- Talk about the health and safety ideas in the book. What did the character do in the story that helped her/him stay healthy and safe?
- Talk with your child about how he/she can be healthy and safe. Make crumpled eggs for around your house reminding healthy habits. For example, you could place a egg above the bathroom sink that reads "Wash your hands!"
- After you have finished reading, make your own book.* Keep the experience fun by making your book you and your child are involved in the process. Write the book together using pictures from magazines or grocery ads. Write the words on one page and draw the pictures on the facing page. Make sure to use capital and lower case letters, the way they are used in this book.
- When you are finished reading, have your child place her/his books in a special box with her/his name on it.

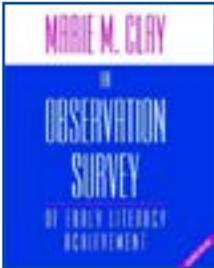
*For more information about purchasing blank books, My Own KEEP BOOKS, please contact us using the information on the back of this book.

This **KEEP BOOK®** belongs to: _____

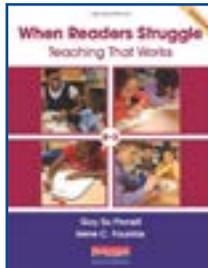
Questions for further discussion

1. What does this sentence mean to you: "The act of comprehension takes place, not on the page, but in the brain"? What does it mean for our teaching?
2. What are the ways we can ensure that children see reading as a meaning-making, problem-solving activity?
3. How much time do readers in your school spend reading books that are meaningful and appropriate for them? How could that amount of time be increased?

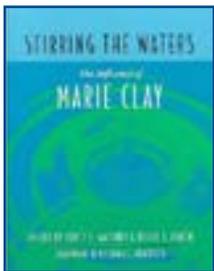
Suggested readings



Clay, M. M. (2002). *An observation survey of early literacy achievement*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. (See chapter 2: Reading and writing: Processing the information in print, pp. 14-22.)

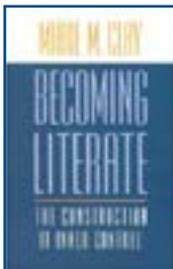


Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (2009). *When readers struggle: Teaching that works*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

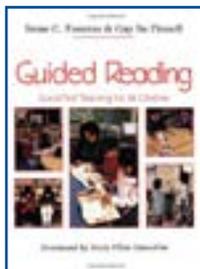


Guthrie, J. T. (1999). The young reader as a self-extending system: Motivational and cognitive underpinnings. In J. S. Gaffney & B. J. Askew (Eds.). *Stirring the waters: The influence of Marie Clay* (pp. 149-164). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

References



Clay, M. (1991). *Becoming literate: The construction of inner control*. Auckland, New Zealand: Heinemann.



Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (1996). *Guided reading: Good first teaching for all children*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.