

Marie Clay's Messages as President of the International Reading Association

Billie Askew, trainer emeritus, Texas Woman's University

In 1992–1993, Marie M. Clay was president of the International Reading Association (IRA), the first non-North American educator elected to that office. Her bimonthly column, President's Notebook, in *Reading Today* provided a venue for her thoughts about literacy learning.

To anyone familiar with Marie Clay's work, it is not surprising that two broad themes emerged across her messages:

- the emphasis on *individual* learners who take different paths to common outcomes, and
- the value of starting with what is *known* regardless of the age or competency of the individual.

A brief description of each President's Notebook entry is provided below. Look for themes that permeate Marie's messages in 1992–1993.

Emerging global issues: Quenching the thirst for knowledge (June–July, 1992)

In her first presidential message, Dr. Clay chose to focus on international issues, specifically access to professional development and current, appropriate materials across diverse cultures, countries, and languages. She expressed concern about the international dropout rate.

She closed with a series of questions for educators around the world to consider from nursery school to adult literacy classes:

- What in our literacy activities will engage learners in more literacy learning of their own?
- What in society will sustain the reading habit? and
- How can we support communication and free flow of information?

She challenged us with this statement: "Unless we answer these questions, we can never fully meet the needs of literacy learners throughout the world."

What does it mean to be illiterate? (August–September, 1992)

In this message, Dr. Clay focused on adult literacy. She challenged our thinking about the term "illiterate," saying it conjures up images of people unable to read anything. Yet it is often used to refer to those who are just less literate than we would like them to be.

Dr. Clay argued that adult literacy programs must start with what the learner already knows—value it—and build on it. These learners must be able to bring their own personal resources into their lessons (e.g., their oral language and their knowledge

of every day life). Adult literacy programs must

- address the needs and motivations of the learner,
- allow the learner to start from existing competencies, and
- provide materials that need to be read for a specific purpose.

It's time for a new standard in standard setting (October–November, 1992)

Dr. Clay focused on practices involving the setting of standards around the world—standards for teacher training, for student performance, and for curricula. She voiced concern about standards that don't allow for individual differences and argued that teaching toward set standards will likely limit individual achievement at either end of the achievement distribution.

Rather than standards that make individuals jump fixed hurdles or reach a certain level of achievement, Dr. Clay suggested the creation of standards that refer to the type and quality of education to be delivered by the school system.

Once again, Dr. Clay suggested moving from what a child knows and allowing for different routes to literacy learning. "The way to higher standards is through higher individual achievement for all students no matter where they currently fall in the distribution of achievement" (p. 3).



Language policy and literacy learning

(December 1992–January 1993)

Dr. Clay represented IRA on a UNESCO panel that explored how language policies affect literacy learning. In this message she focused on some practical examples of language policies and their effect on school learning. She acknowledged that each country decides language policies because of linguistic, historical, social, and economic realities as well as community values.

Dr. Clay concluded that

- learning to talk and having many opportunities to talk is the best preparation for literacy learning;
- on entry to literacy learning, the least complicated way in is to read and write the language already spoken; and
- children ages 5–8 learn a second language easily in good school programs with well-trained teachers and they

need a rich oral language environment in both languages after taking on a new one.

She challenged systems to consider which factors in their pattern of literacy learning need to be adjusted to maximize outcomes of the policy.

Learner-centered instruction saves resources

(February–March, 1993)

Based on an APA document called “Learner-Centered Psychological Principles: Guidelines for School Redesign and Reform,” Dr. Clay argued that learner-centered education saves resources by promoting independent learning. She said that starting with what the child already knows saves teacher time and child time. Learners bring prior knowledge and ways of learning to school tasks and can initiate, construct, and consolidate their own learning. The sense of control and being effective comes from success in new kinds of learning.

Already a learner: A fable

(April–May, 1993)

Written as a fable, this message from Dr. Clay challenged the notion of having all children ready to learn when they enter school. Often the ‘planners’ forget about cultural and social backgrounds and about individual differences and varied experiences.

All too often, things children already know and do are banned when they enter school. Now the teacher determines the agenda. In the fable, a developmental psychologist called for consideration of how individual children personally travel through school environments. The psychologist further suggested that educators could ensure continuity between institutions (from home, to preschool, to kindergarten, to Grade 1) so that entry into Grade 1 allows children to show competency rather than bewilderment.

Remembering Marie

In 1998, Marie Clay spent a week in Pennsylvania to support the implementation of Reading Recovery in the Mid-Atlantic Region. Most of her time was spent in sessions with teachers and administrators. However one day, Marie and I were able to get away for some sightseeing in Gettysburg. We jumped on a tour bus with about 20 other sightseers and toured the battlefield as the driver shared his knowledge of the battle. Marie listened intently and when the driver asked if anyone had questions, Marie immediately spoke out and shared how The Maori Wars in New Zealand happened about the same time as the conflict in Gettysburg. Other people on the bus began asking Marie questions. By the end of the tour, everyone on the bus had moved to sit closer to Marie so they could hear her share information on the Maori Wars and her view of the senselessness of this conflict. These people didn’t have any idea who she was but were intrigued not only by what she was saying but the passion in her voice as to the high value she placed on the Maori culture. No matter where she went, Marie made an impact. She had an international view that made her a special person to all who had contact with her. It was a privilege to know her—Marie M. Clay.

Janet Bufalino, Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania