

Marie Clay: Splendid Scholar and Literacy Leader

Linda Gambrell, professor, Clemson University; current International Reading Association president

Marie Clay was not only an exemplary teacher and scholar, she was a wonderful, witty, woman who lived life to the fullest. What a legacy she has left to those of us in the field of literacy. Marie Clay's research made a difference, leading to revolutions in literacy instruction for struggling readers. Her theory-driven research addressed important literacy issues and was elegantly designed and executed. Her findings were not limited to Reading Recovery, but rather she boldly speculated about broad issues related to literacy learning. Literacy historians will undoubtedly remember Marie Clay as the founder of Reading Recovery, but we must all remember that her writings and research changed literacy and education's trajectory in significant ways.

I was a very new assistant professor at the University of Maryland in the mid-1970s and that is where I remember hearing about and reading Marie Clay's initial writings about Reading Recovery. The 1972 publication of her book, *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behaviour*, provided important insights about the developmental progress of beginning reading. Then, in the early 80s, my early childhood literacy colleagues began talking about the one-to-one intervention coming to the U.S. There was great excitement and enthusiasm when Marie Clay brought her Reading Recovery program to The Ohio State University, primarily because of the success of Reading

Recovery in New Zealand and Clay's international reputation as a researcher and scholar.

I remember being in awe of Clay's scholarship and research. Little did I realize that in the 1990s I would have the honor of serving on the board of directors during her term as president of the International Reading Association (IRA). While I had read much of her work and heard her present at a number of conferences, I did not meet her personally until our time together on the IRA board. I consider it quite a privilege to have known her and had the opportunity to see her in action. In addition to being an exceptional scholar she was a wonderful person. She was a strong leader for IRA, had strong convictions, high ethical standards, and always kept children's literacy learning at the center of her thinking.

Without a doubt, Clay is among the most frequently cited researchers in the field of literacy. In 1999, I conducted a survey with members of the National Reading Conference, considered by many to be the most prestigious literacy research organization in the U.S., in order to identify scholars who most influenced literacy practices across three decades: 1970, 1980, and 1990. While many individuals in the field of literacy were identified for the significance of their work, Marie Clay was the only scholar who was identified as a major influence across all three decades.

Clearly, her work has contributed in a major way to the heritage and history of literacy research and practice.

In thinking about writing this tribute to Clay, I revisited the paper I wrote about the results of the survey. One of the things that I remembered was how eloquently colleagues spoke about Clay's impact on the field of literacy. I decided that revisiting the recognition accorded Clays' work and the comments of her colleagues would be a wonderful way to honor Marie Clay—a tribute not from me, but from leaders in the field of literacy.

Respondents to the survey cited Marie Clay's work on early literacy development as being influential during the 1970s and a number of her publications were specifically identified as influential: *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behaviour (1972)* and *Early Detection of Reading Difficulties (1972, 1979)*. Margaret Griffin commented that *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behaviour* "opened our eyes to how children learn to read and write. It was a new view of how to do research in real classrooms. A seminal work." Patricia Koskinen remarked, "The work of Marie Clay...has had a strong influence on the instructional practices of early childhood educators in preschools and the primary grades."

According to survey respondents, Marie Clay's work during the 1980s built on and expanded her earlier

Marie Clay: An Honored Mentor, Colleague, and Friend

work. Perhaps because the 1980s was a prolific time for Clay, none of her publications dominated the list, but a wide number of books, chapters, and articles were mentioned. One anonymous responder noted, “She changed the way we assess and teach beginning readers. Her influence is seen in the acceptance of observation as an assessment tool. Also, she influenced the shift from the medical model to continuous, naturalistic assessment.”

With respect to the 1990s, Marie Clay’s Reading Recovery work was regarded as highly influential, and a number of her publications related to Reading Recovery were cited. David Reinking noted, “Reading Recovery

has had a direct affect on instruction in the many schools where it has been implemented. It has also had an indirect affect on our perspective about remedial struggling readers. It is also consistent with the tenor of the times politically...and remarkable in the sense that it has remained, for the most part above the fray—inside and outside the field. An instructional practice that has components to which a diverse range of researchers, policymakers and teachers can relate.” According to Cathy Collins Block, “Clay’s work changed our paradigm concerning early literacy. She showed us that ‘waiting was not enough’—that teaching concepts of print could

enhance, rather than hinder, literacy development.”

Each decade of Clay’s work gave us new ideas and understandings about literacy learning. In particular, she will be remembered for using observations of literacy behavior to capture change over time, the notion of accelerated progress to bring children back to a normal trajectory of progress, and “following the child” so that reading work and problem solving is within the child’s capabilities. Marie Clay will be remembered as a splendid scholar and literacy leader.

It is hard to find words to express what Marie Clay has meant to the field of reading education around the world.

Who has done more to promote young children’s literacy?

Who has done more to promote teachers’ professional knowledge, confidence, and practice?

Who has done more to promote the concept of research-based practice and practice-based research?

No one, I think. She was, in the truest sense of the word, a gem—a professional stone so unique, both in its origin and in the manner each facet was shaped by experience, that there is no other like it. Never has been. Never will be.

She will be missed, as she is revered, by her colleagues, to be sure. But more importantly, she will be both missed and revered by the literally hundreds of thousands of children and parents whose lives have been forever changed by the important work she undertook throughout her life and career.

*P. David Pearson, professor and dean,
Graduate School of Education, University of California, Berkeley*