

# A Tribute to Marie Clay

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From her revolutionary dissertation “Emergent Reading Behaviors” in 1966 to nationally and internationally acclaimed 2005 books, *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals*, throughout her years as a cognitive psychologist, university professor, teacher, Marie M. Clay has conducted research to better understand how children think and learn and how to effectively teach struggling students to read and write. Throughout her life, Marie read widely, listened carefully, and closely observed children and teachers at work. Because of her acquaintance with so many fields of study, she enabled us to enter the worlds of literacy, language, psychology, neuroscience, and education.

Marie Clay always seemed to be just ahead of the curve, writing about the systematic observation of young children’s responses in classroom reading and writing in the first years of schooling before such scrutiny became commonplace, and making emergent literacy and early intervention metaphors for quality educational practice before everyone else did. Marie’s scholarship is extensive, and her influence on both the science of learning and literacy learning and the development of application for this science through Reading Recovery is immense.

Marie Clay impacted my life as a university professor, teacher and researcher in three fundamental ways. When I met Marie Clay in 1985, she asked me why I wanted to become a Reading Recovery university trainer. I told her because I wanted to better understand how researchers such

as Bruner and Luria influenced her thinking and development of Reading Recovery. She looked startled and asked why Luria? I explained that I read Luria’s 1973 book, *The Working Brain: An Introduction to Neuropsychology*, while a doctoral student in neuroscience. During class one day, my professor commented that Marie Clay had applied Luria’s theories of the working brain to discuss the reading processes in *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behavior* (1972) and writing process in *What Did I Write?* (1975). Marie said my professor was right, but she wanted to hear an insider’s perspective about the contribution of Luria’s theories of learning to Reading Recovery. I agreed to come up with some potential answers.

During my training year, I wrote many references to Luria’s theories of the brain’s working system that seemed to support the teaching procedures in *The Early Detection of Reading Difficulties* (Clay, 1985). I also decided that in order to better understand and describe emergent working systems for reading and writing text, it would be best to teach first-grade Reading Recovery children who were struggling the most. The first-grade classroom teachers in my neighborhood school agreed that the very hardest to teach Reading Recovery children were also classified learning disabled (LD), however, federal and district policy prohibited the placement of these children into an LD resource room until third grade. I started teaching Reading Recovery students classified as LD

that year and continued to teach this population of students until I retired.

The following year, Marie and I met for several hours to examine and analyze the Reading Recovery “LD” children’s lesson records and audiotaped teacher/student conversations and behaviors that I had collected in 1985–1986. It was a memorable experience. Using specific examples of children’s processing and my responses, we discussed how and why Luria’s model of the functional organization of the brain supports Reading Recovery procedures. These data revealed that once the Reading Recovery children learned to integrate and coordinate the parietal (motor), occipital (eye), and temporal (ear) lobes of the brain, their processing and problem solving while reading and writing improved greatly.

In those few hours of conversation with Marie, I saw an astute, analytic, flexible problem solver at work, a very personable mentor who never made me feel uncomfortable or inadequate. Marie encouraged me to incorporate the ideas discussed and illustrated in Luria’s functional organization of the brain into The Ohio State University Reading Recovery theoretical and clinical coursework if I thought it would be helpful to teacher leaders as they worked with the most difficult to teach Reading Recovery students. I did.

The second way Marie influenced my life is related to the first. During our memorable meeting previously discussed, Marie gave me a draft copy of her 1987 article, “Learning to be

Learning Disabled.” I immediately identified with Marie’s position on learning disability so thoroughly argued in this article.

As a first- through fourth-grade classroom teacher and primary learning disability teacher for 8 years in the 1960s and 1970s, I was part of the emergence and growth of the LD field. In my opinion, the history of the LD field was a series of different renditions of the same tune that says the problems of children with LD can be attributed to a defect within the children themselves. The policy to remove children who were struggling to learn to read from the classroom and place them in a LD resource room to receive extra help was becoming institutionalized. Moreover, there was an extensive body of research that documented the ineffectiveness of these programs. Once labeled, children remained “learning disabled” for a lifetime.

Marie’s influential article gave voice and validity to support the idea that many children who are labeled “learning disabled” are in truth instructionally disabled. That is, they are children who have no neurological disorder at all, but who had a series of unfortunate experiences, usually inadvertent, before formal schooling or during their first years of schooling that interfered with their developing the neural networks to learn how to read and write.

Marie Clay’s classic article made a huge impact on my thinking, research, and reason for wanting to teach this special population of Reading Recovery students. As I worked with the Reading Recovery “LD” children during the next 20 years, I accumulated substantial evidence to document that Reading

Recovery intervention prevents learning disability placement. The 1987 pilot study and follow-up study, from a population of 110 children independently classified as learning disability prior to Reading Recovery intervention, was published in 1989 in the *Educational Research Service Spectrum*. I continued this line of research interest and writing for many years.

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Finally, Marie’s collective body of books and articles and my own research investigating struggling readers’ learning and teacher learning has helped me to better understand how and why learning involves active individuals reorganizing and constructing knowledge *and* that thinking and decision making is always tentative. From her early days working and writing in New Zealand, Marie found ways to encourage and engage teachers in processes that further their thinking, adapt their beliefs, and foster a desire to teach struggling children differently.

Marie also taught us that in order for struggling readers to be successful, teachers must bring to bear their own intelligence, experience, knowledge,

and feelings, in their teaching. They must develop into self-directing, inquiring, reasoning, and attuned decision makers. Marie gave teachers their professionalism and asked them to assume a decision-making role in regard to curriculum, instruction, and the assessment of student progress. I hope we never lose that professionalism.

Marie Clay’s pivotal role in my life culminated in the writing of *Teaching Struggling Readers: How to Use Brain-based Research to Maximize Learning* (Lyons, 2003) which I started writing after our daylong meeting in 1987. After reading a draft copy of this book, Marie said she was happy that I had finally pulled all these ideas together. I felt very honored that she agreed to write the foreword to my book.

Marie Clay was the most curious and inquiring person I have ever met. She spent her life incorporating recent research and theories of learning from multiple disciplines to help us better understand literacy learning and how best to teach struggling students. At a time when she could have lived a life of leisure, Marie continued to revise and update her influential books. When I last talked to Marie on the phone, which was 3 weeks before she died, she said she had worked hard during the last several months to get her “ducks in a row.” Marie was happy to have completed the revision of the *Record of Oral Language* and thrilled that the political struggles Reading Recovery had been facing in the U.S. the last few years seemed to have ended with the release of the What Works Clearinghouse report that establishes Reading Recovery as an effective intervention based on scientific research.

Marie Clay was driven by the belief that a person who thought she knew it all and had done enough research, reading, and writing was fooling herself. She was one of the great minds of the century and her thoughts will continue to be my greatest source of intellectual stimulation, inspiration, and motivation to continue her work.

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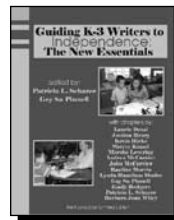


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