



Dame Professor Marie M. Clay: Scientist, Professor, Colleague

Stuart McNaughton, professor, The University of Auckland, New Zealand

Marie was first and foremost a scientist studying children's development. Her seminal doctoral work, a longitudinal study of literacy development, and the later classic research and development programme which led to Reading Recovery came out of her deep interest in the nature and conditions of children's development, both typical and atypical. She was quite insistent, as only Marie could be, that it was her developmental science that was the basis of what she did, saying many times that she hated being introduced to conferences as the 'Reading Lady.'

She accepted as a working definition of developmental science that it described and explained development. But in her definition, the science was able to contribute to optimising development. This latter she took to be as much a part of what it meant to be a scientist as the usual theory building and fact finding. Developmental psychology is an optimistic science and in this regard she was an optimistic person. It is one of the reasons she eschewed the damaging effects of labelling children. She looked for the ways in which psychological and social resources could be designed to support children's optimal development.

Her particular fields of inquiry were wide-ranging and included oral language and socio-emotional development, as well as the development of reading and writing. An exceptional

scientist, she discovered and explained new or puzzling phenomena, and she invented new procedures and tools. A beginning list includes the following:

- Identifying developmental patterns before school which she first labelled 'emergent literacy;'
- Discovering the presence and role of self-corrections in early reading which led to the still current theory that these are regulatory strategies maintaining the complex components needed to read accurately and fluently with meaning;
- Designing new tools for assessing early development in both literacy and oral language;
- Reconceptualising reading errors as diagnostic indicators of the reader's instructional needs;
- Early identification of developmental trajectories in which children are trapped in a cycle of low progress and therefore have limited access to stimulation;
- Operationalising the concept of 'personalised learning', brilliantly demonstrated in Reading Recovery lessons which are individually designed using generic

frameworks of assessments and instruction.

Her applied achievements are recognised most directly in the Reading Recovery programme. This highly effective early intervention programme has near national implementation in New Zealand as well as in parts of education systems in Australia, Bermuda, Canada, Denmark, England, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, the United States, and Wales. In 2005, 11,000 New Zealand children were taught, and the figure is over a million who have been taught worldwide. The U.S. Department of Education recently recognised the quality of the research base to Reading Recovery through its Institute of Education Sciences What Works Clearinghouse, identifying it as an effective programme meeting more standards with higher effectiveness than comparison programmes.

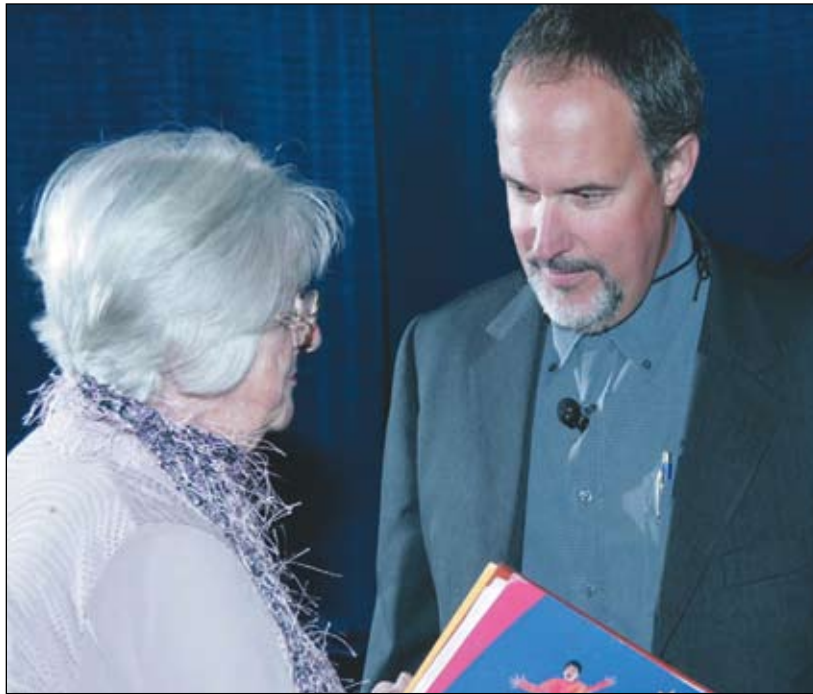
The generalisation of Reading Recovery across countries represents a unique feature of Marie's scholarship which was the understanding that optimising development requires understanding educational systems and developing policy that will help resource those systems. She worked with policymakers in government agencies to get Reading Recovery implemented successfully, nationally, and internationally. The procedures have been redeveloped in Spanish, French, Danish, and Irish, and

currently are being trialled in further language contexts. In the 1990s, they were redeveloped in Maori, the indigenous language of New Zealand. This following a long standing contribution to Maori educational concerns which started in 1970s, with the development of a receptive language measure in Te Reo Maori.

Marie was a very clever writer and she enjoyed thinking about her writing. An example is her book on emergent writing: *What Did I Write?* That is a great title for a book, not the least because it was a direct quote from one of the children she observed. It reflects the point that children develop hypotheses about the nature of writing in advance of controlling all the elements. She is the author of more than 32 books currently in use around the world and has published more than 75 papers on her subject. At the time of her death, a further five books were being prepared for publication

A great teacher, Marie was a rigorous and nurturing mentor, fiercely protective of, and an advocate for, her students. Among her graduate and doctoral students there have been heads of departments and deans from four New Zealand universities; directors of two research centres; chief executives of governmental agencies including the New Zealand Ministry of Education; national and international professional developers; a generation of school psychologists, principals, Reading Recovery educators, countless teachers; and at least one politician.

It was interesting to observe how Marie's focus in her science changed, seemingly in parallel with the ages of her much-loved children. In the earliest years at the university the focus



It was interesting to see how Marie's focus in her science changed, said former colleague Stuart McNaughton—seemingly in parallel with the ages of her much-loved children.

was early development. As her children got older she developed courses in middle childhood, and when older still in adolescent development. If she had continued at the university longer, almost certainly there would have been a course on grandparenting.

Marie maintained a high level of contact with children, parents, and teaching communities. Among her many commitments, she assisted in the formation of the Reading Association in New Zealand, was president of the Auckland Reading Association in 1971–72, and coordinated the New Zealand Reading Association councils from 1971–74. In 1978, she was awarded the International Citation of Merit at the World Congress on Reading, and the following year she received the David H. Russell Award for distinguished research in the teaching of English from the National Council of Teachers of English in

the U.S. She was inducted into the International Reading Association's (IRA) Hall of Fame in 1982. Her early and continuing involvement with the local and international activities of the IRA, along with her enormous contribution to understandings about literacy learning and teaching, were acknowledged when in 1989, in the highest poll ever, the membership of the IRA voted for Marie Clay to become their president for the 1992–93 term. Marie was the first non-North American to be appointed to this prestigious and demanding position. In 1993 she received the Charles A. Dana Award for Pioneering Achievements in Education.

She had an ongoing contribution and commitment to social science research in New Zealand, standing on a variety of national advisory committees and taking an active role in



and becoming a Fellow of science bodies such as the New Zealand Psychological Society and the Royal Society of New Zealand.

Her achievements as a career academic are spectacular. Marie graduated from The University of Auckland with a PhD in Education in 1966; she was appointed the first woman professor at the University in 1975, and the first woman head of an academic department. In 1987, she was made a Dame Commander of the British Empire and in 1994, was awarded the title “New Zealander of the Year.” Five overseas universities have awarded her honorary degrees. In 2004, she was awarded the Distinguished Alumni Award from The University of Auckland.

I had very few disagreements with Marie. One was the occasion of her farewell speech at the University of Auckland when she apparently retired. Apparently, because she then worked harder and travelled more than ever before. She used analogies to great effect in her work and she used an analogy at her farewell that typified her humility. She described her times during Christmas holidays playing on a family farm. She and the other children would make trails through the bush on the farm. When she returned the next holidays, the trails were overgrown. She said that her work had made trails. But they would disappear as others would find new trails. I think she got the analogy wrong. True, others will make new discoveries; they will add ways of researching with and optimizing children’s literacy development. But, these accomplishments will be done standing on this work and in reference to the extraordinary and enduring body of work from this great scientist.

Remembering Marie

I can’t imagine my professional life without the knowledge and experience I have gained based on Marie Clay’s work. Her work changed the way I viewed teaching and learning and I will forever be grateful for the enlightenment. I know there are many other reading professionals that feel this way also. The body of research and writing she left us will continue to be a major contribution to the field of literacy and teaching.

Marie Clay was a unique individual, well-honored, and well-loved. As I reflected on her work and how she lived her life I recognized dichotomies that contributed to her uniqueness that also might provide lessons from which we all can benefit.

Marie Clay had a huge vision — the vision that all children can become literate if teachers learned how to teach them. Her big idea was that it might be possible to change the trajectory of literacy failure for most children by changing the way teachers teach. And that this could be done by observing and valuing partly correct responses rather than deficits.

But she developed this vision based upon looking through a fine lens at the idiosyncrasies of individual learners. The life lesson might be that you should have a big vision, but it is the little things that contribute to your success.

*Connie Briggs, Emporia State University;
current North American Trainers Group president*

Marie Clay was one of the greatest, if not the greatest, educational minds of the Twentieth Century. Her research, writing, and most importantly, the professional development models she put in place to ensure the ongoing relevance of her work are exemplary.

Peter Hunt, Australia

The ripples of Dr. Marie Clay’s legacy live on, in each child who comes to literacy as a result of the wisdom she shared and each teacher who will never teach or think the same because they put Dame Marie Clay’s theory into practice. I am so grateful her life touched mine.

Tanai Dawson, Canada

I was so fortunate to hear Dr. Clay speak on several occasions. To me it was like hearing Thomas Edison talk about how he invented the light bulb!

Betty Bruce, Georgia