

Remembering Marie

With this tribute to Dr. Clay we celebrate our joy in having had Marie as a mentor and a friend and our loss in knowing she is no longer with us! I want to share an introduction I wrote for her visits to Michigan in 2001. Just a small reminder of all she has done for us.

It is my pleasure this morning to introduce Dr. Marie Clay.

To introduce you to the remarkable individual, I would like to follow Saint Exupery's advice in *The Little Prince*. He warns that when you tell grown-ups "that you have made a new friend, they never ask you any questions about essential matters. They never say to you, 'What does his voice sound like? What games does he love best? Does he collect butterflies?' Instead they demand: 'How old is he? How many brothers has he? How much does he weigh? How much money does his father make?'" Only from these figures do they think they have learned anything about him."

I know you would want me to focus on essential matters. So, I won't tell you how old Marie is! And I won't bore you by reading a long list of the books and articles she has written, though I'm sure you know many of them very well. And I won't even talk about the data on the remarkable success of Reading Recovery in America and around the world. Though I don't think it is boring at all that in the last 15 years Marie's work has touched the lives of over a million children in this country.

Instead, let me focus on essential matters. You might like to know that Marie does indeed collect butterflies. Her butterflies are ideas, ideas related to literacy learning and teaching. She has come across these ideas in the strangest way

— by actually observing children over time as they learn to read and write, and by observing teachers as they work with children over time to support the learning of the most at-risk children. She has recorded these observations in great detail and shared them with us in books like, *What Did I Write*, *Observing Young Readers*, *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behavior*, and *The Early Detection of Reading Difficulties*. She continues to reflect, refine and interpret these ideas in light of current theory and practice in literacy education and her ongoing observations. She shares this analysis with us in recent titles such as, *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control*, *By Different Paths to Common Outcomes*, and most recently, *Change Over Time in Children's Literacy Development*.

The butterflies she has collected form the basis for Reading Recovery, the foundation of our work with children. But Marie would be the first to admit the collection is not complete and the organization only tentative. She provides the model and the challenge to remain tentative in our work with children. To always test the effect of our teaching by observing how children respond. To confirm our tentative theories by looking for signs of increased independence and acceleration in our student's reading and writing.

Now I think you'd want to know what games does Marie love best? Surely one of her favorite games is politics—the politics of literacy and the politics of education. There have been lots of great researchers and theoreticians in education, but few who have had the impact of Dr. Clay. Some researchers would transform literacy education by freeing teachers from the constraints of basal programs to pursue more authentic

literacy activities. Other theorists would promote literacy for all children by tightly controlling the phonetic structures in early reading materials and carefully scripting teachers' interactions with their classes. Marie has taken a different path. She has strived to ensure that the most at-risk children have access to individual instruction by the most highly qualified literacy professionals.

None of us would be here today if Marie just collected butterflies, and like so many educators, ignored the political game. She has played the game at the local, regional, national, and international level. She has developed her game strategies and adjusted them for different situations and contexts. In doing so, she has modeled for us how to advocate for what is essential.

Finally, I know you would want to ask, "What does her voice sound like?" The tones I hear are those of concern, compassion, and commitment. She is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of teachers and children. Her voice is making possible the equity of educational opportunity that has often been promised but seldom delivered to many of our most promising but at-risk children.

It is my great pleasure to introduce a new friend to some and old friend to many, Dr. Marie Clay.

*Robert M. Schwartz,
Oakland University;
current RRCNA president*



Remembering Marie

“Beyond mountains there are mountains” is a Haitian proverb brought to life by Tracy Kidder who tracked the lifesaving work of Dr. Paul Farmer, a physician and anthropologist, committed to curing infectious diseases, initially in Haiti. The topography of Haiti mirrors life in that the ascent of one mountain yields another, as meeting one challenge reveals another. Dr. Marie Clay was not surprised by challenges; like Farmer she anticipated them and engaged with us shoulder-to-shoulder in the spadework of solving them.

The following quote from Kidder’s book reminded me of Marie. Her name and her work could be substituted for Farmer’s.

I once heard Farmer say that he hoped a day would come when he could do a good job just by showing up. It seems to me that time has already arrived. A great deal of what he’s started goes on without him now . . . Meanwhile, other definitions than the usual, of what can be done and what is reasonable to do in medicine and public health have spread from him. They’re still spreading, like ripples in a pond.

How does one person with great talents come to exert a force on the world?

Marie’s communication was a succession of demonstrations of attuning oneself with the world of another. She intently listened, observed, interpreted, then acted. Her actions were responses born out of observations and driven by a vision of the world as it might be—a totally literate global community. She knew that alone, she did not have the reach that was required, so she enrolled a worldwide community of colleagues who have the professional will to accomplish the impossible, one child

at a time. Her theory pivots on the deceptively simple, profound idea that a child could accelerate her rate of learning if a teacher responded to the sense that *this* child is making of oral and written communication along her idiosyncratic pathway of becoming literate. She understood that assumptions about groups deprive us of the guidance that we need to teach individuals, particularly those whose literacy learning has not yet taken off.

To return to Kidder’s question, “How does one person with great talents come to exert a force on the world?” In Marie’s case, like Farmer’s, she chose to be responsible. She chose to respond, to act, in the face of overwhelming numbers, lack of precedence, and seemingly insurmountable challenges. The unparalleled success of young children inspires teachers who desire to hone their craft in order to customize opportunities for each child to achieve the learning standards of her peers. Importantly, Marie and Farmer thoughtfully guided the development of unique collaborative infrastructures, constructed from the inside out within each system (i.e., class, school, district, university, state, and country), to fit and sustain teachers’ work.

In a note to Marie on Jan. 5, 2003, I wrote, “I continue to be awed by your thinking and writing as I dig more deeply into sections of *Change Over Time*. Thank you for choosing children’s literacy learning as your professional area of impact. I don’t know where we would be without your work.” In a response on January 9, Marie replied, “Thank you very much for letting me know that it has value.”

By knowing you, my life was enlarged and my horizons made endless.

*Janet S. Gaffney,
University of Illinois
at Urbana-Champaign*

As a thinker and a theorist affecting education and development, Marie Clay stands among the intellectual giants of the Twentieth Century. She had an uncanny knack for asking important questions, which arose largely from her deep knowledge of the field of literacy education and her interest in any knowledge or research that may have bearing on early literacy development. . . .

. . . Marie was extraordinary as a teacher, mentor, and colleague. She was concerned not only with her personal pursuit of knowledge, but also in helping others come to understand and to investigate ideas. She was kindly and gentle, but she could move people to do things they might not otherwise have undertaken and she could challenge ideas and positions in ways that made you think, re-think, and grow and learn. Marie Clay received many awards and high commendations during her lifetime. However, she valued these honors not as approbation for herself, but as confirmation and validation of her intellectual work, which she passionately desired to live on.

Those of us who have been fortunate enough to have learned from and worked with Marie Clay have an obligation to help see that her ideas and her work continue to influence educational thinking and practice in the present and into the future.

*Noel K. Jones,
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