

Marie Clay: An Honored Mentor, Colleague, and Friend

It is an awesome task to describe Marie Clay as a mentor, colleague and friend. In my attempt, words fail to capture the extensive and nuanced ways that she impacted and influenced those of us who were privileged to be mentored and befriended by this remarkable humanitarian.

The authors in this section provide insight into the nature of her learning, thinking, encouraging, and challenging. We are reminded of her never ending search for what is possible. Sailing in new directions herself, she supported her colleagues to travel to previously uncharted territory as well. She provided an outstanding example of extraordinary research, borne from her keen observations of children's development. She employed unusual lenses to observe and capture change over time and to reveal to all of us what we had not noticed before.

Marie Clay respected her colleagues and friends, as she respected all learners. She generously shared her vision, views, and theories, but she also listened to those of others. She could learn from conversations with children and classroom teachers as well as esteemed professional colleagues and regularly made time for these conversations. She demonstrated to all of us the importance of continuing to form new questions and search for the answers in many locations. We were reminded continually not to become too attached to any particular answer, but to remain tentative in our theories and ideas.

Marie Clay was a friend to all of us as an optimistic, questioning, compassionate presence in our professional lives. Above all else, she was a friend to each child who benefited from the gift of literacy that her research and writing made possible.

— Salli Forbes

A Tribute to Marie M. Clay: She Searched for Questions That Needed Answers

Billie Askew, trainer emeritus, Texas Woman's University

When I consider Marie Clay's influence on my life, I must return to the late 1960s, long before I knew her. My advisor and mentor at the University of Arizona, literacy scholar Ruth Strang, talked of visiting with a young researcher from New Zealand at the World Congress in Copenhagen. Dr. Strang predicted that this extraordinary thinker would contribute to world literacy in ways not yet imagined. When I met Marie Clay I was able to connect the dots—and to realize my good fortune in becoming a part of the legacy forecast by Dr. Strang.

Marie Clay influenced my thinking in so many ways. She gave me a whole new definition for the word *inquiry!* Her world and her work were tied to questions about what *matters*. She asked questions that have altered understandings of early literacy learning around the world. An overarching question in all of her work was, "What is possible . . .?" In her own words, Marie told us

I live in a perpetual state of enquiry, finding new questions to ask, then moving on. I do not have 'a position' or a safe haven where what is 'right' exists. Pragmatism precludes idealism. I search for questions which need answers. What exists in the real world? And how well do our theories explain what exists? (Clay, 2001, p. 3)

Marie's perpetual state of inquiry had a profound effect on me. At first, it was not always comfortable when I was the object of her inquiry and wanted to respond with an 'acceptable' if not 'right' answer. I had to abandon some 'safe havens' and be open to new ways of thinking, asking new questions of my own. What a gift she gave me—both professionally and personally.

Examples of the many questions she asked about emergent literacy are cited below. Take time to consider the *importance* of each question—and the *significance* of the potential answers.

- How early could one see the process of learning to read moving off course?
- What do *proficient* young readers do as they problem solve increasingly difficult texts? What evidence do we have of sequential changes in their proficiency?
- What would have to change to have all children readers and writers with average for age competencies by age 9 or 10 years?
- How do *acts of processing* change over time during literacy acquisition?
- Does an overview of what we know provide a useful mapping of change over time in



literacy processing that might guide early literacy interventions?

- What is it about continuous texts that challenges a reader or writer?
- What is the relationship of early writing to early reading?
- How could young teachers sharpen their observation of children’s efforts?
- What is possible for children with reading problems?
- What is possible when we change the design and delivery of traditional education for the children that teachers find hard to teach?
- What enables Reading Recovery to work in educational settings internationally?

Many of these questions—and scores more—originated in Marie’s unprecedented original research of emerging reading behaviors (Clay, 1966) and continued throughout her career as she sought answers to questions that needed answers. Through her inquiries, Marie Clay contributed groundbreaking advances in our understandings of emerging literacy behaviors. I highlight four of many areas of her inquiry that have significantly influenced my thinking, my work, and even my world.

Systematic Assessment of Early Literacy Achievement

A guiding question in Marie Clay’s early research — “Can we see the process of reading going astray close to the onset of instruction?” — led her to observe and record exactly what occurred in the natural class-

room setting. She found ways of observing the first steps into reading, writing, and changes in oral language acquisition. Her work gave us tools for the assessment and analysis of consequential changes over time in early literacy learning. One outcome of her work is *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 2002, 2006) in several languages. Her pivotal contribution of running records as a tool for observing text processing behaviors has revolutionized our understandings of the reading process and of individual learners.

Teachers and researchers can now use her *unusual lenses* to analyze changing in emerging literacy behaviors. And Marie’s question, “How could yesterday’s behaviors evolve into tomorrow’s?” (Clay, 1982, p. 1), translates to an observant teacher responding to a child’s daily changes in literacy behaviors.

A Detailed Account of a Complex Literacy Processing System

Consider the significance of this question: “What do proficient young readers do as they problem-solve increasingly difficult texts?” (Clay, 2001, p. 43). Using her unusual lenses, Marie provided a description of the behaviors of proficient readers. Her accounts of effective processing systems provide the grounded theory upon which her work rests.

Space prohibits even a cursory description of this theory, but the complexity of the literacy processing system is reflected in the following quote:

In a complex model of interacting competencies in reading and writing the reader can

potentially draw from all his or her current understanding, and all his or her language competencies, and visual information, and phonological information, and knowledge of printing conventions, in ways which *extend both the searching and linking processes as well as the item knowledge repertoires*. Learners pull together necessary information from print in simple ways at first...but as opportunities to read and write accumulate over time the learner becomes able to quickly and momentarily construct a somewhat complex operating system which might solve the problem. (Clay, 2001, p. 224)

Within her complex theory of literacy processing, Marie Clay did not ignore writing. Throughout her career she pursued the question, “How does early writing influence early reading?” Her unprecedented work on children’s writing, *What Did I Write?* (Clay, 1975), influenced educational theory and practice in schools. When Anne Haas Dyson discovered *What Did I Write?* in an Austin, Texas, bookstore, she realized that the book promised intellectual interest in and respect for children’s actions. She claims that her own research path began that day—in that bookstore aisle (Gaffney & Askew, 1999, p. 286).

Marie helped us to see connections between writing and the strategic activities children use when reading. Her perpetual state of inquiry was evident when she suggested that studying how children use what they learn in writing when they are reading “is a patch of research worthy of cultivation” (Clay, 2003, p. 302).

A Heightened Respect for Individual Differences

“Can educational practice escape from ... expectations of average for age, and linked assumptions that children must take common paths to common outcomes?”
(Clay, 1998, p. 223)

Marie Clay’s work is built on the demonstrated belief that children take *different* paths to common outcomes. Marie Clay did not apologize for holding the view that it is not a matter of pedaling harder along the same general path that works for successful readers, but “*it is more a matter of initially changing the route several times in order to get to the same destination*” (Clay, 2003, p. 298).

I can think of no literacy scholar who has been a greater champion of the individual. Marie Clay’s article on *accommodating* diversity (1998) has influenced my work in so many ways, redefining diversity to accommodate any and all the variants of individual differences.

Marie Clay’s focus on the individual translates to her emphasis on the *learner*. Consider her view of the teaching/learning process: “Acts of reading are acts of construction rather than instruction. Most instruction... serves to fill out children’s knowledge sources” (Clay, 2001, p. 137). She viewed the learner as actively constructing new ways of problem solving with appropriate support from an observing teacher.

Negating a deficit model of learning, Marie Clay posed a powerful question: “Could we work with a curriculum of competencies?” (Clay, 2001, p. 131). Reading Recovery is a demonstration of such a curriculum—

with the focus on an individual child’s existing competencies. Marie viewed the Reading Recovery teacher as an observer of a child’s literacy processing behaviors who is responsive to the learner and makes effective decisions, moment by moment, based on the child’s responses. The ultimate goal is an independent learner. What a contrast to prescribed curricula and methodologies designed with no *real* child in mind!

Early Intervention for the Lowest Literacy Achievers

“What is possible when we change the design and delivery of traditional education for the children that teachers find hard to teach?” That question led to years of research in New Zealand (Clay, 1993) and the development of Reading Recovery. Research and evaluation across the world have demonstrated what is possible with Reading Recovery (in several languages)—a dramatic reduction in the number of learners with extreme literacy difficulties (Schmitt, Askew, Fountas, Lyons, & Pinnell, 2005).

Reading Recovery embodies Marie Clay’s groundbreaking work in literacy. It brings diverse individuals by different routes to full participation in their classrooms. The ways in which Marie has moved her inquiry and grounded theory into practice is legendary, preventing literacy failure for countless young children around the world.

After implementing Reading Recovery in New Zealand, Marie Clay asked yet another question: “Could what worked in New Zealand be replicated in another country?” (Clay, 1997, p. 659) Understanding the challenges of placing an innova-

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tion into existing education systems, Marie proposed structures to support the dissemination and scaling up of Reading Recovery in diverse settings around the world. Data from several countries document Reading Recovery’s effectiveness in a variety of socioeconomic, sociocultural, and sociolinguistic settings.

Nobel Prize-winning physicist and educational reformer Kenneth G. Wilson used Reading Recovery as a model for the process of redesigning education. “Reading Recovery offers United States education its first real demonstration of the power of a process combining research, development (including ongoing teacher education), marketing, and technical support in an orchestrated system of change” (Wilson & Daviss, 1994, p. 76).

Thank you, Marie Clay!

Each time someone asked Marie Clay if she realized the magnitude of her contributions, she quickly responded that it was not enough—that there



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are many more children to reach. Her retort is reminiscent of Tennyson who said, "So much to do, so little done, such things to be." It is now our challenge to see that her work continues for all the children who need help—so much to do.

Thank you, Marie Clay, for probing new hypotheses and asking the tough questions. We will try to stay true to your legacy of inquiry. Only through inquiry will we move our thinking forward and generate new hypotheses to keep your legacy alive. Because of your pursuit of finding what is possible, we have learned from you that

"All things are possible until they are proved impossible—and even the impossible may only be so as of now."

— Pearl S. Buck

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