Describing Marie Clay's contributions to the theory of literacy teaching and learning through her development of Reading Recovery would take several volumes. Most obviously, while recognizing cognitive, perceptual, social, and cultural differences among children, she has demonstrated that none of those differences is terminal when it comes to literacy learning and that early powerful intervention can undo conceptual confusions, restructure literate processes, and change learning trajectories as well as drastically reduce or eliminate the need to classify children as disabled or dyslexic. Her framework and accumulated evidence has inspired researchers from different theoretical persuasions to explore these issues and, inevitably, they arrive at similar conclusions. However, parts of Marie's work developed in Reading Recovery are, I believe, revolutionary and have not yet been fully engaged by the reading research community.

To explore a single example, consider Marie's commitment to keeping the child in control of learning. This is most obvious, of course, in her insistence that we “follow the child's lead” and in her early recognition of the significance of self-correction. Keeping children in control of their literacy learning requires that they notice when things are not quite right. It means tuning their inner ears to notice the sound of disjuncture and teaching them to interpret it as a cue for problem solving rather than as a sign of failure. Different branches of psychology have now validated her early work on this. However, there is an additional part of keeping children in control of their learning that is less well accepted, and that is her concern about “teaching for strategies.” For many theorists the concept is counter-intuitive. Common wisdom still holds that the teacher's job is to teach a strategy and have the child practice it until it is automatic. The idea that the child might generate strategies rather than have them all explicitly taught is anathema. Turning this on its head, Marie argues that keeping children in control of their learning requires that they be set up to encounter manageable problems that they can solve or partially solve alone or with support.

From this view, the teacher's job is not delivering knowledge, but arranging for the problem to be manageable, sustaining the child's problem-solving attempts emphasizing flexibility (“What else can you do?” / “How else could you figure that out?”) and helping the child build a productive personal narrative around the event. “I like the way you figured that out” draws children's attention to their agency and persistence—spinning a narrative of personal agency. “How did you figure that out?” takes it a step further and asks the child to spin an agentive narrative in which the child is the active protagonist who generates strategies and solves problems. In this way, Reading Recovery and its extensions are also about building productive literate identities with resilience built into them. The identities are part of narratives of agency constructed at the point of encountering difficulty. Because of Marie's attention to the partially correct, the agency narrative is repeatedly rehearsed even when the child's efforts are only partially successful, thus constructing an identity that resists defeat and helplessness. Teachers don't just help construct the narrative, though, they help children connect productive narratives and identities to the evidence in their reading and writing practice. These narratives are very different from those that turn attention to a character trait of ability or smartness, for example, which produces...
Marie Clay has pushed us to maintain coherence among theories of development, literacy, learning, teaching, and teacher education—a coherence based on meaning-directed, self-extending systems.

Marie Clay On the Purpose of Reading Recovery

...to dramatically reduce the number of learners who have extreme difficulty with literacy learning and the cost of these learners to educational systems.