

Remembering Moments Shared With Marie Clay

Marie, the Researcher

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It is hard to express the mixture of emotions we all feel at this moment. The joy in having had Marie as a mentor and a friend, the loss in knowing she is no longer with us! I want to share an introduction I wrote on one of 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 class. 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.

Remarks from the tribute to Marie Clay, June 4, 2007, at the 2007 Teacher Leader Institute & North American Leadership Academy in Vienna, Virginia