



Home

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Join & Support

Funds, Medals & Competitions

Teaching & Learning

Expert Advice

Research Practice

Journals & Reports

Journals

Reports

Events

News

Contact Us

Become a Society member

Join our mailing list

1983

Home / Publications / Reports / Academy

2007 Academy Yearbook

(McNaughton, S., 2007)

The 2007 Academy Yearbook details the accomplishments of the Academy of the Royal Society of New Zealand throughout the year.

Dame Marie Clay

DBE MA(Hons) DipEd PhD Auck HonDHL Ohio State University HonDHL Lesley University HonLittD (Ed) University of London EdD Purdue HonDHL Texas Woman's University FRSNZ FNZPsS HonFNZEI

1926-2007



Distinguished alumna Dame Marie Clay was a world-renowned developmental psychologist whose pioneering work in Reading Recovery in New Zealand and its successful transference to many countries of the world has won her international acclaim. Marie Clay was born in Wellington on 3 January 1926. She began her teacher training at Wellington College of Education in 1943. Marie received her Primary Teachers Certificate in 1945, and began teaching children with intellectual disabilities while studying at Victoria University in Wellington. In 1948 she completed a Masters thesis on the topic "Teaching of Reading to Special Class Children", and received an MA (Hons) degree. In 1950 she was awarded a Fullbright Scholarship and Smith-Mundt Grant to study at the University of Minnesota where she studied developmental psychology and clinical child development, courses not available in New Zealand at the time. This she acknowledged as a turning point in her understanding of how to study children's learning.

Marie Clay married in 1952 and after returning to New Zealand continued to teach children with special needs in Wanganui. In 1955 she moved to Auckland and within a few years with two young children she became involved in the early days of the Playcentre movement. She also began teaching remedial teaching at home. The sudden improvement in the reading ability of two of her pupils within a few months led her to design research to monitor progress. In 1960 she joined the University of Auckland's Education Department and taught child development to educational psychologists for the next 30 years.

Dame 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 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.

Marie Clay 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 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 miscues which can be used for diagnostic purposes;

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, Barbados, Canada, Denmark, England, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, the United States and Wales. In 2005, 11,000 NZ children were taught and the figure is over a million who have been taught world wide. The US Department of Education recently recognised the quality of the research base to Reading Recovery through its Institute of Education Sciences 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 policy-makers in government agencies to get Reading Recovery implemented successfully, nationally and internationally. The procedures have been redeveloped in Spanish and French, and currently are being trialled in further language contexts. In the 1990s they were redeveloped in Māori, the indigenous language of New Zealand. This following a long standing contribution to Māori educational concerns which started in the 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 of 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 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 grand-parenting.

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 co-ordinator for the NZ Reading Association councils from 1971 to 1974. 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 USA. She was inducted into the Reading Hall of Fame in 1982. Her early and continuing involvement with the local, and international activities of the Reading Association, along with her enormous contribution to understandings about literacy learning and teaching, were acknowledged when in 1989, in the highest poll ever, the International Literacy Association voted for Marie Clay to become their President for the 1992-93 term. Marie was the first non-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.

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