Enhancing the Lives of Learners and Teachers: Literacy Lessons Implementation in Kentucky and Ohio

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In the beginning of our work together, he was defeated, lacked confidence, and had experienced failure again and again. Reading for him was painful, hard, and exhausting. He would always say, ‘I can’t. I don’t know.’ Now, 13 weeks later, after independently writing caterpillar, he looked at me with a confident grin and said, ‘I got this…I don’t think I need your help anymore.’ And that was all I needed to hear—pure joy!

—Specialist teacher trained in Literacy Lessons™

Literacy Lessons in Kentucky

Marie Clay developed Reading Recovery© as an intervention that would prevent reading failure before it could take root in a child’s life. She also understood that special education (SPED) and English language learner (ELL) specialists could benefit from the intensive training model and that the children they served could also make remarkable progress in literacy learning if provided with responsive instruction.

If a policy of mainstreaming or inclusion for children with pronounced handicaps is operated and a specialist report is available, special conditions may be arranged, over and above the normal preventive thrust of the early intervention using the same theoretical and instructional model, under a label like ‘literacy processing theory’ but not labeled as Reading Recovery. Work with such children proceeds for longer according to need with different rules for implementation and delivery, and the lower outcomes predicted are accepted as worthwhile. This then becomes a treatment intervention for individuals, not a preventive intervention which is adopted by an education system; it involves longer-term treatments delivered to individuals but it uses the same literacy processing theory as Reading Recovery to guide instruction for individuals who have a cluster of individual handicaps. (Clay, 2015, p. 218)

Kentucky has been implementing Reading Recovery for over 28 years with great success for our most-vulnerable young readers. In 2014, Lindy, a Reading Recovery university trainer, began piloting the new Literacy Lessons intervention with the special education and English as a second language (ESL) teachers. The growth of the Literacy Lessons intervention in Kentucky has been slow, but the intervention is starting to show great success with the children served by these specialist teachers.

For Literacy Lessons intervention specialists, one challenge with implementation is scheduling a 30-minute, one-to-one time for an enrolled student and insuring that minutes in IEPs are met. Literacy Lessons teachers have found several ways to problem solve around the scheduling and changing caseloads of these specialist teachers. One teacher shared ways that she accommodates packed schedules:

I worked with one of my students during morning duty hours. They were here before school started, and I got them right off the bus and into reading. I also worked with one right after that while their class was doing morning work and community circle. Another student I worked in at the very end of the day when his class was packing up and doing SSR time.

Some Literacy Lessons intervention specialists teach children after school, others have been successful in collaborating with school teams to make adjustments to their schedules, and some have even convinced administrators to hire additional specialist teachers to help cover caseloads while Literacy Lessons teachers provide one-to-one interventions for their special populations students. One Literacy Lessons intervention specialist summarized the problem solving:

Overall, I equate it to a puzzle. It can be solved, but it takes a lot of tweaking and help from collaborating teachers and the principal to make it work. If you’re able to, I highly recommend doing so. It’s made a world of difference for me as a teacher and for the students I teach.
Despite the slow growth, feedback received from Literacy Lessons teachers about the training year and beyond has convinced us that whatever it takes to provide this training to these specialist teachers must be done. It must be done because the Literacy Lessons intervention can be life-changing for their students and the Literacy Lessons professional learning model can be life-changing for the teachers as well, as evidenced in this quote from a trained Literacy Lessons intervention specialist:

The biggest impact that Literacy Lessons training had on my teaching is the idea that there is hope for students who have experienced struggle when learning to read. As a special education teacher, the focus was often placed on supporting and maintaining any reading knowledge and skills, whereas, this training has shifted my focus to accelerating literacy learning regardless of a previous label. As Marie Clay (2016) so eloquently stated, ‘If a child is a struggling reader or writer the conclusion must be that we have not yet discovered a way to help him learn’ (p. 165). This is a HUGE shift from ‘What are the next skills to teach and check off?’ to ‘What does this child show evidence of and what does this child neglect?’ and ‘How can I support accelerated learning through reading and writing?’ I am always deepening, refining, adjusting, and THINKING about what my students need to learn, and I do it without a script. I have to be extremely focused and deliberate in order to ensure I am providing the best, most impactful teaching and learning opportunities at every moment!

Working with Literacy Lessons teacher leaders and teachers
Lindy asked the teacher leaders supporting Literacy Lessons teachers to teach children who would support their own learning about adapting their instruction to meet the needs of children with language learning issues or other special needs. The teacher leaders believe, as Clay did, that the teaching of children supports teacher learning as well as the learning of children. So if teacher leaders are to support Literacy Lessons teachers, they must build their own case knowledge while working alongside diverse learners and adapting their instruction to meet their needs.

Lindy also tried to focus one or two professional development days on helping teacher leaders in supporting their Literacy Lessons teachers. As a university trainer, Lindy recently brought the teacher leaders together to problem solve a child who had a severe hearing loss that had gone undiagnosed in preschool, 2 years in kindergarten, and for most of first grade. Once the hearing loss was discovered and corrected, his hearing improved; but he had fallen far behind on even the most-basic concepts of learning to read. The problem solving done by the teacher leaders concerning this child was impressive. But the most impactful learning experienced that day occurred for all of the teacher leaders when they saw the child Clay was referring to when she said, “This child’s time in [Literacy Lessons] may be his one big opportunity for literacy learning. Do not give up on him” (2016, p. 169).

Even more impressive to witness on that day was the child’s motivation and desire to learn to read. It was a lesson for all in the power of resiliency observed in children who face some of the most-detrimental challenges life brings. Lindy used this demonstration lesson as a study session for the teacher leaders who were reading chapter 6: ‘Adjusting teaching for particular difficulties’ in the new edition of Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals (Clay, 2016) and as a model for them to use in problem solving children with their own Literacy Lessons teachers. Lindy also used this same problem-solving format around a child to support the study sessions with Teaching Struggling Readers (Lyons, 2003).
In addition, it is important for the teacher leaders and teachers to understand that each and every child taught, whether in Reading Recovery or in Literacy Lessons, will require adaptations to meet their individual needs. That is what Clay (2016) intended:

It is because these procedures are designed for adapting instruction to the learning needs of individual children that they can be applied to special education students who are experiencing difficulty with early literacy acquisition and to English language learners, including seven-to nine-year old children who need foundational instruction in English literacy. (p. 3)

Remaining flexible and tentative in teaching are paramount, and there should be an expectation of diversity in how children work on texts.

Observations of Literacy Lessons teachers
One of our early discoveries was that teachers of special populations are excellent observers of children when they come to Literacy Lessons training. Therefore, they make outstanding contributions to the training and ongoing professional development classes, and that is a beneficial aspect of classes blending Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons teachers. The teachers are learning from one another, and these specialist teachers bring fresh eyes to the training classes.

Another discovery was the way Literacy Lessons teachers discuss the progress of their students. While both Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons teachers focus on making accelerated progress, Reading Recovery teachers typically discuss progress in terms of 12–20 weeks and in text levels. Literacy Lessons teachers, on the other hand, discuss progress in terms of months and years of growth. For example, one specialist wrote, “I currently serve a third-grade girl who started the year reading at a Text Level 12. After 3 months of instruction, she is currently at a Text Level 22. That is 1.5 years of growth in 3 months!”

Lastly, specialist teachers seemed enamored of the professional learning model of Literacy Lessons and Reading Recovery training and the ongoing professional development. They are appreciative of learning about literacy processing theory, the problem solving at behind-the-glass sessions, and the collegiality this professional learning model provides. “It is the most highly effective training and professional development that I have received in my 15 years of experience in special education,” one of the Literacy Lessons teachers reported.

Observations of Literacy Lessons student success
Lindy and Kentucky’s teacher leaders are seeing great success with Literacy Lessons students—both the SPED students and ELLs—as well as their teachers. One of the many success stories is Steven’s progress shared below.

Steven entered kindergarten in 2011. During that year he was referred for special education testing due to a variety of concerns. He was evaluated and subsequently qualified for special education services under the category of ’developmental delay.’ He also qualified for speech/language services due to expressive language and articulation delays and began receiving these services that year.

The Literacy Lessons specialist started working with Steven as he began third grade. He had made limited academic progress and his academic achievement was well below that of his peers, especially in reading. An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 2013) was administered in the fall of 2014, and Steven began receiving Literacy Lessons. Across 19 school weeks, he participated in 63 individual lessons. The Observation Survey was administered again in mid-January 2015, and because he demonstrated an early processing system, he exited successfully from Literacy Lessons.

Steven was re-evaluated for special education services in May 2015, and due to his progress, he no longer qualified. The re-evaluation report showed that he did not demonstrate any disability in the areas of basic reading, reading comprehension, or written expression. Steven exited special education services. Literacy Lessons kept him from a possible long-term special education label and placement. Steven was again given the Observation Survey at the end of the 2015 school year. The results in Table 1 show that

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<th>Table 1. Stephen’s Observation Survey Scores Across the Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>Text Reading Level</td>
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<td>Ohio Word Test</td>
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<td>Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words</td>
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even after his series of Literacy Lessons ended, he continued making progress in reading.

The following testimony from a Literacy Lessons teacher in Kentucky summarizes our experiences:

Literacy Lessons has been the best training I’ve had as a special education teacher. It was very intense and it greatly increased my knowledge of how children acquire literacy. I am so much better equipped to help my special education students who are struggling with reading and writing. Literacy Lessons has had a direct and measurable impact on their learning. I am able to use the knowledge gained from Literacy Lessons not only in my one on one lessons, but also when I am working with groups of students.

**Literacy Lessons in Ohio**

Similar to Kentucky’s history, Ohio has also benefitted from over 30 years of successful Reading Recovery implementation in districts across the state. Before her death in 2007, Marie Clay provided guidance, insight, and the authority for The Ohio State University (OSU) to seek a registered trademark for Literacy Lessons in the U.S. The OSU trainers, along with Ohio teacher leaders and trained teachers, were extensively involved in initial pilots of Literacy Lessons and worked with trainer colleagues as the North American Trainers Group (NATG) developed and refined the *Standards and Guidelines of Literacy Lessons in the United States* (2013, updated 2015). Though implementation of Literacy Lessons was small during this time, in 2014–15 OSU trainers decided to train all Ohio teacher leaders in Literacy Lessons. Teacher leaders were expected to work with Literacy Lessons students, collect data, and complete a case study. They were also involved in extensive professional development across the year, including visitations with and experiences observing trained teachers work with older children through a one-way mirror. Teacher leaders who went on to sustain Literacy Lessons in their respective sites continue with yearly professional development that is in addition to their required Reading Recovery professional development.

**Observations of Literacy Lessons student success**

As an Ohio teacher leader, Jeff began training teachers in Literacy Lessons in 2015–16. His first cohort consisted of seven teachers, all of whom were already Reading Recovery trained. Three teachers were certified in special education and the remaining four were teachers certified to work with ELL students.

One teacher who trained in 2015 was Mandy, a veteran ELL teacher with almost 40 years of experience who had close familiarity with Reading Recovery because she shared a room with Jeff during his first 3 years as a Reading Recovery teacher and then through her own training in 2013.

One student whom Mandy worked with in Literacy Lessons was a particularly interesting success story. Jasleen, an immigrant from the Middle East, was a struggling second grader. On her Language Assessment Scales (LAS) Placement Screener, her speaking and listening were strengths, as shown by scores of 100% on both subtests; but she only scored 33% in reading and 27% in writing on the LAS at the beginning of the year. Jasleen had many areas of concern as indicated by the raw scores on both the Observation Survey and several additional measures (see Table 2, September). Her scores indicated she was an excellent candidate for Literacy Lessons.

Mandy reflected:

On a personal level, Jasleen was a very quiet girl. She was hesitant to read aloud or to voice her word solving. This made it difficult to determine the strategic activity she was using and what she needed to learn to do. It was important to build her confidence level to problem solve aloud with me. Jasleen had strong oral skills but was a quiet and persistent worker. However, from the inception of Literacy Lessons, at difficulty, Jasleen never appealed. She kept her head down, looked at the pictures, and re-read. Furthermore, she would not move on when stumped. When she got stuck, I would have to intervene. She was either too shy or too proud to ask for help. I worked hard to open her to trying new strategic behavior and often said to her, ‘I need to hear you try.’

Mandy worked with Jasleen one-to-one, in 30-minute sessions for approximately 18 weeks. In that short time, Jasleen grew tremendously, as evidenced on her January exit scores in Table 2.

Jasleen’s growth was also observed in her classroom performance. She made the mid-year benchmark in second grade and continued to make good progress without needing daily, one-to-one lessons. In fact, Jasleen continued to show growth in the classroom over time — ending second grade on level, maintaining her growth in third grade, and subsequently passing high-stakes, end-of-year tests with scores that allowed her to avoid retention in grade due to low reading achievement, as stipulated by Ohio’s Third
Grade Reading Guarantee law. This type of progress — securing a self-extending system in reading and writing that ensures ongoing literacy learning—is an expressed goal for teachers working in Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons: “Learners would need to be able to read and write texts relatively independently in ways that could lead to the learner taking on new competencies through his or her own efforts in the classroom” [Clay’s emphasis] (Clay, 2015, p. 219).

Mandy explained Jasleen’s progress:

[T]he appropriateness of Literacy Lessons lay in being able to customize the focus, expanding or contracting according to need, and to be able to meet English language learners at their actual level and take them forward. English language learners can be really excellent candidates for Reading Recovery as well as Literacy Lessons. It is a question of being sensitive to a little different set of needs, a little different timeframe for acquisition, and some modified teaching strategies.

Mandy also gives some important cautionary advice about working in Literacy Lessons or Reading Recovery with ELLs. She states that teachers of students who are acquiring English must consider how to use language in ways that support, not confuse, the learner.

Saying, ‘Does that ‘sound’ right?’ or ‘Does that make sense?’ or ‘How do you know it was right?’ may only confuse the child more since they are learning English structures and may have limited English vocabulary. Ultimately what helps the most is the same advice given to Reading Recovery teachers by Clay (2016), ‘The teacher is concerned with how the child works on problem-solving and new learning. Attention is paid to what that child can do well and how to use these strengths to enable him to do the things he finds difficult’ (p. 15).

Another ELL teacher who trained in Literacy Lessons, Jill, had a similar story during last year’s training, Jeff’s first with Literacy Lessons implementation at his site.

My student entered second grade with limited English and very few skills. She was literally transformed by Literacy Lessons. Together with the classroom teacher’s efforts, the intense, daily lessons turned her into an independent reader with a newfound love of reading. Literacy Lessons changed the trajectory of second grade and became a catalyst for academic success.

Alyson, a special education teacher in Jeff’s district, began training in and teaching Literacy Lessons and documented similar success during her first 2 years of instruction with Charlene. A third-grade student in special education,

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<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Entry Scores (September)</th>
<th>Exit Scores (January)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Letter Identification</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio Word Test</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concepts About Print</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text Reading Level</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(She reached grade-level benchmark for classroom standards.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slosson Oral Reading Test (SORT)</td>
<td>36 words</td>
<td>75 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeFord Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words Sentences for Grade 2</td>
<td>Phonemes: 47/3rd stanine</td>
<td>Phonemes: 63/6th stanine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spelling: 9/4th stanine</td>
<td>Spelling: 11/5th stanine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Assessment Scale (LAS) Placement Test</td>
<td>Speaking: 100%</td>
<td>Reading: 83% (up more than 150%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listening: 100%</td>
<td>Writing: 72% (up nearly 200%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading: 33%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing: 27%</td>
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</table>
Charlene was far behind her peers; after 3 years of school and 2 years of special education services, she was reading material equivalent to an end-of-first-grade level. Table 3 documents Charlene’s scores on the Observation Survey and the Slosson Oral Reading Test (SORT) when Alyson began Literacy Lessons with her.

During her third-grade year in Literacy Lessons with Alyson, Charlene made tremendous progress and achieved over a year’s growth in Text Reading Level in just 1 year, progress that had never been seen for Charlene since she started kindergarten. Alyson continued one-to-one, daily 30 minutes of Literacy Lessons with Charlene in fourth grade and Charlene’s accelerated progress continued. By the middle of fourth grade, Charlene was reading grade-level text, demonstrated a literacy processing system, and went on to pass the fourth-grade, high-stakes, end-of-year literacy test. In effect, Charlene had made more progress in just 14 months of Literacy Lessons than she had made in the previous 3 years combined.

Alyson explains Charlene’s progress:

Literacy Lessons has provided Charlene with the ability to read with confidence. It allows me to provide lessons that are unique to the child’s specific learning needs. Being flexible is key, and knowing and adjusting to their needs is imperative. Due to Literacy Lessons and a high level of collaboration with her classroom teacher and other interventionists in the building, her reading progress continues to flourish. When I reflect back to my training year for Literacy Lessons, having Jeff observe and model procedures that could help move Charlene was so helpful. I now feel I have a plan. I know what a child needs and can quickly adjust in the moment in order to move them to where she needs to be.

Comparisons of Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons

Because Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons training uses a common text for initial training, Clay’s (2016) Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals, there could be some confusion about the two interventions. Common to both Literacy Lessons and Reading Recovery are Clay’s theories of literacy processing, understandings about how to create conditions under which learning happens, and the aim to both accelerate learning and to support the learner’s construction of a self-extending system. Table 4 on the following page highlights some of the similarities and differences that may be helpful for readers new to Literacy Lessons or Reading Recovery.

Summary of Our Literacy Lessons Implementations and Observations

In this article, the experiences of a university trainer (Lindy) and teacher leader (Jeff) have illustrated that Literacy Lessons training is a powerful tool in the hands of SPED and ELL teachers. Like Reading Recovery, Literacy Lessons shares Clay’s literacy processing theory, a rigorous training model with ongoing professional development, and the collection and analysis of data to inform instruction and guide ongoing implementation (see Konstantellou & Lose, 2009). The observations and informal data from the individual case studies shared in this article and interviews with teachers reflect what Stanford researcher Eliot Eisner (1993) said of educational research:

The major aim…in which we are engaged…has to do with the improvement of educational practice so that the lives of those who teach and learn are themselves enhanced… (p. 10)

Indeed, the implementation of Literacy Lessons in Kentucky and Ohio seems to be doing just that — enhancing the lives of those who teach and learn.

Authors’ Note: All names are pseudonyms. Special thanks to the Literacy Lessons specialists in Kentucky and Ohio for sharing these important stories of success.
### Table 4. Comparing Components of Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Literacy Lessons</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Training Qualifications</td>
<td>A licensed teacher with successful teaching experience is qualified to train in Reading Recovery for a school committed to the Reading Recovery implementation.</td>
<td>A licensed teacher certified in special education, ESL, or bilingual education who presents evidence of successful teaching experience and is working in a school that has a Reading Recovery intervention is qualified to train in Literacy Lessons.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Course Foci</td>
<td>The Reading Recovery teacher acquires knowledge of early literacy assessment, literacy processing theory, and instructional procedures for ensuring each learner’s acquisition of a processing system that is a self-extending system for reading and writing. Teachers-in-training teach multiple lessons for their peers behind a one-way glass and receive four visits from their teacher leader.</td>
<td>The Literacy Lessons teacher acquires knowledge of early literacy assessment, literacy processing theory, instructional procedures for ensuring each learner’s acquisition of a processing system that is a self-extending system for reading and writing. They also study the learning needs of older students, students with special needs, and students who are acquiring English. Teachers teach multiple lessons for their peers behind a one-way glass and receive four visits from their teacher leader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Taught During Training</td>
<td>The Reading Recovery teacher-in-training works with first-grade students who are struggling to learn to read and write. These students are the lowest-performing children in their age cohort and are included irrespective of labels, including learning disabled, special education, or ELL. A minimum of eight Reading Recovery children are taught during the school year: four children in the first wave and four children in the second wave.</td>
<td>Initially, the Literacy Lessons teacher-in-training works with first-grade children eligible for Reading Recovery in a school setting. These students are selected after the Reading Recovery teacher has identified her caseload of the lowest-performing learners. The training model specifies the number of Reading Recovery children instructed (two or more) and the timing of the initial teaching of their special-area Literacy Lessons students (e.g., in round two of Year 1 or in Year 2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Taught Beyond the Training Year/Experience</td>
<td>The Reading Recovery teacher works with first-grade students who are struggling to learn to read and write. These students are the lowest-performing children in their age cohort and are included irrespective of labels, including learning disabled, special education, or ELL.</td>
<td>A trained Literacy Lessons intervention specialist works with either a) students who have been identified for any type of special education and have not developed an early processing system; or b) ELLs who are struggling to learn to read and write and have not developed an early literacy processing system. Literacy Lessons students are ordinarily in Grades 1–4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>The Reading Recovery teacher provides individually designed lessons 30 minutes daily for each child for a maximum of 20 weeks.</td>
<td>The Literacy Lessons teacher provides daily, individually designed lessons for Literacy Lessons students. Individual lessons may extend beyond 30 minutes and the series of lessons may extend beyond 20 weeks. Decisions regarding the length of daily lessons and duration of the treatment are based on the judgments of the teacher leader and the Literacy Lessons teacher, in consultation with the school team.</td>
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### Implementation

**Daily Lessons**

Instruction includes daily reading, writing, and letter/word work. The child learns by reading and writing continuous texts. Selections of leveled texts, appropriate for each individual and presenting a gradually increasing gradient of difficulty, are based on daily running records and teacher observations.

**Daily Records**

Reading Recovery teachers monitor progress daily and maintain records of reading and writing progress over time.

**Data Collection**

Annual data collection includes every child served by a Reading Recovery teacher with records submitted to the IDEC for annual reporting and evaluation.

**Following Training**

Reading Recovery teachers continue to receive school visits and participate in ongoing professional development sessions with their teacher leader annually after training. These sessions provide opportunities to participate in behind-the-glass lessons.

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### Table 4. Comparing Components of Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons

#### About the Authors

**Dr. Lindy Harmon** is a Reading Recovery trainer at the University of Kentucky Reading Recovery Center in Lexington, KY. She has been a Reading Recovery professional for over 20 years and continues to teach Reading Recovery at the University of Kentucky. She is currently the chairperson of the Reading Recovery Council of North America.

**Jeff Williams** is a K-12 literacy coach as well as a Reading Recovery/Literacy Lessons teacher leader for the Solon City Schools in Ohio. He currently is the president of the Reading Recovery Council of North America.

### References