Realizing Clay’s Vision for Special Populations of Students: Implementation and Impact of Literacy Lessons

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Clay’s vision for special populations of students was to offer the one-to-one literacy instruction that has been proven so successful with diverse populations of first graders to a wider group of students in elementary grades experiencing difficulty acquiring beginning literacy. Clay had observed the success of Reading Recovery® teachers instructing children with learning difficulties, often identified as special education (SPED) students, and with English language learners (ELLs), and she invited explorations of the implementation of Reading Recovery procedures by specialist teachers offering individual instruction focused on the acquisition of early literacy. These specialist teachers trained in Literacy Lessons may instruct SPED children and ELLs who were served by Reading Recovery in first grade but need longer-term treatment and/or SPED students and ELLs in elementary grades beyond Grade 1 who are in need of developing an early literacy processing system. Her goal was “to establish a well-documented, redesigned intervention that ensures the highest effectiveness for special populations of children requiring individual instruction to address extraordinary literacy difficulties” (Doyle, 2009, p. 300).

For several years, Reading Recovery trainers and teacher leaders have engaged in exploratory trials of Literacy Lessons and have gained valuable insights informing the redesign efforts.

In an earlier article, Konstantellou and Lose (2009) explored both the history of Clay’s research on working with children who experience literacy difficulties and the promise of her theory of literacy processing for reaching special populations of struggling literacy learners beyond Reading Recovery. We provided the rationale for training Literacy Lessons intervention specialists and explored the historical and theoretical frameworks for developing this intervention. We stated that “Clay envisioned
instruction based on her theory of literacy learning through adaptations of the Reading Recovery training and implementation” (p. 63) and shared Clay’s thinking regarding the teaching of special populations of students who need long-term, specialist help:

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 RR. Work with such children proceeds for longer according to need and 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 preventative intervention which is adopted by an education system [Clay’s emphasis]; it involves longer-term treatments delivered to individuals but it uses the same literacy processing theory as RR to guide instruction for individuals who have a cluster of individual handicaps. (Clay, 2001, p. 218)

Clay’s thinking leads us to confirm the following:

• Literacy Lessons teachers are specialist teachers who receive intensive training in literacy processing theory and Literacy Lessons implementation.

• Literacy Lessons students include SPED and ELL students ranging in ages from 6 to 9 who are struggling to acquire a literacy processing system for beginning reading.

• Literacy Lessons instruction is delivered to individuals.

• The interventions for participating students may be longer-term treatments (beyond 20 weeks of instruction).

• The successful outcome of instruction is a literacy processing system. For those learners above a first-grade level, this success may be observed even if their achievement level remains below the expected level of average readers in their grade cohort.

For several years, Reading Recovery trainers and teacher leaders have engaged in exploratory trials of Literacy Lessons and have gained valuable insights informing the redesign efforts. Four important developments have transpired over this time, currently guide the Literacy Lessons implementation, and are the focus of this article.

First, Standards and Guidelines of Literacy Lessons in the United States (2013, updated 2015) have been developed by Reading Recovery trainers adhering to the four components for Literacy Lessons identified by Clay:

1. Individually designed and individually delivered instruction for children from special populations who are struggling to develop an early literacy processing system;

2. A recognized course for qualified teachers with ongoing professional development;

3. Ongoing data collection, research, and evaluation;

4. Establishment of an infrastructure and standards to sustain implementation and maintain quality control. (p. 3)

Second, annual reports from university training centers (UTCs) piloting Literacy Lessons have provided rich information informing ongoing efforts to establish the intervention. For example, students who participated in Literacy Lessons made considerable progress after receiving the intervention, acquiring a processing system for literacy in spite of initial difficulty with learning to read and write (see Harmon & Williams, this issue). These reports also revealed that some specialist teachers may initially find it difficult to shift from prescriptive approaches to literacy instruction to responsive, constructivist approaches that build on student strengths. Other accounts, anecdotal in nature, provided as feedback to Reading Recovery trainers, point to special educators’ appreciation for the training and the opportunities it has created to combine new learning about literacy processing theory with their specialist teacher expertise.

Third, the recent intensification of the ongoing debate on dyslexia and learning disabilities has highlighted the need for early identification and intervention designed by expert teachers to support learners who are at risk of early failure in beginning literacy. The success of Reading Recovery as an early intervention made possible the request for the training of specialist teachers in the theory and teaching procedures of Reading Recovery.

Fourth, early reports of the Literacy Lessons national data collection submitted by 14 UTCs as part of the national data collection reveal that
children in special education and ELLs have made significant progress in acquiring a processing system for literacy (Briggs & Lomax, this issue).

**Literacy Lessons Standards**

As in Reading Recovery, Literacy Lessons standards have been developed by the North American Trainers Group (NATG) to guide implementation. The purpose of these standards is to ensure that this trademark intervention is delivered with integrity and fidelity. The standards were established in 2013, informed by the results and observations of exploratory trials of Literacy Lessons training and instruction conducted by a number of UTCs in the U.S. The following descriptions of the Literacy Lessons implementation are detailed in the current Literacy Lessons Standards and Guidelines that are published by and available on the website of the Reading Recovery Council of North America (RRCNA).

**Who are the students that the Literacy Lessons intervention is intended for?**

The students served represent two distinct groups of learners who have not developed an early literacy processing system. They may be children identified for any form of special education or they may be ELLs, and generally, they are in Grades 1–4. Clay’s *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (2013) is the assessment used to identify participating students.

**Who are the teachers who are eligible to train in Literacy Lessons?**

Literacy Lessons training is offered to educators certified in specialist areas, including special education, ESL, or bilingual education. These educators are seeking additional expertise to help children from their specialist caseloads develop early reading and writing processing systems. Literacy Lessons intervention specialists are selected from among specialist teachers who have shown evidence of successful teaching and are employed in schools that are implementing Reading Recovery. Or, they may be in schools that exclusively support special populations of children.

What kind of training certifies one as a Literacy Lessons teacher?

Initial training consists of graduate level courses taught by a registered Reading Recovery teacher leader. There are two alternative models for Literacy Lessons teacher training: a 1-year model and a 2-year model.

In the 1-year training model, Literacy Lessons teacher-candidates begin their training year by teaching individual lessons following the Reading Recovery procedures to a minimum of two first-grade students eligible for Reading Recovery daily for up to 20 weeks. Following the series of lessons for these Reading Recovery eligible children, they teach individual lessons for two students from their specialist caseloads daily. These students are Literacy Lessons students selected for individual instruction to support their acquisition of an early literacy processing system. In some UTCs Literacy Lessons teacher-candidates instruct four Reading Recovery eligible first-grade students during the training year.

In the 2-year training model, Literacy Lessons teacher-candidates instruct at least four Reading Recovery eligible students during the training year following Reading Recovery procedures. During the second year, they begin teaching Literacy Lessons students from their respective specialist caseloads in daily, individual lessons.

The Reading Recovery eligible children are assigned to the Literacy Lessons trainees following selection of the school’s Reading Recovery teachers’ students. During their training, Literacy Lessons teachers-in-training teach a student behind-the-glass at least three times and receive at least four visits from the teacher leader.

What happens beyond the initial training?

To maintain Literacy Lessons certification, Literacy Lessons intervention specialists teach at least one Literacy Lessons eligible student, one-to-one, each day, in a school setting. They participate in a minimum of six professional development sessions during the school year and teach lessons behind-the-glass as scheduled. In areas where there are not enough Literacy Lessons teachers to form their own group for ongoing professional development, they join their Reading Recovery colleagues and in some instances receive other specially designed sessions for Literacy Lessons teachers as a part of their continuing learning. During these sessions, Literacy Lessons teachers observe and discuss the demonstration lessons they did in their class. Through these experiences they not only co-construct and build theoretical and practical knowledge about the provision of individualized teaching in support of children’s literacy processing systems, but they also contribute to the group’s knowledge about the benefits
of the Literacy Lessons intervention for special populations of children, the school, and the education system as a whole. Also like Reading Recovery teachers, Literacy Lessons teachers receive visits from their Reading Recovery teacher leader at their school in support of their teaching of Literacy Lessons students. These individualized visits to the Literacy Lessons teachers may also include discussions about a particular child and his overall progress that involve other specialists at the school, for example physical and occupational therapists, supervisors of English language programs, and the school psychologist.

**How is the Literacy Lessons intervention evaluated?**
Like Reading Recovery, Literacy Lessons is a research-based intervention. Thus, data are collected on every student served by Literacy Lessons teachers and are reported to the International Data Evaluation Center (IDEC) separately from Reading Recovery data. Data are analyzed to address specific research questions and to explore the effectiveness of the implementation in order to improve outcomes for students and schools (see Briggs & Lomax, this issue).

**Recent Reports of Literacy Lessons Implementations**
Many teachers and administrators have reflected on Literacy Lessons’ impact on student outcomes, teacher expertise, and whole-school benefits as presented in the RRCNA-published brochure, *Increase Literacy Expertise in Schools* (2016).

Because they are certified teachers of SPED or ELL students, Literacy Lessons teachers bring to their Literacy Lessons training and continuing development experiences particular expertise in the areas of their specialization. Literacy Lessons special educators have completed graduate-level course work or hold a minimum of a master’s degree in one or more areas of specialization including the higher incidence conditions such as learning disabilities, multiple learning disabili-

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— School Administrator

Listening and speaking, as well as content area subjects. Many teachers of ELLs are often able to speak in one or more of the languages spoken by their students. Regardless of their particular specialization, these specialist educators bring additional credentials and knowledge beyond preparation as general education teachers to their Literacy Lessons training and continuing development sessions and to the instructional adaptations for their Literacy Lessons students.

**Appreciation for new learning**
Specialists in their own right, Literacy Lessons teachers often express gratitude for the new learning acquired in their training year and continuing development experiences as illustrated in the comments provided to a Reading Recovery trainer by one recently trained special educator: “I am just so appreciative of the training that I’ve been fortunate enough to have and use every day with my special services students. I am able to be a careful observer of my students, to take what they already know to move them forward and to foster their accelerated growth. Among the things I use are sound boxes and magnetic letters to show them how to take words apart. I provide them with real reading and real writing opportunities every day, and I always make sure they take anything in isolation back to continuous text.”

Another teacher shared the impact of a focus on helping children acquire a strategic processing system for reading and writing in contrast to acquiring items or skills: “I am truly beginning to understand the complexity of the theory, that it was not about drilling words and more words and teaching children to sound out words.”
Contributions of specialist teachers to professional knowledge

Often in schools, specialist teachers and general educators do not have sufficient opportunities to share their expertise and contribute to each other’s learning. However, as several teacher leaders have commented, these Literacy Lessons intervention specialists have influenced the learning of other members of the training class. As reported by one teacher leader to her trainer, “The teachers who have participated in Literacy Lessons have been top-notch — frequently leaders in the class. I think it is because they have an in-depth grounding in their own specialty. The ESL teachers have been very handy when we talk about language structure (for all students) as well as the literacy support needed for English language learners.”

Literacy Lessons and a culture of collaboration

Literacy Lessons has impacted a wider range of teachers and students beyond those involved in Reading Recovery, as indicated in reports to teacher leaders and trainers. According to one school administrator, “Undoubtedly the biggest achievement has been the strengthening of school teams as more teachers on the team share conversations about children’s literacy development informed by Clay’s theory.” And as indicated in the following comments, extending the training to specialist teachers has resulted in a seamless system of support in response to struggling literacy learners and has fostered a culture of collaboration between the school’s special educators and Reading Recovery teachers. As one teacher leader stated: “I think that the positive impact Literacy Lessons training has on the wider school community and the discussions at team meetings is vital. It has allowed us to share a common language and philosophy of learning. The Literacy Lessons teachers have also been vocal advocates for their populations receiving Reading Recovery as a prerreferral intervention and they seem more able to convince colleagues that these children should benefit from Reading Recovery. They have voiced that they find their new understandings are enhancing their teaching across the other parts of the day.”

A seamless system of support

Finally, specialist educators trained in Literacy Lessons provide a critical response to the diagnostic information obtained by Reading Recovery on behalf of children who need longer-term literacy interventions. As one teacher leader explained: “It is very useful this year having the resource room teacher trained in Literacy Lessons. She is available at team meetings to discuss how she will provide services for children who end up in special education. In addition to that she has told me that the training has changed the way she teaches all her special education children, even the children in the upper grades. From what I can see, this is the avenue to provide high-quality professional development to teachers in our Reading Recovery schools. The better the teaching is at our schools and the more the teaching staff understands the reading and writing processes, the better our results will be and the better our recommended students will do.” Clearly, Literacy Lessons has resulted in benefits to the system and the school as a whole that go well beyond improving children’s literacy performance.

Ongoing Debate on Dyslexia and Learning Disabilities and its Impact on Literacy Lessons Training

In the past few years there has been a resurgence of research debates on dyslexia and related disorders. The research on dyslexia, however, has yet to make a clear distinction among dyslexia, learning disabilities, reading disabilities, and reading difficulties (International Literacy Association, 2016). Indeed, each of these terms has been used interchangeably at various times to describe individuals experiencing difficulty with learning to read or specific skills associated with the reading process including decoding, letter and word recognition and discrimination, and comprehension. Clay’s own research (1987) had also shown that “it is not possible to identify causes of difficulties or to distinguish between experientially and constitutionally impaired readers” (RRCNA, 2015, p. 4). This led her to advocate for the importance and effectiveness of one-to-one instruction in preventing learning/reading difficulties in learners regardless of the factors that caused the difficulty (experience or organically based).

Clay argued that it is the expertise of the Reading Recovery-trained teacher that has prevented longer-term literacy difficulties in children labeled as learning disabled or dyslexic. Reading Recovery has achieved unparalleled success with the lowest-performing first graders through excellence in teacher professional development. Indeed, abundant research including the recent evaluation of the i3 federal scale-up of Reading Recovery points to the effectiveness of Reading Recovery-trained
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D‘Agostino, 2012). It is no wonder that in light of these strong endorsements, many administrators have inquired about investing in training their specialist teachers—special education and ESL teachers—in professional development based on Reading Recovery theory and teaching procedures.

Promising Outcomes

In the early implementation of Literacy Lessons, individual Reading Recovery sites had collected data informally on specialist teachers’ work and had produced accounts of the successes achieved with identified special populations of students. Since 2013, when systematic data on Literacy Lessons interventions were submitted to the IDEC, there is clear evidence of the promising outcomes for SPED and ELL students (Briggs & Lomax, this issue). Children served by Literacy Lessons intervention specialists in the one-to-one setting have assembled processing systems for literacy that will contribute to their continued progress. These outcomes confirm earlier research that children identified as learning disabled or ELLs can become strategic readers and writers if provided the opportunity to work one-to-one with Reading Recovery-trained educators (Lyons, 1994; Kelly, Gómez-Bellengé, Chen, & Schultz, 2008). Now that Literacy Lessons training is more widely accessible to specialist teachers working with struggling readers beyond first grade, it is anticipated that future research will reveal additional, powerful outcomes with an even greater number of children in more schools.

Early explorations of Literacy Lessons have led to implementation and research that clearly documents the significant value of using Clay’s (2016) Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals to expand teaching to include a greater number of children having difficulty in literacy learning. The impact of Clay’s extraordinary vision, her theory of literacy teaching and learning, and the contributions of Reading Recovery to children and teachers have opened up new possibilities in the form of Literacy Lessons for specialist teachers who work with children in special education and ELLs who find literacy learning difficult.

Editor’s note: The NCRTI database is now maintained by the National Center on Intensive Intervention funded by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs.
References


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