

Teachers and Children Learning With and From Each Other: What Is Possible With Literacy Lessons

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"His progress in reading is the only thing that is going right in his life. I have seen the positive social-emotional effects. Reading has given him an outlet. He can soothe himself with a book and find entertainment in a book. But most of all, he feels so proud of himself."

— Oliver's fourth-grade special education social worker

Oliver, referenced in the quote above and described later in this article, represents one of an increasing number of children experiencing accelerated learning gains through participation in Literacy Lessons™ delivered by their special education or English language learner (ELL) teachers. Credentialed Reading Recovery® and Literacy Lessons teacher leaders engage specialist teachers in intensive initial training courses and continuing professional development, often along with Reading Recovery teacher colleagues. When Oliver's special education teacher began learning about Literacy Lessons, he discovered his pathway for becoming a reader.

The positive effects of Reading Recovery as a successful short-term prereferral first-grade intervention have been consistently documented for over 30 years (Rodgers, 2016). Literacy Lessons offers another opportunity for children who are already enrolled in special education or ELL intervention services to experience similar successful learning outcomes. This article presents important reasons for schools to consider implementing Literacy Lessons, an introduction to Literacy Lessons as a supplemental instruction option for children outside of the scope of Reading Recovery, and finally, specific examples illustrating how individual children can experience accelerated

literacy gains when their specialist teachers participate in the Literacy Lessons professional development model.

What is Literacy Lessons?

Marie Clay historically advocated for expanding the application of Reading Recovery for special populations of children:

It is because these [Reading Recovery] 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, who need foundational instruction in English literacy. (Clay, 2016, p. 16)

Recognizing the increasing numbers of children qualifying for special services, the North American Trainers Group followed Clay's vision while conducting field trials and research that lead to the collaborative development of the *Standards and Guidelines of Literacy Lessons in the United States* (2013/2015). Through the documentation of field trials, data collection, and working with trademark lawyers at The Ohio State University, the Literacy Lessons trademark became established.

School systems implementing Reading Recovery may choose to implement Literacy Lessons services, training, and ongoing professional development for certified teachers assigned to special education or ELL teaching positions. Credentialed trainers within Reading Recovery/Literacy Lessons university training centers provide the initial rigorous yearlong course work, training, coaching, and ongoing professional learning for teacher leaders who then train and coach Literacy Lessons specialists in their school districts. Implementations aim to reach students in Grades 2–4 who continue to experience early literacy learning difficulties as assessed with *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 2019). Incorporating the tenants of Reading Recovery, teachers

learn how to purposefully design individual literacy lessons that uncover unique student strengths and particular difficulties that block literacy learning.

Unlike Reading Recovery, Literacy Lessons offers greater flexibility in terms of lesson frequency, lesson length (15–40 minutes vs. 30 minutes), and unlimited weeks of service with intentional methods supported by theories of working with special populations of children who may have developed strong skills that block learning (Clay, 2016). Both Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons teachers aim to help each student acquire the essential foundational skills for supporting an early literacy processing system as well as the self-assured will to continue to learn in the absence of individual lessons. Primary professional resources are *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals* (Clay, 2016) and Clay's Observation Survey.

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Typical individual lessons or tutoring sessions include reading and enjoying familiar books; reading yesterday's new book; manipulating magnetic letters; constructing and breaking words apart (phonology and orthography); composing and transcribing a message or story; reconstructing a cut-up message; and learning how to orientate oneself to a new story or an informational text and attempting to read it with a little help from the teacher.

Literacy Lessons offers an appropriate option for particular children placed in special education programs or for others qualifying for ELL programs in Reading Recovery schools. Literacy Lessons specialists acquire dexterity in customizing lesson components — selecting from a variety of instructional material aiming to engage students in purposeful reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities. Both Literacy Lessons and Reading Recovery share these two important tenants emphasizing the role of observation and the power of aligning word study, reading, and writing activities within each lesson:

1. Individual lesson planning follows systematic observation of the unique ways a particular student works on problem solving while using oral and written language. Day by day, the teacher designs each lesson to leverage student strengths as a resource for working through literacy task difficulties, for developing alternative problem-solving methods, and speedy solving of increasing complex challenges.
2. Learning accelerates when strategies learned in both reading and writing reciprocally support each other. Teachers help students recognize, apply, and transfer word solving (decoding) skills during reading to word construction (encoding) skills while transcribing cohesively composed messages during each lesson. (Clay, 2016, p. 15)

As a companion to Reading Recovery, an implementation of Literacy Lessons prepares specialist teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and tools that directly support and improve extraordinary instruction for children who qualify for special education or ELL services. The following illustrates how individual children experienced accelerated literacy gains as their specialist teachers learned how to design tailored literacy instruction that focused more on individual strengths over deficits.

Three Reasons to Consider Implementing Literacy Lessons

Increasing populations of ELL and special education students

Between the fall of 2000 and the fall of 2017, public schools in all but seven states and the District of Columbia experienced a significant increase in the numbers of students needing ELL services. In 2017, the highest percentage of ELL students were enrolled in lower grades (K–5). For example, 16% of kindergartners, 9% of sixth graders, and 4.6% of 12th graders were ELL students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). The national data show that 14% of all public-school students receive special education services under the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and 1% to 20% of a school's total enrollment may include ELL students. During the 2018–2019 school year, 33% of all students who received special education services fell into the specific learning disabilities category. Students in this category generally present with one or more of the

basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language—spoken or written—with specific difficulties related to listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, or mathematical calculations.

An implementation of Literacy Lessons alongside Reading Recovery addresses the rising need to provide special needs students access to grade-level curriculum through evidence-based interventions, and to narrow the widening achievement gap across student subgroups.

Reading achievement gap

With the No Child Left Behind Act of 2000 and the IDEA of 2004, schools became accountable for reporting academic achievement outcomes for all student subcategories including students with disabilities (SWD) and students classified as ELLs. Most recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) required states to report academic outcomes of SWDs and ELLs as compared to all students. Revisions of both IDEA and ESSA clearly shift the definition of accountability and educational access from reporting the physical delivery setting of educational services to the reporting of academic growth relative to how much children learn each year.

Conducting a meta-analysis of 23 selected studies published between 1997 and 2016, Gilmour et al., (2019) estimated the size of the reading achievement gap between elementary and middle school students with and without disabilities. They generally found SWDs lag about 3.3 years behind their nondisabled peers in reading achievement growth. This particular finding magnifies concerns regarding SWDs access to the general curriculum, especially given the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2019) report indicating that 60% of fourth- and eighth-grade students *without disabilities* fall below grade level in reading.

Gilmour et al. (2019) acknowledged that accountability practices focused solely on achievement gap data may not lead to stronger academic outcomes for SWDs or improve their access to the general curriculum. This particular

investigation raised more questions regarding why the achievement gap is so large and offered initial findings of an in-progress observational research project (Lindström, 2018) regarding reading instruction for students with or at risk for disabilities. Lindström found little evidence of effective instructional strategies for special needs students with teachers spending less time on literacy instruction than other classroom activities. Instruction often failed to address foundational reading skills and hampered access to the general curriculum.

Improved access and outcomes

Improving outcomes and access to the general education literacy curriculum for students needing very specific learning support begins with increasing teacher knowledge and skills regarding the adaptation and customization of instructional practices to meet the needs of a wide variety of individual learners. While specialized supplemental instruction tends to focus on remediating documented student deficits, Marie Clay's work persistently prompts us to think more deeply and observe more intently the unique approach individual children take while in the act of reading and writing age-appropriate and interesting texts. She originally posed these important research questions leading to the original development of Reading Recovery, continued expansion through Descubriendo la Lectura (DLL) in the United States, Intervention préventive en lecture-écriture (IPLÉ) in Canada, and more recently Literacy Lessons:

1. What is the brain doing when a child is reading and writing successfully?
2. What is possible for individual children who experience great difficulty with early literacy learning?
3. What if the severe literacy learning difficulty rate (within a school population) were reduced to less than 1%? (Clay, 2004)

A recent large-scale independent research project (May et al., 2016) offers substantial evidence that implementations of Reading Recovery can indeed increase the literacy achievement for most of the children Clay's work originally intended to reach. Recent implementations of Literacy Lessons replicate similar accelerated gains for elementary students identified for more intensive and highly specialized literacy interventions. While Clay's vision of reducing literacy learning difficulties to less than 1% of primary school students has yet to be realized in North America, we are beginning to experience the possibility as special

program teachers engage in intensely focused professional development designed to lift their knowledge toward highly responsive instruction for individual children identified for Tier 3 or 4 literacy learning interventions beyond first grade. Increasing teacher expertise and confidence in helping children acquire effective and efficient problem-solving methods for reading texts through an implementation of Literacy Lessons can narrow the achievement gap that traditionally widens over time.

Literacy Lessons offers school systems a highly effective method for addressing the rapidly increasing numbers of children qualifying for ELL or special education services. An implementation of Literacy Lessons alongside Reading Recovery addresses the rising need to provide special needs students access to grade-level curriculum through evidence-based interventions, and to narrow the widening achievement gap across student subgroups.

Literacy Lessons Teachers and Children Learning Together

Four teacher leaders who train, coach, and support both Literacy Lessons and Reading Recovery teachers asked Literacy Lessons teachers to describe their work with Literacy Lessons students who experienced successful outcomes. Selected snippets from their descriptions follow in the next section. In all cases presented here, the Literacy Lessons teacher's primary job assignment was to deliver ELL or special education Tier 2 or 3 interventions. Each Literacy Lessons teacher participated in an initial yearlong series of university courses with simultaneous practicum, followed by annual continuing professional development sessions along with Reading Recovery teachers in their school districts. Literacy Lessons teachers designed and delivered 30- to 40-minute individual lessons to one or two of their caseload students daily or as often as possible. Four students described here represent students with specifically identified learning disabilities including a documented individualized educational program (IEP). One, the first example below, represents an ELL receiving ELL supplemental instruction.

Consider what can happen for children when their specialist teachers increase professional knowledge of early literacy practice applying new-found understandings to daily teaching with deliberate dexterity, highly focused with consistent instructional decisions customized and responsive to each student's unique learning needs.

Speaking, reading, and writing in English as an emergent bilingual learner: Andre

Andre's family relocated from Mexico to the United States just before the start of his second-grade year in school. He had successfully completed 2 years of primary education in Mexico. Since no Spanish instructional setting was available in his new school, he entered into an English only classroom. After a few weeks, his second-grade classroom teacher observed how quickly he was beginning to read and write along with his English-speaking peers. She recognized that Andre's understanding of basic print concepts, alphabetic, and phonetic knowledge in Spanish served as a strong foundation for accessing literacy learning in English. Guided by his second-grade teacher, Andre began his first steps toward English literacy while maintaining his Spanish oral language.

At the start of third grade, Andre was successfully reading level 6/D storybooks in English. His English as a second language (ESL) teacher and classroom teacher agreed to offer Literacy Lessons within his ESL support. A highly motivated learner, Andre was eager to learn. His teachers consistently modeled, noticed, and contingently supported his increasing control of English language production including past tense verbs, prepositional phrases, and conjunctions.

Andre's English oral language expanded through reading stories and engaging in conversation with his Literacy Lessons teacher about stories within the individual lessons. As a result, his ability to detect and self-correct errors while reading and writing also advanced. Supported by his strong meaning-making skills, his desire to enjoy stories, and reading standard English syntax embedded within interesting texts, Andre became increasingly skilled in communicating his ideas in English.

By the middle of third grade and after 17 weeks of individualized lessons carefully coordinated with his classroom instruction, Andre successfully read and comprehended texts at level 24/L, catching up to a second-grade reading level. Based on further assessment and documented progress, the school team decided that Andre had sufficiently developed a foundational literacy processing system in English to allow him to profit from small-group guided instruction with his peers both in the classroom and in supplemental ELL instruction.

Andre's end of third-grade developmental reading assessment verified his independent reading capacity at level 26/M, slightly below the third-grade benchmark. He

acquired foundational skills and strategies to support continued learning gains in English literacy. As an emergent bilingual learner, Andre gained 2 years of reading achievement through the combination of consistently focused goals shared between his classroom and ELL/Literacy Lessons teachers. As a fourth grader, he continued on his English language and literacy learning journey with his classmates.

Andre's third-grade classroom teacher shared this observation:

Andre significantly benefited from receiving Literacy Lessons in third grade. Being involved in an intensive, consistent literacy supplement helped him build a strong vocabulary in English. He learned how to relate events that occurred in the stories he read to his own life and how to retell stories including key details that he wrote about. Literacy Lessons enabled him to actively and confidently participate in small group instruction with his grade-level peers in our classroom. Literacy Lessons made a huge impact!

Developing self-regulation while learning: Matthew

Shortly after he moved into a new school at the start of first grade, early assessment results placed Matthew among the lowest achievers in his classroom and he entered Reading Recovery. After 20 weeks of daily individualized lessons supplementing his first-grade classroom curriculum, his scores on the Observation Survey indicated satisfactory gains in all areas with the exception of Text Reading. Most children reach grade-level proficiency as a result of participating in Reading Recovery. Some children, like Matthew, experience a secondary positive outcome of Reading Recovery:

Instead of continuing to struggle through class levels, never able to catch up, the child is identified for ongoing support that can be tailored to his current educational needs. The careful assessment of reading and writing progress by Reading Recovery teachers helps specialists to identify appropriate further help for the learner. Early identification of a small group of children who need extended help is a second positive outcome of Reading Recovery. Transfer from Reading Recovery to further help should be made immediately to ensure that what has been learned so far will not be forgotten. (Clay, 2016, p. 19)

Before the end of first grade, Matthew qualified for cross-categorical special education services under the category

of "significant developmental delay" in the areas of fine gross motor, emotional, and social. In the middle of second grade, he entered an emotional behavioral disabilities program at his school. During that time, Matthew participated in a second-grade general education classroom supplemented with individualized instruction provided by his special education teacher who was trained in Literacy Lessons to meet his IEP for reading and writing. He received additional special education services for math and social skills.

Because he easily drew upon his knowledge of story, sentence syntax, and initial letters to read texts, Matthew often avoided problem-solving efforts that called for using known clusters of letters embedded within words to confirm or correct his reading. His teacher's call for word solving beyond a single letter or single letter sound level resulted in yawning, wiggling legs and arms, and lots of deflective side talk during book reading. These apparent avoidance behaviors signaled his Literacy Lessons teacher of his need for word solving instruction in order to build up his efficacy as a reader. Based on her emerging hypothesis grounded in sensitive observation of Matthew's behaviors, the Literacy Lessons teacher aimed to teach him how to initiate word solving while maintaining his strength as a meaning maker. As a result, his confidence increased dramatically as a stress-free reader who could successfully apply more sophisticated word-solving strategies.

For several weeks, the Literacy Lessons teacher intentionally worked only within Matthew's set of known skills while maintaining a consistently trusting and collaborative working relationship. As Matthew's confidence gradually increased, his Literacy Lessons teacher revised both his learning and her teaching goal toward showing him how to locate and use known letter clusters, sounds, and blends within larger word parts such as prefixes, suffixes, and syllables for solving new words encountered during reading interesting texts. After completing 18 weeks of Literacy Lessons during the last half of second grade, Matthew's independent text reading had increased from a level 9 to 14.

Matthew's third-grade fall Text Reading assessment indicated that he had maintained skills and strategies previously acquired at end of second grade. Even though his independent reading remained far below third-grade proficiency, he held on to previous learning even after the summer break. His Literacy Lessons teacher again developed a plan to build upon and extend his current

competencies, while working through avoidance behaviors that occasionally resurfaced.

Whenever those behaviors resurfaced during text reading, his Literacy Lessons teacher aimed first to reestablish their working relationship by holding him accountable for what he could do and providing varying degrees of help in other areas more challenging for him. Within a very short time after the start of third grade, Matthew regained the self-control necessary for attending to problem-solving tasks while reading. His teacher quickly updated instructional progress goals to teach him how to maintain high comprehension and take words apart using known visual information when he needed to solve new words encountered during reading and writing of continuous text.

Each time Matthew encountered new or unexpected challenges his teacher noticed a temporary lapse in progress. Each time, his Literacy Lessons teacher persistently and skillfully reestablished his confidence by temporarily reducing challenges, revisiting familiar texts, reviewing, and revising previous learning until he felt secure and confident again before gradually lifting the daily challenge of reading a new text. The Literacy Lessons teacher had learned to recognize a learning lapse as a phenomenon that Clay named the “pebble in the pond effect.”

Sometimes what you think is old and established learning can be disturbed by some new competing learning and for a short time confusion rather than ‘knowing’ is observed. New learning has created a disturbance in an old response pattern that had seemed to be learned.

If learning were just a matter of adding bits of knowledge to our memory banks this would not happen. When a response is controlled by a pattern of movements (and a network of brain reactions) it is not surprising that the established pattern could be disturbed by adding a new component. It takes a little time to rearrange the old learning. The observant teacher tries to work out what new experience has upset the old established responding. (Clay, 2016, p. 39)

Matthew’s Literacy Lessons teacher practiced systematic observation as she intentionally and contingently challenged him during each lesson to learn a little bit more. As Matthew began to initiate and internalize a strategic problem-solving approach to reading, he and his teachers celebrated incremental learning gains. Increasing degrees

of stamina and perseverance replaced inattentiveness and fidgeting as he developed ways to search for multiple sources of information, to self-monitor and to correct most of his mistakes while reading interesting texts, and writing to communicate meaningful messages. The self-controlling behaviors internalized during his individualized Literacy Lessons began to transfer across all academic areas into the general education classroom environment and across math and science content areas.

At the end of third grade and after participating in a total of 116 Literacy Lessons sessions, Matthew no longer required individualized lessons. He had acquired the necessary foundational literacy skills and strategies, increased confidence, and self-control to successfully participate in small-group instruction with his peers within a general education classroom setting. While his special education services continued after third grade, he achieved full integration into a general education classroom with his fourth-grade age mates.

Accelerated learning: Annie

Annie’s independent text reading scores remained far below grade-level expectations at the end of first grade after a series Reading Recovery lessons. Similar to Matthew’s case, Annie’s subtest scores at end of first grade on the Observation Survey had increased with the exception of Text Reading. At the start of second grade, she read level 4/C, indicating a 1-year achievement gap. Upon a review of further assessments, the school team placed Annie into special education services as a Tier 3 supplement to her second-grade classroom literacy instruction. Her special education teacher decided to meet Annie’s IEP minutes for literacy instruction using the individualized Literacy Lessons framework. Daily engagement in carefully selected and slightly supported reading and writing activities resulted in accelerated learning.

Between September and November, Annie’s text reading capacity grew from level 4/C to level 14/H. Across 2 previous years or 72 weeks of schooling, she had gained only six text levels or approximately one text level per 12-week period. After 8 weeks working with her Literacy Lessons teacher, her text reading capacity began accelerating by approximately one text level per week! This accelerated rate of learning occurred for several possible reasons. Emergent and very early literacy foundation skills were likely established during her K–1 general classroom instruction supplemented with Reading Recovery tailored instruction. However, Annie seemed to require more time

to learn with the support of intensely focused lessons customized to her particular way of learning.

As she engaged in collaborative training sessions with her colleagues, Annie's special education/Literacy Lessons teacher combined her emerging understandings of Clay's work with her previous knowledge and experience working with children like Annie. Sensitive observation and the context of working individually with Annie allowed the teacher the room to carefully craft and deliver responsive instruction that built upon Annie's knowledge while offering just the right amount of challenge.

Narrowing achievement gap: Oliver

Oliver attended a standalone regional special education district (SED), a county cooperative district covering a 400-square-mile county and drawing students from 31 surrounding rural school districts. The cooperative pools resources in order to serve students with physical, social-emotional, and other learning challenges. Children like Oliver who qualified for special education services are bused daily from their home schools to the SED school until they no longer need services. Most students continue attending the SED school through eighth grade, as few progress enough to be fully integrated into their home elementary school classrooms.

Oliver began attending SED in kindergarten. His first opportunity to participate in Literacy Lessons came at the start of fourth grade when his special education teacher entered initial training courses for Literacy Lessons. The Observation Survey revealed Oliver's independent reading capacity to be at a level 5/D after 5 years of specialized schooling supported by teams of well-intentioned, caring, and certified special education teachers, psychologists, and social services personnel.

After just 17 weeks in individual Literacy Lessons, Oliver gained 15 text levels, successfully reading level 20/K and reducing his achievement gap by 3 years! Accelerated literacy progress continued through the end of fourth grade as Oliver came to believe in himself as a learner. During this time, Oliver's Literacy Lessons teacher engaged in collaborative training sessions with her colleagues and combined her growing understandings of Clay's work with her previous knowledge and experience working with children like him. His Literacy Lessons teacher practiced systematic observation, setting attainable short-term goals, and offering just the right amount of challenge in

each intentionally customized lesson. Finally, as a fourth grader, Oliver began extending his current capacities and his self-efficacy as a reader, as a writer, and as a learner. The design of Literacy Lessons tutoring sessions combined with his teacher's learning launched him upon a journey toward becoming literate and opened the door to further learning opportunities. In addition to his case social worker, his teachers and his mother took notice:

I have noticed a tremendous increase on his level of independence especially with his writing. Before Literacy Lessons intervention, he did not want to write anything on his own and now he just takes off.
— Oliver's third- and fourth-grade classroom teacher

He is so motivated to read ... While waiting at the barber shop to get a haircut, he found a book in the waiting room. He was so into the book that when it was his turn to get his haircut he let another boy take his turn because he didn't want to stop reading. He was very insistent on finishing his book.
— Oliver's Mom

Capturing attention: Garrett

Garrett qualified for special education services due to a diagnosis of moderate autism spectrum disorder (ASD). ASD refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech, and nonverbal communication. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, autism affects an estimated 1 in 54 children in the United States (<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>). Garrett was one of several children with some degree of ASD attending his particular school that operated under a model of inclusion for all learners. The school offered both Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons within a portfolio of various other intervention services.

The school team reviewed assessment data and recommended Literacy Lessons as the most appropriate intervention for Garrett at the start of second grade to meet his IEP goals for literacy learning. The Text Reading subtest of the Observation Survey indicated his highest independent text reading to be near level 3/C, indicating a 2-year achievement gap when compared to the fall second-grade proficiency benchmark. Drawing upon her study of Clay's works and participation in the Literacy Lessons professional development sessions, Garrett's special education teacher skillfully identified his unique strengths and needs as a person and as a literacy learner.

At first, Garrett could sustain and manage his attention for only short periods of time. His teacher limited his Literacy Lessons sessions to about 15–20 minutes. Over time, lessons gradually increased to 30 minutes as Garrett’s stamina improved with sustained attention to text reading and writing activities carefully selected, tied to his interests, and easily accessible. Early lessons focused on learning to distinguish between the role of print on the page in relation to the pictures and how stories are constructed page by page. Extended periods with repeated readings of a text allowed him to build fluency, success, and stamina over time. His teacher recorded snippets of running records whenever he began to take over text reading. She delayed taking a full running record to assess independent reading after three or more readings of a text, with lessening degrees of teacher help gradually transferring greater responsibility to him.

Through daily writing opportunities negotiated and constructed with his teacher’s assistance, Garrett gained skill and understanding of how and why linking sounds to letters could be useful when writing meaningful messages. Gradually he learned how to spell and write a variety of words including multisyllabic words and words with irregular spellings such as “goodnight,” “brother,” and “elephants.” He learned how to apply word construction knowledge gained during writing to solving during reading texts. He learned how to initiate problem-solving strategies while reading unfamiliar words in texts such as taking words apart, rereading, listening to himself to monitor meaning while reading continuous text, and how to self-correct most mistakes. By April of second grade, Garrett could independently read a level 16/I on a first reading indicating that he could now participate in small-group reading lessons. Teachers began transitioning him from individual Literacy Lessons to a small guided reading group intervention with his same-age peers. He continued enjoying the challenge of reading new books with less dependency on teacher prompts and reminders. In the small-group setting, Garrett continued to progress approaching second-grade reading proficiency by the end of the school year. In addition to his text reading gain, word reading vocabulary tripled in size from 34 words in the fall to 92 words at end of year.

Into third and fourth grades, Garrett continued to grow as a reader and a writer with specialized reading support focused on increasing reading fluency and higher-level comprehension skills. He finished fifth grade reading

independently at level N and continues to enjoy reading as a sixth grader. Receiving Literacy Lessons in second grade provided him with the tools and strategies necessary to launch him into a literate life that now allows him to participate with his age mates in a regular education setting.

Living with autism presents ever emerging new challenges for individuals throughout a lifetime, but learning to read and write need not be one of them. Participating in Literacy Lessons with his specially trained and coached special education teacher opened new possibilities and hope for Garrett’s future. His teachers understood, accepted, and celebrated learning how to read and write as an individualized journey.

Increasing Teacher Knowledge and Expertise

For some children, the route to literacy learning may be littered with obstacles and detours that require the teacher to become an expert navigator, responsive to individual needs, and an informed decision maker. All teachers, including specialist teachers, must be prepared to navigate each child’s unique route to learning. While each child’s pathway to literacy learning will be unique, the methods of responsive instruction grounded in the works of Marie Clay’s foundational early literacy theories and practices provide common supports for teachers. Despite an educational system’s best efforts and well-intentioned instruction, the children described in the examples above experienced severe learning delays prior to entering Literacy Lessons. Their successes demonstrate that many more children can begin a gradual upward climb toward literacy learning while experiencing increased social and emotional well-being under the guidance of expert teachers. Literacy Lessons teachers participate in specifically tailored, laser focused, and continuous professional learning around their work with special needs students.

Both Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons teachers engage in specialized clinical-based initial training and in ongoing professional development. Regular coaching visits are focused on developing multiple ways to practice responsive, intentional, and contingent teaching tailored to an individual student’s unique strengths and weaknesses. Credentialed teacher leaders facilitate these experiences for teachers over time within their school districts. Literacy Lessons intervention specialists hold special education or ELL teaching endorsements. They work

with children who are not eligible for Reading Recovery and who qualify for extra specialized services. Literacy Lessons teachers continually practice how to interact with a very wide variety of learners who experience the most difficulty in accessing the school literacy curriculum. By flexibly applying teaching procedures described in *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals* (Clay, 2016), and drawing upon their continued professional learning and teaching experiences, teachers can empower student learning gains. Andre, Matthew, Annie, Oliver, and Garrett experienced learning gains within a relatively short time beyond the expectations of their teachers, specialists, and families.

The next section summarizes reflections gathered from three Literacy Lessons teachers in response to this question: How has Literacy Lessons teacher training and continuing professional development influenced your work with children and others? Their comments revolve

Their successes demonstrate that many more children can begin a gradual upward climb toward literacy learning while experiencing increased social and emotional well-being under the guidance of expert teachers.

around particular changes in their approach to instruction as a result of their participation in Literacy Lessons training conducted by their district's teacher leader. Areas most significant to them were (a) focusing on student strengths to overcome deficits, (b) intentionally connecting reading and writing instruction, and (c) teaming with colleagues for student learning gains

Focusing on student strengths to overcome deficits

Kathy (Matthew's teacher) began the clinical training for Literacy Lessons after nearly 20 years as a special education teacher, including 5 years teaching in an emotional behavior disabilities program. Over the last 3 years implementing Literacy Lessons, she reports significant changes in her teaching practices overall, not just for literacy instruction. As a teacher of students with social-emotional, behavioral, and academic needs in multiple content areas, she can be intentional and decisive in instructing students across all academic areas.

Before Literacy Lessons training, Kathy wrote IEP goals in very general terms based on Common Core Standards and assessment results that highlight student deficits that determined qualification for special education services. She is now more knowledgeable of the scope and sequence of early literacy learning which allows her to identify where a student's learning journey may best begin. Kathy communicates more precisely with other teachers as they coconstruct realistic and attainable student IEP goals aiming for transfer into the general education setting. Coconstructing individual student learning goals and sharing specific learning gains across the general and special education contexts increases each student's capacity for transferring skills across contexts, literacy, and other content areas.

Kathy continues to refine her understandings and skills for identifying each student's specific literacy strengths and weakness. Customized learning targets for literacy as well as across all academic areas now start with a recognition of what students already know and can do. She practices contingent teaching being constantly aware that the gradual release of responsibility varies for each student and changes over time. Through her practice with Literacy Lessons and collegial discussions with her Reading Recovery/Literacy Lessons teacher leader and others, her knowledge continues to deepen and the literacy learning of her students continues to accelerate. She attributes her professional growth directly to her experiences with Literacy Lessons. She reports teaching with intense precision and clarity of purpose. The critical nature of time management and capturing an individual student's full engagement throughout each lesson each day is of highest priority. Applying these principles beyond the individual literacy lessons to group instruction and all areas of her daily teaching practices results in greater academic gains for all students on her caseload.

The highly supportive and collegial nature of the Literacy Lessons training sessions that include teaching lessons while colleagues observe and provide feedback helped Kathy to discover gaps in her practices and knowledge. Unawareness turned into awareness and renewed efforts to improve. In her words, "Every student comes with a different set of skills and teachers must observe, identify, and develop instruction that builds on that student's set of skills. The Literacy Lesson training allows me to reflect on my teaching in order to reteach, reconstruct, or identify the higher priority of some skills, without making me feel

like I made a mistake in my teaching. And for that I am grateful across all areas of teaching.”

Intentionally connecting reading and writing instruction

As an experienced special education teacher and through her participation on Literacy Lessons training sessions, Brenda (Garrett’s teacher) believes in the critical importance of early literacy intervention as a foundation for student success across all academic areas. Prior to her experiences with Literacy Lessons, Brenda generally taught reading and writing separately without realizing the reciprocal nature that “each produces learned responses that facilitate new responding in the other area” (Clay, 2016, p. 22). She now realizes that reading and writing instruction complement each other and improve a child’s potential for developing early literacy foundational skills and problem-solving strategies. Uniting reading and writing instruction within the same lesson positively influences rapid student progress in reading. Literacy Lessons teachers study and experience the results of Clay’s (2016) guidance:

Reading and writing are two different ways of learning about the same thing — the written code used to record oral language. It is like having two hands. The knowledge you have about writing can be used during reading, and vice versa. Children give us hints about the common ground they notice between reading and writing. Most literacy instruction theories pay little attention to the fact that the child is learning to write words and stories at the same time as he is learning to read. The reciprocity of early reading and early writing is grossly undervalued. (p. 77)

Through her thoughtful and intentional guidance, Brenda’s students can make connections across reading and writing activities shifting from receiving a message (reading) to giving a message (writing) within each lesson. Brenda writes: “It is so powerful to watch my students, not only in Literacy Lessons, but in all literacy interventions, make accelerated progress; large in part due to the knowledge I now have as a Literacy Lessons teacher. My teaching will forever be changed for the better!”

Teaming with colleagues

As an ELL, bilingual, and Literacy Lessons teacher, Ellen works in a K–5 dual language school. All students enrolled in her school receive 50% of their general instruction in Spanish and 50% in English. Teachers regularly collaborate to develop best methods for teaching

the foundational skills children need to become literate in both Spanish and English. Ellen’s participation in the Literacy Lessons training sessions empowers her to share increasing knowledge of instructional practices with teams of teachers in her school. She lifts and facilitates improved understandings. Children within a dual language curriculum may encounter reading difficulties for multiple reasons, including the challenges of encountering new vocabulary, unfamiliar syntax, and concepts. Discussing and sharing her learning discoveries with colleagues continues to deepen and develop Ellen’s understanding. One particular challenge for Ellen and her school team is that many more children are entering school as language learners in both Spanish and English without a dominant oral language base. Through consultation with administrators, teacher leaders, and others in her school, Ellen developed a short-term intervention to help students construct an oral language foundation first in Spanish reflecting the family’s dominant language. They clustered high need ELL first graders into small intervention groups for the purpose of strengthening and extending oral language development. Instructional activities included shared reading, reading aloud, retelling stories, engaging in interactive writing in order to draw upon oral language as one resource for problem solving while reading, and constructing written messages.

Ellen believes that her participation in Literacy Lessons professional development sessions, followed with coaching visits from her teacher leader, transforms her instructional decision-making in teaching reading overall and more specifically in supporting ELL students. The opportunity for in-depth study of oral language development continues to be most influential in improving her work with students. Before Literacy Lessons training, her language acquisition lessons focused on increasing student skills in all areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing simultaneously with a limited understanding of the significantly primary role of oral language development. Through her study and practice as a Literacy Lessons teacher, she began to view oral language as the primary resource that every child brings to early literacy learning and serves as the initial foundation of a self-extending processing system for both writing and reading. While planning instruction for ELL reading groups, Ellen now carefully considers how students’ oral language competencies might support or hinder successful engagement during reading and writing tasks. When selecting texts, she considers how to best

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introduce and navigate students through unfamiliar story elements or ideas, new language structures, and unfamiliar vocabulary. Ellen confesses she often and confidently veers away from the scripted lesson plans found in the district's adopted ELL curriculum to customize lessons for particular children.

For example, she explains that “Literacy Lessons training has made me look at high-frequency words differently, understanding that for many language learners, abstract words carrying little meaning (*the, was, it, is, this, here*) are harder to master than concrete concept words such *book, table, fish*.” Rather than delivering a scripted lesson, Ellen first asks herself: What is within this student's zone of proximal development? What new challenge can be conquered and how can I scaffold instructional language to support greater independence in this learner? “Shifts in my thinking lead me to helping our students bridge languages in order to become more efficient language and literacy learners,” Ellen said.

In Closing

Literacy Lessons can produce successful outcomes for both teachers and children. Pairing Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons implementations offer rich opportunities for collaboration across general education, special education, ELL, Reading Recovery, and other specialist teachers as they engage in the collaborative professional learning experiences as one community of learners. Teachers counsel each other as they practice and refine skills in becoming intentionally focused on observing carefully and responding contingently in the moment in ways that allow student learning to accelerate. They gain a renewed sense of urgency and a deepened belief that all children can learn. Teacher leaders purposefully design initial training courses, individualized coaching visits, and

continuing professional development sessions to nurture risk taking, challenging conversations, and constructive feedback around student-centered professional practices grounded in the most current evidence-based research and the works of Marie Clay.

The challenges of collaborations across special education, ELL, Reading Recovery, other intervention services, and general education programs within complex systems can be conquered. Embracing Clay's earliest question, “What if the severe literacy difficulty rate were reduced to less than one percent?”, beckons educational systems to engage in concentrated, continuous, united efforts where all teachers, administrators, parents, and policy makers work together to give all children and their teachers opportunities to learn. Pairing Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons offers an effective approach for realizing that potential—especially for our most fragile learners—and prioritizing continuous teacher professional learning acknowledging that “in the end it is the individual adaptation made by the expert teacher to that child's idiosyncratic competencies and history of past experiences that starts him on the upward climb to effective literacy performances” (Clay, 2016, p. 195). The examples offered here of teachers and children learning together illustrate how the opportunity to learn can be realized for special populations of children in your school. Let us advocate for giving our most fragile learners the greatest opportunity to realize and enjoy a literate life.

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About the Author

Dr. Mary Ann Poparad is an associate professor, Reading Recovery/Literacy Lessons trainer, and director of the Reading Recovery Center for Literacy at National Louis University, Chicago and Tampa. She teaches post-graduate level courses that prepare K–12 teacher leaders and literacy coaches while working closely with their school leadership teams around comprehensive school improvement processes. Mary Ann is a former language arts and secondary English teacher, reading specialist, Title I administrator, grant writer, and Reading Recovery teacher leader. She can be reached at mary.poparad@nl.edu.



About the Cover

Laylah grew tremendously as a reader and a writer during her time in Reading Recovery. She especially loved to create her own elaborate and funny stories. She would often bring her own stories (written at home!) to lessons to share with her teacher.

Now in fourth grade, Laylah enjoys reading fantasy stories, especially if it is about unicorns or other mythical creatures! She continues to work hard each day and brings joy to all those around her.