What is Literacy Lessons™ and how are students selected?

Literacy Lessons is an intensive intervention for special education (SPED) students and emergent bilingual students who are experiencing extreme difficulty acquiring early literacy processing systems. This treatment intervention, envisioned by Marie Clay for special populations of learners, is based on Clay’s (2015, 2016) literacy processing theory and related instructional procedures. Most often, eligible students are in the range of 6–9 years of age and are in Grades 1–4. Literacy Lessons is available in schools implementing Reading Recovery, and school teams select this opportunity for individual instruction based on each student’s educational needs and local assessments, including An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 2019).

How do teachers benefit?

Most importantly, Literacy Lessons is a professional learning model for both certified/licensed SPED and English language learner (ELL) teachers assigned to work within their specialty areas in schools implementing Reading Recovery. School principals collaborate with district Reading Recovery teacher leaders to nominate experienced SPED or ELL teachers to engage in graduate study while tutoring at least two students daily supplemented with frequent expert coaching. After successfully completing initial training, teachers earn a Literacy Lessons intervention specialist credential issued by a licensed Reading Recovery university training center.

What makes Literacy Lessons unique?

Based on Clay’s (2015) literacy processing theory, Literacy Lessons provides uniquely effective instruction to help individual children acquire early literacy processing systems. The effectiveness of Literacy Lessons is the result of intensive and ongoing teacher professional development, individual tutoring sessions for students, and annual evaluations of data reported on every child served.

Professional development. Literacy Lessons specialists join a professional learning community dedicated to serving our school’s most challenging learners struggling with literacy acquisition. The preparation of the Literacy Lessons teacher involves graduate coursework and experiences designed to ensure teachers’ understandings of both theoretical and instructional knowledge pertaining to literacy instruction for struggling learners. This training is intended to extend the specialists’ abilities to work with their special populations of children who may have developed strong skills that block literacy learning (Clay, 2016). Initial training may be offered as a 1- or 2-year commitment by a Reading Recovery teacher leader affiliated with a university training center. This training prepares the specialist teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and tools to effectively provide extraordinary instruction for children receiving SPED or ELL services.

Individual instruction. Literacy Lessons teachers create a series of one-to-one sessions that purposefully build on each student’s unique capabilities, or strengths, and lead to the acquisition of essential, foundational skills for reading and writing. These intervention specialists ensure that each session balances ease with challenge across reading and writing activities, and as a result, each student develops the self-assured will to continue to learn in the absence of individual lessons. Literacy Lessons sessions provide targeted instructional goals, progress monitoring, and immediate instructional adjustments to maximize student gains in the least amount of time. Additionally, as students gain literacy proficiency, they exhibit enhanced attributes of self-motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation (Elzy & Lipp, 202; Harmon & Williams, 2017; Poparad, 2021). Individual tutoring continues until the student shows evidence of an established literacy processing system that will continue to develop in a less intensive instructional setting.

Annual data. Each year, teachers submit data to the International Data Evaluation Center allowing documentation of the number of participants and the pre- and post-year performance of each student
on the Observation Survey. This year (2022–2023) marks the 10th consecutive year of data collection. As of spring 2022, approximately 760 Literacy Lessons specialists have tutored 3,225 Literacy Lessons students. For many students, the literacy growth observed during the intervention is substantially greater than annual progress observed prior to Literacy Lessons. Examination of the means and magnitude of mean differences (i.e., effect sizes) on the Observation Survey tasks for both SPED and emergent bilingual students confirmed that on average all participants benefit from the intervention (Briggs & Lomax, 2017). The effect size on the text reading task (greater than 2.0) for both SPED and emergent bilingual students revealed that all students make excellent progress in securing an effective early literacy processing system (Briggs & Lomax, 2017). The data are reviewed annually to improve implementations that matter most for students.

**Why Literacy Lessons?**

Each year we learn more about how best to adjust teaching to maximize literacy gains for diverse learners beyond first grade. The nature of children’s difficulties in becoming literate and the best ways to teach them remain among the unsettled sciences; however, Literacy Lessons offers a highly effective approach for children receiving special services.

The Literacy Lessons implementation assists schools in meeting school improvement goals within a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support plan. Specific foci include the following:

- Reduce the percentage of students needing long term specialized, intervention by narrowing early literacy achievement gaps.
- Quickly increase student opportunity to learn and profit from less intensive instruction.
- Improve teacher expertise in diagnosing early literacy difficulties and in customizing instruction for special student populations beyond Reading Recovery, beyond first grade.
- Shift teacher and student mindsets from deficit seeking to potential seeking.
- Improve instructional planning and communication among school planning teams to integrate individual student learning goals across classroom and intervention instructional settings.

**Where to begin?**

Identify, clarify, and prioritize your school improvement needs. Leverage teacher knowledge, expectations, and professional growth to maximize literacy achievement gains across classroom and intervention settings. Consider these questions to guide further investigation and problem solving:

- Are the numbers of children identified for special services (SPED or ELL) declining or increasing year by year?
- Are achievement gaps narrowing or increasing annually?
- Are specialist teachers engaged in ongoing professional learning communities designed to enhance their abilities to diagnosis and detect early literacy difficulties and customize instruction accommodating the idiosyncratic needs of the special needs children in your school community?

**References**


**About the Author**

Mary Ann Poparad is an associate professor and trainer of Reading Recovery teacher leaders at National Louis University (Chicago/Tampa) and a member of the North American Trainers Group.