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# Literacy FOCUS

## RESEARCH INDICATES...

Charles Dickens' "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" sums up the profession of teaching pretty accurately. There are plenty of stories of success that accompany years of teaching experience, but there are also some moments of utter failure too. During the course of one's teaching career, the obvious goal is to be able to discern what works over what doesn't in order to lessen the 'worst of times scenario', in favor of the 'best of times'. But, studies show that to optimize learning in the classroom, 'what works' practices should not be left up to subjectivity or interpretation, and that they should be strategic choices that are planned and organized through substantiated research.

It is easy to read about and research effective instructional practices when it confirms our greatest teaching strengths. But, it is less pleasant or encouraging to find out that one is not engaging in good practices, even through no fault of one's own. What do we do in the face of "studies show that what you are doing is actually not so great", or how about "MRI scans now show that what you actually thought about how your students learn is actually quite incorrect"? In order to increase the 'best of times' moments, we need to acknowledge that technology has brought much information and clarity about the science of learning, and we then need to implement that in our classroom instruction and adult centre organization.

Studies do show that literacy fluency is the highest predictor of academic success, and that its lack of attainment contributes to serious consequences such as criminality. In the course of implementing the Diversified Basic Education program in Québec, adult centres must focus on high quality reading and writing instruction,

because research indicates that it is most beneficial for learners. And though history has had a tendency to shift from one educational trend to another outlining different ways of teaching literacy skills, science is now debunking some of these practices and putting them to rest. For example, teaching reading and writing using the "whole language" approach has proven to be ineffective for typical and atypical learners alike, and must stop permeating language lessons.

So, if every learner needs to be taught effective reading and writing skills, how do we address the needs of all learners in the classroom, especially struggling ones or ones who are diagnosed with learning disabilities? Centres and their educational stakeholders need to study and choose an effective instructional method, not a trend, that incorporates and addresses exceptionalities, such as *Response to Intervention*.

This publication follows where the [Literacy Guide](#), that was published earlier this year, left off. Though there are many literacy strategies that are highlighted and encouraged in it, it does not fully address struggling readers and writers or those who are diagnosed with a learning disability. The information that is presented here is not meant as a final destination, but more of a starting point for educators, professionals, and administrators to head in the direction they wish to pursue in successfully implementing the reading and writing based Diversified Basic Education program of Québec.

**PROCEDE Pedagogical Consultant**

# RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION MODEL (RTI)

## THREE TIERS OF INSTRUCTION TO ADDRESS LITERACY NEEDS

The Québec Ministry Of Education supplies adult centres with the mandated curriculum, but little else with regards to accompanying instructional methods. And, even less so with regards to learners who might struggle through these government demands. Teachers and educational professionals must navigate the sea of books, resources, programs, research, and professional development that befalls them every year to create and plan their classroom and lessons.

Classroom instruction is not a simple feat, and implementing the DBE is not either. Adult centres bemoan the increased reading and writing demands it places on its

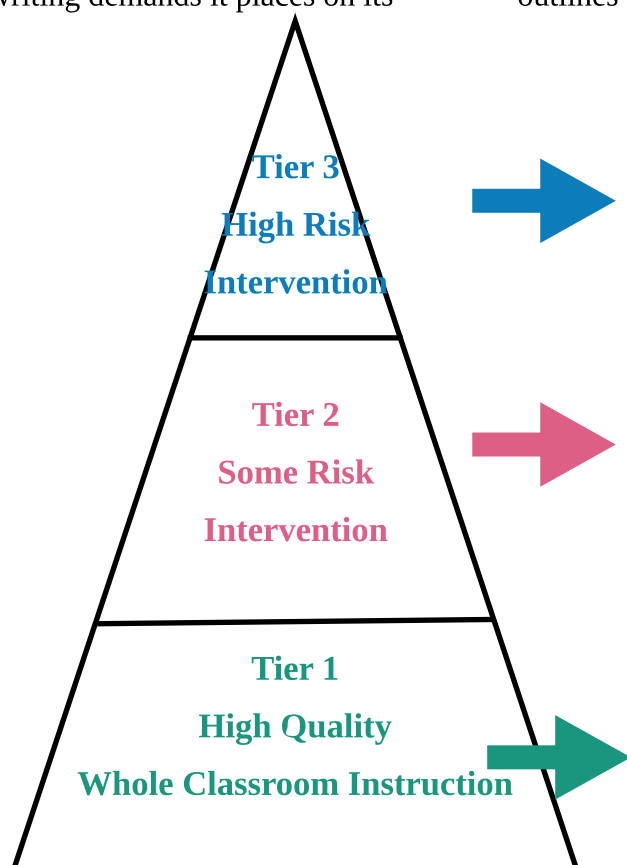
learners who more often than not have demonstrated a struggle with attaining literacy skills. For this reason, it is important that adult centres adopt high quality evidence based instructional methods that not only convey the mandated DBE curriculum to the whole class, but can also detect and monitor those who struggle with learning. And, possibly offer those who struggle with a planned and timed intervention program that can address the needs that they exhibit in the classroom. Is this even a possibility?

*Response to Intervention* is a three tiered instructional organization that does just that. It is a model that outlines specific instructions at each

tier level of instruction. It is not about reinventing the wheel of education for adult centres, but more about a reevaluation of the current practices that exist or not.

In fact, Tier 1 instruction is most probably already in place, though more emphasis must be placed on formative assessment than currently. It is what happens in Tier 2 and 3 that may be of interest to educational stakeholders, in order to really help adult learners who struggle with the course reading and writing demands. That is the level of instruction that more often than not, gets left behind.

[Click here to learn more](#)



### Adapted from RTI Action Network

More intense and even more organized intervention that includes an increase in instructional time and more personalized assessments. This intervention level can occur when several Tier 2 interventions have shown little progress. It is at this level that a certified professional can be requested to diagnose any learning disabilities.

Specific intervention that is timed and monitored to help learners who have shown low assessment scores in Tier 1 whole classroom instruction. A learning goal and minimum of a 10 week instructional plan must accompany Tier 2 intervention. Can be performed by teacher, paraprofessional or resource personnel during or outside of class time.

Teacher planned and organized classroom instruction around proven instructional methods. The teacher has the leeway to choose the resources, books, programs and activities that have **empirical evidence to effectively help all learners succeed the learning goals**. Ongoing assessment and evaluation are imperative and scheduled in order to detect which learners are at what level of ability with regards to established benchmarks.

# TEACHERS CAN DETECT

Teaching learners how to become expert readers and writers requires vast amounts of knowledge that pertains to literacy acquisition in both typical and atypical learners alike. Educators need to know about high quality reading and writing instruction methods. But, they also need to know how to differentiate between students who are experiencing difficulty in acquiring literacy skills due to poor instruction, low motivation or lack of effort, versus students who are experiencing difficulty in acquiring literacy skills due to

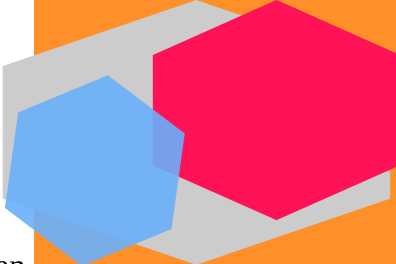
a learning disability.

Certain behaviors that adult learners may exhibit such as low attendance, lack of motivation, and inattention to class instruction may be just that, or an indication of low literacy skills, or even a specific diagnosed or undiagnosed learning disability. In either case, it is important to try and pin point where and why an adult learner is struggling in class and to not conclude in incorrect assumptions.

A teacher is not a

certified professional who can or should diagnose any learner with disability, but is a certified learning professional who can detect difficulties that a learner has in acquiring reading and writing skills.

It is only by informing teachers about the signs and symptoms of atypical learners and providing even more information about accompanying accommodations and interventions, that effective literacy instruction and intervention can occur.



***A teacher is not a certified professional who can or should diagnose any learner with a disability, but is a certified learning professional who can detect difficulties that a learner has in acquiring reading and writing skills.***

## DETECTING THROUGH BENCHMARKS

The only way that a teacher can detect if a learner is struggling, is if there are clear and delineated grade level benchmarks, often found in the form of state curriculum. These benchmarks, however, must be accompanied with standard, organized and specifically timed assessments that provide the information necessary to compare and contrast standards with abilities. Educators and learners cannot really verbalize abilities or deficits if they are not aware of the standards, or if they are not all agreed on.

Though the Québec Ministry of Education does supply a Diversified Basic Education program with learning benchmarks, it does not provide literacy ones. Though marks are awarded in most, if not all subjects for the ability to communicate answers in a sophisticated manner, the lack of parameters over what constitutes sophisticated communication, can leave educators confounded. It is important that educators, if not province wide, than at least centre wide have a consensus on what weak, intermediate and strong reading and writing skills are at each grade level. Adult centres can clarify literacy benchmarks and measure them in the following ways:

- ❑ **placement tests that detect grade level and analyze reading and writing abilities**
- ❑ **literacy baseline, grade appropriate assessment at the beginning of courses to analyze reading, writing abilities and executive functions**
- ❑ **reading, writing and executive function feedback throughout the course duration**
- ❑ **re-administering baseline tests at the end of courses in order to measure progression**

It is important to clarify that end of course, summative assessments in adult education, that are worth 100% of term marks, evaluate course content and may or may not include literacy skills. Whatever extra reading or writing demands educators have added to course content for instructional purposes, can only clarify unspecified government criteria, but cannot alter them. For example, literacy benchmarks can specify what the MEES criteria for 'sophisticated vocabulary' entails for each course or grade level, but cannot alter the fact that this is a criteria that exists on the MEES evaluation.

# STRUGGLES DETECTED...NOW WHAT?

For teachers, detecting struggling learners is often the easy part, it is knowing what to do afterwards that can be difficult. If assessments and in class observations highlight that a learner is struggling with course content, and more specifically with reading and writing abilities, an action plan is required. Again, it is important to put unfounded conclusions aside, and to remember that struggles can be the result of many different reasons ranging from lack of attendance or motivation, poor class instruction, including the class they are presently attending, second or third language acquisition, atypical abilities or a diagnosed learning disability.

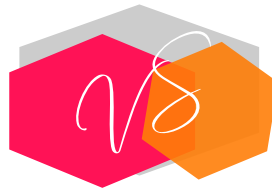
In either case, it is whatever struggle or struggles the evidence indicates that needs to be addressed. If a learner exhibits poor attendance and reading problems, centres and educators can attend to both and not make one conditional to the other. It is perhaps by offering reading support intervention that might improve classroom attendance.

The struggles that are addressed later in this newsletter, offer some of the signs and symptoms of common atypical learning issues that may surface in adult education classrooms. It is important to be aware of them in order to be able to detect them so as to offer the appropriate accommodations and interventions

required. It is very important to note, that detecting learning struggles does not mean that there is an exemption from classroom learning. In fact accommodations are exactly the opposite, they encourage rather than discourage attendance. As the [Québec government administrative guide](#) stipulates in point 5.1 'measures... must in no way lower the requirements established or modify the content of the evaluation'.

Struggling learners, who are or are not diagnosed, cannot pass 'Go' and collect credits, if they do not succeed the learning goals, but they should get the accommodations and interventions they need to help them get there.

## LEARNING STRUGGLES



## LEARNING DISABILITY

Learning struggles are evidence based information that point to difficulties in acquiring or communicating knowledge that is atypical from the standard. These struggles **should never lead to formal diagnosis without the implication of a professional**. Some evidence of possible learning struggles:

- poor school attendance or punctuality
- poor class scores
- weak reading and writing skills
- avoiding reading and writing tasks
- weak memory skills
- weak organization skills
- difficulty adjusting to new settings
- working slowly
- poor grasp of abstract concepts
- either pays too little attention to details or focuses on them too much

Learning struggles can originate from poor attendance, motivation, and instruction, as well as second language acquisition, poor executive functions and/or a learning disability

There is no universally accepted definition of a learning disability, and there is no country wide one either. However, there are fundamental evidence based parameters that the [Learning Disability Association of Canada](#) does adheres to in diagnosing one:

- Learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency
- Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning
- Learning disabilities range in severity and may affect any or several areas of life
- Learning disabilities are life long

Learning disabilities are neurobiological and/or genetic in origin



# ACCOMMODATIONS

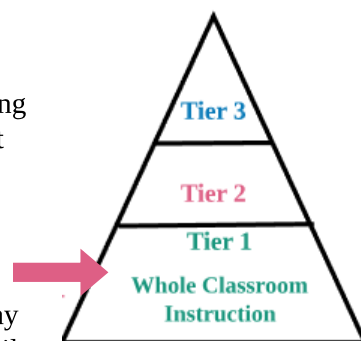
An accommodation is the act of giving a struggling learner, demonstrated through ongoing classroom assessment, or a learner who has been diagnosed with a learning disability an adjustment to the instructional demands that the curriculum imposes. For example, giving a learner who is diagnosed with dysgraphia (a writing disability) a computer so that they can use the text to speech feature to "write" a mandated 600 word argumentative

essay. Accommodations are given during whole classroom instruction so that teachers can move forward with high quality instruction of the planned lesson, and to also give the learner the opportunity to achieve their full potential regardless of disability.

An accommodation is a serious matter, however, and must be accompanied by evidence that the learner requires it. Also, an

accommodation must be followed very carefully during classroom instruction so that these adjustments are continued through to end of course outcomes. We would not want the learner who is used to "speaking" their essay to be confronted with a pencil and paper only exam at the end of the course.

Another important point to make about accommodation is that it is not to be confounded with an



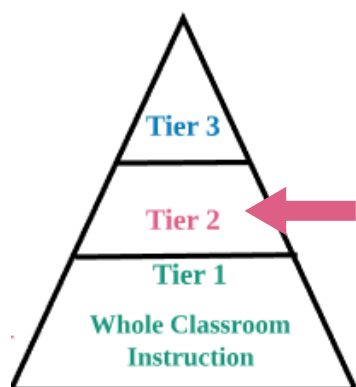
intervention or a time where special education occurs. It is an adjustment to curriculum demands that a learner has proven to require to succeed better.

## ***AUTHORIZED ACCOMMODATIONS ON MINISTERIAL ADULT EDUCATION EXAMS***

- ❑ extending up to one third more time
- ❑ isolated location with proper supervision
- ❑ providing an attendant such as an interpreter or an invigilator, except for reading exams
- ❑ computerized reading or writing aid with certain conditions
- ❑ writing and reading tools (pencil grip, graph paper, magnifying glass, inclined stand etc.)
- ❑ record answers on a recorder
- ❑ any other accommodations require special permissions

An intervention is providing learners with an instructional program, that is timed and monitored, directly addressing a learners' reading and writing needs. The intervention is done in

small groups and can be administered by the teacher, paraprofessional, or resource personnel. In adult education this intervention may or may not happen at the centre, but in another community organization such as Literacy Unlimited. An example of an intervention would be that the learner who gets a computer as a writing accommodation, would have an instructional program devised to focus on their physical disability to hand write or on their weak pre-writing organizational skills.



Interventions are monitored closely, for a minimum duration of ten weeks, through assessments. Progress or lack thereof leads to further decisions regarding placement back at the Tier 1 level only, continuation of Tier 2, or more intense intervention in Tier 3 instruction.

Perhaps the preciseness of these Tier interventions may not lend themselves well in adult education exactly as prescribed. But, paying attention to the nuances of

accommodations versus interventions and understanding that struggling readers and writers can only progress through their difficulties or disabilities with an intervention plan and progress monitoring is important.

The increased reading and writing demands of the DBE will force adult centres to pay close attention to learners who struggle in whole classroom instruction and plan accordingly.

# STRUGGLING READERS



Learners who exhibit poor reading abilities may each have different types of deficits. "Researchers have identified three kinds of developmental reading disabilities that often overlap but that can be separate and distinct: (1) phonological deficit, (2) processing speed/orthographic processing deficit, and (3) comprehension deficit." (Moats & Tolman, 2017) Some poor readers are detected and diagnosed early on in elementary school, but some not because some poor reading abilities may only be detected with the introduction of complex texts found in later grades. Those who struggle with reading tend to exhibit the following symptoms:

- Have difficulty decoding single words (reading single words in isolation);
- May be slow to learn the connection between letters and sounds;
- May confuse small words – *at/to, said/and, does/goes*;
- Make consistent reading and spelling errors;
- Exhibit poor reading fluency
- May transpose number sequences and confuse arithmetic signs (+ - x / =);
- May have trouble remembering facts;
- May be slow to learn new skills; relies heavily on memorizing without understanding;
- May have difficulty planning;
- Often use an awkward pencil grip (fist, thumb hooked over fingers, etc.);
- May have poor fine motor coordination: (Common Signs of Dyslexia, 2017)

## IN CLASS ACCOMMODATIONS

- **USE AN AUDIO FEATURE TO READ TEXT**
- **ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY (GOOGLE READ AND WRITE)**
- **MORE TIME TO COMPLETE READING TASKS**
- **PENCIL GRIPS**

## INTERVENTIONS

- **STUDY OF PHONOLOGY AND PHONEMIC AWARENESS**
- **DECODING STRATEGIES**
- **VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT EXERCISES**
- **READING FOR FLUENCY**
- **READING FOR COMPREHENSION**

# STRUGGLING WRITERS



Learners who exhibit signs of poor handwriting may suffer from different ailments. Some may have phonological and/or memory deficits that make writing out letters cognitively difficult, and others may suffer from physical motor disabilities that impair the physical act of writing. Signs and symptoms of learners who struggle with handwriting are:

- provides good verbal descriptions
- displays an inability to write complete sentences
- struggles to write the letters, and some are poorly written;
- sometimes cannot write on the line
- has difficulty remembering vocabulary words and spelling them correctly

## IN CLASS ACCOMMODATIONS

- **MORE TIME TO COMPLETE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**
- **MINIMIZING HANDWRITING DEMANDS**
- **PROVIDING CLASS NOTES**
- **ACCEPTING MISSPELLED WORDS**
- **USING ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY ON WRITING TASKS**
- **USE OF GRAPH PAPER INSTEAD OF LINED**
- **WRITING WITH PENCIL GRIPS**

## INTERVENTIONS

- **CURSIVE OR SCRIPT HANDWRITING EXERCISES**
- **FINE MOTOR EXERCISES (SQUEEZE TENNIS BALLS, BEADING ETC.)**

# STRUGGLING WITH EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS

**ADD and ADHD is disorder that affects Executive Functions**

"Executive function is a term used to describe a set of mental processes that helps us connect past experience with present action. We use executive function when we perform such activities as planning, organizing, strategizing and paying attention to and remembering details" (National Centre for Learning Disabilities, 2017). Executive functions assist learning because they influence self regulation abilities. Those who struggle with executive functions exhibit the following symptoms:

- difficulty planning a project;
- trouble comprehending how much time a project will take to complete;
- struggles to tell a story (verbally or in writing);
- trouble communicating details in an organized, sequential manner;
- has difficulty with the mental strategies involved in memorization and retrieving information from memory;
- has trouble initiating activities or tasks, or generating ideas independently;
- has difficulty retaining information while doing something with it; e.g., remembering a phone number while dialing; (National Centre for Learning Disabilities, 2017)

## **IN CLASS ACCOMMODATIONS**

- **TIME ORGANIZERS, COMPUTERS OR WATCHES WITH ALARMS**
- **VISUAL SCHEDULES**
- **WRITTEN DIRECTIONS WITH ORAL INSTRUCTIONS**
- **CHECKLISTS**
- **MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE**
- **TRIFOLD BOARD TO MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS**

## **INTERVENTIONS**

- **MEET WITH A TEACHER OR SUPERVISOR ON A REGULAR BASIS TO REVIEW WORK TROUBLESHOOT PROBLEMS.**
- **BEHAVIOR OR WORK CONTRACTS**



# ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER

English Language Learners are students who are learning English as the language of instruction while learning its curriculum. Within two or so years of exposure to the language, learners can become proficient in the everyday aspect of the language, but require five to seven years to become proficient in academic English (Capacity Building Series, 2013). ELLs bring with them their own particular struggles and do display some achievement gaps because of their lack of mastery of the English language. ELLs are students whose first language is not English and speak their mother tongue at home. They

- Hear another spoken language at home, but respond in English
- Use a combination of languages at home
- Attend schools in other languages and enter English school later on
- Leave and return to Canada, while not following an English education

## **IN CLASS ACCOMMODATIONS**

- **COGNATE DICTIONARIES**
- **USE AN AUDIO FEATURE TO READ TEXT**
- **MORE TIME TO RESPOND**
- **SMALL GROUP ORAL INTERACTIONS**

## **INTERVENTIONS**

- **STUDY OF PHONOLOGY AND PHONEMIC AWARENESS**
- **DECODING STRATEGIES**
- **VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT EXERCISES**
- **READING FOR FLUENCY**
- **READING FOR COMPREHENSION**



## DEDICATION AND THANKS

This literacy issue is dedicated to all the students that I was unable to help due to my lack of expertise in learning struggles and disabilities. I wish to formally apologize to you all and wish that I had done you justice. Though you have come and gone out of my life for almost twenty years, I will always remember you and hold you very dear to my heart even though my behavior did not always demonstrate that. Now that I know better, I will do better. And, a special thank you to Steve Dunn, Director of New Horizons Adult Centre, who has supported and encouraged my quest to become a literacy expert by asking for my help and consulting services as if I was one. It seems that my ship is sailing in that direction.

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