

What's the Fuss About Phonics and Word Study?

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Introduction

Headlines like 'The Great Debate' or 'Reading Wars' or 'Whole Language Versus Phonics' have polarized conversations about phonics and word study in newspapers, journal articles, and, more recently, in web-based formats. Writers often position the issue of phonics and word study as having two sides—diametrically opposed—phonics or no phonics. In this article, I argue that such 'wars' are often based on half-truths or exaggerations and should be replaced with more productive conversations.

Regretfully, this kind of dialogue is often inflammatory and does not thoughtfully examine the four most important questions surrounding phonics and word study:

1. **The question is not *if* phonics is taught; it's *how* is phonics taught?** There is wide agreement that understanding letters, sounds, and how they work in English is an essential part of learning to read and write. Important, deeper questions include: How do children learn the complexities of English orthography? and What are the best teaching methods to help students read and write continuous text? Educators must move beyond oppositional arguments to study and identify the characteristics of effective and efficient phonics and word study instruction.
2. **How are individual needs met?** The needs of individual students must be part of the discussion. This is a daunting task when teachers are responsible for 25 or more children, each with their own knowledge base and needs. Clearly, one-size-fits-all is not appropriate. Students benefit from their teachers' careful documentation of students' knowledge and teachers' intentional teaching designed to meet their individual needs.
3. **How does instruction change over time to meet individual needs?** The discussion must also include

how students build on their growing orthographic knowledge over time and what instruction best supports individuals to learn the complexities of English, a language which is not orthographically regular. I agree with Robert Schwartz who writes that, "The literacy profession would be well served to abandon the debate over whether phonics knowledge is a necessary component of early literacy learning. The science of early literacy needs to focus on change over time in children's word recognition strategies as children build their phonic and orthographic knowledge..." (2015, p. 5).

4. **What do teachers need to know about English orthography to ensure students learn the complexities of English to support reading and writing proficiency?** Although English is a complex language, there is no need for students to learn individual words by rote memorization. Rather, equipped with conceptual understanding of English, teachers can help students discover important insights into how words work which will support their reading and writing achievement (Scharer, 1992).

There are six "D Words" I offer which will inform those four questions: *Debated*, *Developmental*, *Document*, *Diverse*, *Describe*, and *Discuss*. The first will set the stage for the fuss about phonics and word study using examples from both Reading Recovery® and classroom studies which illustrate how the conflict has been described in the literature for decades. The other five words will help Reading Recovery teachers and classroom teachers collaborate to design high-quality phonics and word study instruction which meets the needs of each child.

Debated

Chall's 1967 book, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, is often credited with coining the headline 'The Great Debate.' I remember Jeanne Chall visiting The Ohio State University early in my career. She introduced herself as "the grubby old phonics lady" in a wonderfully self-deprecating manner. Clearly, her publications and workbooks

for children positioned her as a phonics advocate. However, after viewing a Reading Recovery lesson, she said that it was the best example she had ever seen of quality phonics instruction. I recall thinking that this was someone who really understood the complexities of both children and learning English.

Concurrent with Chall's publication, Bond and Dykstra (1967) published their findings of the 'First-Grade Studies,' concluding that they could find no clear best basal program or instructional approach for beginning reading instruction. Phonics was an important component of instruction, but it was the teacher who truly made the difference in children's literacy acquisition, not a published program. Later, the debate escalated into 'The Reading Wars' and by the 1990s, the sound bite was 'Phonics Versus Whole Language.' Whole language advocates wrote a response to this dichotomy and clearly argued that there was, indeed, quality phonics instruction in whole language classrooms (Newman & Church, 1990).

To provide scholarly evidence of phonics instruction in whole language classrooms, Karin Dahl and I conducted federally funded research to document phonics instruction in eight whole language first-grade classrooms for an entire year. We found that students not only learned a great deal about letter-sound relationships but phonological and phonemic awareness as well (Dahl, Scharer, Lawson, & Grogan, 1999). My fingers were typing constantly documenting all the ways students were learning about letters and sounds through ABC books, shared reading, poetry, word sorts, word collections, and, in general, a celebration of how words work. The teachers used both formal and informal assessments to fine-tune instruction to meet students' needs. Our publications in *Reading Research Quarterly* and *The Reading Teacher* (Dahl & Scharer, 2000), however, did not stem the debate. Although we argued that the instruction we documented in eight first-grade classrooms was systematic (intentionally and carefully planned to provide instruction to meet student needs) and intensive (instruction as present during most every part of the literacy block in large group, small group, and individual contexts), there were still critiques of both our methodology (qualitative and no control group) and our findings.

The studies, articles, and critiques below provide a crucial context for understanding the dialogue and context surrounding phonics and word study over the past 20 years, particularly as it relates to Reading Recovery.

National Reading Panel

The findings of the 2000 National Reading Panel (NRP) offer important insights about phonological awareness and phonics instruction which provide a backdrop for the critics of Reading Recovery I will describe.

Phonemic awareness. The panel concluded that there is a positive relationship between phonological awareness and learning to read. However, the panel did not endorse any particular method of teaching children phonological or phonemic awareness (PA). The panel specifically noted that "...children will acquire some phonemic awareness in the course of learning to read and spell even though they are not taught PA explicitly" (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], National Reading Panel Reports of the Subgroups, 2000a, p. 2-43). This conclusion is contrary to those who use the panel's report to argue that children must first learn phonological awareness before learning to read. The panel also noted that programs lasting more than 20 hours were less effective than programs 20 hours or less (p. 2-6) and that there are many ways to teach phonemic awareness. PA instruction was found to be most effective when instructing preschool children, less effective in kindergarten, and even less effective in first grade. In terms of struggling students, the panel found that "the effects of PA training on spelling for disabled readers was minimal, as indicated by effect sizes that did not differ significantly from zero" (p. 2-4).

The panel also offered three cautions regarding phonemic awareness instruction: (a) PA training is not a complete reading program; (b) there are many ways to teach PA effectively; and (c) "the motivation of both students and their teachers is a critical ingredient of success. Research has not specifically focused on this" (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], National Reading Panel Report Summary, 2000b, p. 8). The panel concluded that "the NRP findings should not be used to dictate any oversimplified prescriptions regarding effective PA instruction... There are many factors that govern the effectiveness of instruction" (Reports of the Subgroups, 2000a, p. 2-7).

Thus, the panel carefully identified the most appropriate age for PA instruction, argued for limiting instruction to 20 hours of all instructional time for literacy, and noted the importance of the motivation of both teachers and students relative to selecting an instructional method.

Phonics. It's important to describe the context of the work on phonics to appropriately interpret the panel's findings. Joanne Yatvin was a principal who was a member of the panel and the phonics subgroup. She wrote with concern that there was only one research librarian assisted by several doctoral students to do electronic searches for all of the panel's subgroups. She described the effort as "every man for himself" (2002). In addition, only 38 studies met the criteria for inclusion in the phonics meta-analysis. Only 14 studies were on typically developing students, and the definition of reading measured in the studies varied from reading words in isolation to reading phonetically decodable words with few studies using connected text. In addition, Yatvin wrote that "contrary to the guidelines specified by NICHD at the outset, an outside researcher who had not shared in the panel's journey was commissioned to do the [phonics] review" (Yatvin, 2002, p. 368). She added that "The phonics report in its completed form was not seen, even by the whole subcommittee, of which I was a member, until February 25, four days before the full report was to go to press. Thus, the phonics report became part of the full report of the NRP uncorrected, undeliberated, and unapproved" (p. 369). Yatvin worried that the report had been carelessly read and misinterpreted and that "government agencies at all levels are calling for changes in school instruction and teacher education derived from the 'science' of the NRP report" (p. 369).

One of the concerns is that the extensive work of the subgroups had been inappropriately interpreted in some of the shorter versions of the report (NICHD, 2000b). Elaine M. Garan provided the following example of inaccurate reporting of the panel's findings in her book, *Resisting Reading Mandates: How to Triumph with the Truth* (2002):

- The summary concluded that "...systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for students in kindergarten through 6th grade and for children having difficulty learning to read." (NICHD, 2000b, p. 9)
- However, the reports of the subgroups concluded that "There were insufficient data to draw any conclusions about the effects of phonics instruction with normally developing readers above 1st grade." (NICHD, 2000a, p. 2-117)

Using the findings from the summary, arguments could be made for systematic phonics instruction through sixth grade. However, the actual findings of the panel contradict that.

The panel also noted that children enter school with varying funds of knowledge about letters and sounds suggesting individual instructional needs. "However, it is common for many phonics programs to present a fixed sequence of lessons scheduled from the beginning to the end of the school year" (NICHD, 2000a, p. 2-97). The panel cautioned that "phonics instruction should not become the dominant component in a reading program, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached" (p. 2-97). In addition, the panel noted that "very little research has attempted to determine the contribution of decodable books to the effectiveness of phonics programs" (p. 2-98).

Similar to the panel's findings about phonemic awareness, the Reports of the Subgroups offered cautions about the potential mismatch between the individual needs of students and published phonics programs, that the panel's analyses were unable to determine the effect of phonics instruction beyond first grade, and that use of decodable books was not supported by sufficient research. These are important cautions to keep in mind when considering the critiques of Reading Recovery which use the work of the NRP to substantiate their claims. These are also important points to keep in mind in light of the current demand for systematic programs of instruction in word recognition, or phonics, by the International Dyslexia Association for any child presenting signs of dyslexia at any age.

Reading Recovery critics

Reading Recovery as whole language. Reading Recovery has been characterized by critics as a whole language program with little attention to phonics. For example, in 2007, Louisa Moats wrote an article published by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute entitled *Whole-Language High Jinks: How to Tell When "Scientifically Based Reading Instruction" Isn't*. Moats ignored over 30 years of data on every Reading Recovery child by claiming that Reading Recovery drops 25–40% of the students who don't do well from their data set and that without systematic phonics, students' gains are almost zero. Richard Allington responded through the Education Policy Studies Laboratory online think tank review of research:

Moats would have the reader believe that the presence of systematic phonics lessons— explicit, scripted, sequential, and paced — has been found to be critical in fostering beginning reading development. But, in fact, what the NRP found is that systematic phonics provided a small benefit, primarily on reading lists of words and non-words...even those findings have been seriously challenged by subsequent analyses of the NRP data base. (Allington, 2007)

Allington also writes with concern about Reading Recovery: “Consider the Reading Recovery intervention program that Moats savages. This intervention has stimulated sufficient research (36 studies) that D’Agostino and Murphy (2004) were able to conduct a meta-analysis of that program’s effects on reading achievement” showing that Reading Recovery gains were statistically significant on every measure. The researchers concluded that Reading Recovery students were reaching their classroom peers.

Allington continued by comparing the depth of data on Reading Recovery to the scarcity of data on Moats’ Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) professional development program: “This sort of research support stands in stark contrast to the products that Moats endorses, which have almost no published research to support their use” (Allington, 2007). Allington’s claim is supported by the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) which concluded that LETRS “did not increase the reading test scores of their students” (WWC, 2009).

International Dyslexia Association. In 2011, each of the five articles in the themed issue of *Perspectives on Language and Literacy*, published by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA), discounted various aspects of Reading Recovery. Perhaps Reading Recovery was singled out because of its scientific evidence of effectiveness and the international scalability of the intervention which had been awarded a \$45 million federal grant to scale up in 2010 (D’Agostino, Rodgers, & Scharer, 2010). This entire journal was devoted to diminishing Reading Recovery’s effectiveness; yet, the Reading Recovery community was not provided the opportunity for rebuttal within the journal. In response, *Dispelling Misrepresentations and Misconceptions About Reading Recovery* (RRCNA, 2012) was published on the RRCNA website.

In 2016, the International Literacy Association (ILA, formerly the International Reading Association) published a Research Advisory regarding dyslexia and approaches to

teaching dyslexic children. The advisory concluded that “research does not support the common belief that Orton-Gillingham-based approaches are necessary for students classified as dyslexic ... Rather, students classified as dyslexic have varying strengths and challenges, and teaching them is too complex a task for a scripted, one-size-fits-all program” (ILA, 2016a, p. 3).

The IDA responded, arguing that the field was unified in beliefs and approaches and asserted “there is no difference of opinion about the best method for teaching children with dyslexia to read. That method is systematic, explicit, phonics-based reading instruction. It is the same approach to reading instruction that was recommended for all children by the National Reading Panel (2000) in its landmark report” (IDA, 2016, p. 1).

In response, the ILA’s Research Advisory Addendum quoted the NRP and argued that, while phonics instruction was more effective than non-phonics approaches, the panel reported sufficient limitations to be cautious in interpreting their findings. For example, only 24% of the effect sizes computed for the review had outcomes that measured reading of continuous text. For the rest, the outcome was single word reading or spelling. The ILA addendum continued by focusing in on the effectiveness of the Orton-Gillingham approach reported by the NRP:

[T]he Orton-Gillingham (O-G) program had the lowest average effect size (0.23). Looking further, only two of the O-G studies assessed comprehension, and the average effect size on comprehension was -.03. Only one study reported a delayed assessment of comprehension, and the effect size was -0.81 (six months after the completion of the intervention). That is negative 0.81 — thus participation in an O-G program appears to have had a large negative impact on reading achievement in comparison with other intervention methods evaluated in the study. (ILA, 2016b, p. 3)

More recently, a team of researchers interviewed dyslexia interventionists and were struck by their use of authoritative discourse (Worthy, Svrek, Daly-Lesch, & Tily, 2018). Even though there is still much debate about the definition of dyslexia and appropriate instruction, “...dyslexia policy and practice are steeped in authoritative discourse that speaks of a definitive definition, unique characteristics and prescribed intervention programs that are not well supported by research” (p. 359). The following quotes from dyslexia interventionists illustrate their findings:

- “We begin on day one because we don’t want to assume their brain knows anything necessarily.”
- “As long as I stick to this [program], I know this works and I know if I make sure to say everything it says to say, then it will all turn out good.”
- “We know for a fact.” “A dyslexia therapist knows.” “We know the neurobiology of it.”
(Worthy et al., 2018, p. 377)

When asked about students who did not make progress an interventionist replied, “It broke my heart that he didn’t make more progress, but he just, he was dyslexic, he was ESL and he didn’t have home support.” (Worthy et al., 2018, p. 372). During 60-minute sessions, the interventionists reported that comprehension, vocabulary, and writing are often skipped. Texts students read were limited to decodable materials provided by the intervention. Yet students were “excited because it’s the only thing they get to read” (p. 372).

In contrast, Reading Recovery students read multiple books with natural language during each 30-minute lesson, write their own story, have phonics lessons based on student needs, and take books home that they can read every night. The structure of the Reading Recovery lesson is based on Clay’s complex literacy processing theory enabling children to develop working systems for reading and writing as they read and write continuous texts with the support of a knowledgeable teacher. Writing in *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, Doyle (2018) provides an elegant description of Clay’s theories in contrast to “a critical, or single, variable theory of literacy acquisition (visual information) and a deficit model of learning and remediation” (p. 37). Doyle also offers important suggestions for Reading Recovery and classroom teachers to support conversations with colleagues holding the single theory of reading. In the same journal issue, Gabriel (2018) describes the laws and policies surrounding dyslexia-specific legislation. Both are key articles for Reading Recovery and classroom teachers to inform conversations about dyslexia.

The Reading Wars and Reading Recovery. In 2017, an article was published in *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal* written by Cook, Rodes, & Lipsitz entitled “The Reading Wars and Reading Recovery: What Educators, Families, and Taxpayers Should Know.” Two key claims made by the authors were (a) that “Reading Recovery teachers are not trained to provide explicit and systematic instruction in the essential foundational com-

ponents of reading” (p. 19) and further that (b) “If all K–3 students were taught with evidence-based methodology from their first days in school, there would be far fewer students who would need to be retained in first grade or need special education” (p. 19). The Reading Recovery community knows that the first claim is false and no research was cited to support their second claim. The Reading Recovery community responded to the multiple misleading false claims to discredit Reading Recovery, the world’s most widely researched early reading intervention, in a subsequent issue of the same journal (Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2017), on this journal’s website, and on the RRCNA website.

Deprivation argument. Phonics proponents often argue that teachers are depriving students of the opportunity to learn to read because there’s not enough systematic, intensive phonics instruction. The same argument could be made that spending too much time on systematic, intensive phonics instruction denies students sufficient time to read books, listen to quality children’s literature, and write in response to their reading! This is, perhaps, why children with more than 20 hours of phonemic awareness training do not score as well as those with 20 hours or less; they are missing quality literacy instruction that includes reading and writing continuous texts. The phonics argument must change from ‘either-or’ to the questions posed at the beginning of this article. We need to study and discuss how to teach English orthography, how to meet individual needs, how those needs change over time, and what teachers need to know to support learners. The rest of this article will focus on those questions by considering the remaining D Words: Developmental, Diverse, Document, Describe, and Discuss.

Developmental

In the early 1970s, researchers began to document how young children represented their meaning while writing. This meant looking at what children could do rather than what they could not. Marie Clay’s 1975 text *What Did I Write?* and Charles Read’s 1971 seminal work with preschoolers studied and presented the logic behind children’s spelling attempts. Clay discovered and shared how logical children are in writing words to record their messages. Read learned that children systematically matched the names of letters they knew to speech sounds and that less prominent sounds (such as short vowels) were easily overlooked. Examining spelling errors, in fact, provided a window into children’s thinking.

Read's work was followed by an impressive line of research coming from the University of Virginia where Edmund Henderson (1990) and his colleagues identified a set of developmental spelling stages and found similar developmental paths for children learning other alphabetic languages such as French, Portuguese, and Spanish (Templeton & Bear, 1992). The stages are not intended to be tightly defined; rather, Henderson argued that the stages could inform teachers about what a child understood conceptually so the teacher could plan what to teach next. He identified four stages of development: letter name (sound), within word (pattern), syllable juncture (meaning), and

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derivational constancy (derivation). Understanding students' developmental learning of spelling concepts can help teachers identify what students might already know and what to teach next. Reading Recovery teachers have the advantage of observing children's writing and spelling attempts daily while supporting more and more awareness and independence. They therefore are able to monitor a child's increasing control of concepts of word construction, or spelling, over time.

What follows is a brief description of letter name (sound) and within word (pattern), the expected conceptual understandings observed among first-grade readers that can be found in books such as *Word Journeys* (Ganske, 2013) and *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2015). This information is presented to provide our Reading Recovery teachers who work as literacy coaches with helpful information for classroom teachers.

Letter name (sound)

Unlike Spanish, English is not a *transparent* language with each letter representing a consistent sound. English is a mixture of German, Danish, Norman French, Church Latin, classical Latin, and classical Greek as well as words from Arabia, India, the Americas, Spain, Polynesia, Russia, & Tibet! Henderson noted that "... our use of the

alphabet appears to be as confusing to learners as possible" (1990, p. 9). So, teaching a child that T always sounds like /t/ will not be useful for words like *the* or *caution*. Rather than teaching a rigid relationship between sounds and letters, our instruction needs to support a lifelong interest in words with the recognition that, while English is complicated, there are principles that can help individuals move toward conventional spelling.

Sound is the first principle children use as they attempt to write words. Using the names of the letters they know young children will spell *cat* as KT and may identify long vowels correctly spelling *boat* as BOT (Henderson, 1990). Understanding how they represent more complex sounds requires you to think like a 5-year-old. For example, consider why a young writer may spell *when* as YN. The name of the letter Y is the first sound a child hears; the less prominent sound of the vowel is overlooked; and the final sound is represented correctly as N. Children need to learn about words that start with a W so they can connect a known word to a new one. It really helps to have a child named William or Winifred in the class as children often use what they know from their name and the names of others to spell unknown words (Bloodgood, 1999). Name charts used by classroom teachers make excellent supports for children as they are learning about letters and sounds so they can connect the spellings of friend's names with sounds heard. Reading Recovery teachers support children to flexibly use letters and sounds to arrive at conventional spelling by using sound boxes during the writing portion of the lessons and magnetic letters (if you know *like*, you can write *bike*, etc.)

Affricates are often tricky as children may spell *drum* beginning with a J due to how they articulate the initial sounds. Children also may notice that certain letters, when side-by-side, sound different — like TH, SH, or CH. Teaching that *shoe* begins with a /sh/ sound must be tempered by learning over time that /sh/ can be represented in many ways in words such as *sugar*, *conscious*, *chaperone*, *schist*, *fuchsia*, *issue*, *mansion*, or *ocean*. Most of these words will not become a focus of attention until much later for students. The point is that it's important to teach students to be flexible and consider multiple possibilities when reading and writing. Reading Recovery teachers value and teach for flexibility from the first lessons and may support classroom teachers with students struggling to monitor, cross-check, and make multiple attempts on unknown words.

A recommendation for classroom teachers is that children who spell using letter names benefit from sorting pictures by sound, listening to children's literature which celebrates the sounds words make, learning about words through interactive and shared writing (McFerin & Woodruff, 2018), sorting short vowel words, and extensive reading and writing. Daily classroom writing workshop (McFerin, 2018) parallels the writing portion of the Reading Recovery lesson and offers time for children to create their stories and demonstrate what they know about how words work. Analyzing student writing helps teachers identify teaching points for future minilessons and other instructional contexts. Writing workshop begins with a minilesson which may focus on learning how words word by using sound boxes, working with generative words, or adding endings, much like the ways Reading Recovery teachers support their students to work with words (for example, using sound boxes, using known words to get to unknown words, working with words in isolation, etc.) throughout Reading Recovery lessons.

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Within word (pattern)

Children begin to notice patterns within words they are reading and will use those patterns in their writing. For example, they may notice that long vowels are marked by either another vowel next to it or a final E. This is the time when as part of classroom instruction, children might benefit from sorting words with different long vowel patterns because relying only a sound will not help. Do I spell *bike* as BIEK with two vowels together? Teachers must be cautious with rules such as "when two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking" since Clymer (1963/1996) established that this rule only works with about 45 percent of the words primary students are most likely to read and write. In contrast to a focus on rules, Reading Recovery teachers help children look for *chunks* or *parts in words* that can help them flexibly solve words in both reading and writing.

When children begin to notice short vowels, classroom teachers often present study of word families. However, Clay (2001) has cautioned:

... Knowing many different words enlarges one's chances of getting to new words; knowing only short words, and regular spelling patterns provided by teachers who are 'hooked on word families' of the 'cut, but, nut, and shut' type, restricts options when constructing new words." (p. 24)

Word families can be overused as vowels do not have a consistent sound. Short O, for example, is not always for *octopus*. Let's look, for example, at just two letters: H and O. Following are examples Frank Smith (1985) offers of words using the same first letter and vowel, each with different sounds: *hot, horse, hope, horizon, hook, honey, hoot, hour, house, honest*.

This is yet another reason why we must teach children flexibility when approaching words. Smith poses the following question (1985, p. 53) relative to the set words beginning with HO: "Can anyone really believe that a child could learn to identify these words by sounding out the letters?"

Wide reading will help children acquire correct spellings as many of the words in this pattern are commonly found in the stories they read so they will acquire a visual memory. Similarly, every time a Reading Recovery child rereads a familiar book, he has the opportunity to notice something new and to add to his visual memory. Word sorts used in classroom instruction at this level will focus on long vowel patterns, r-controlled vowel patterns, and more complex consonant clusters such as QU, STR, or combinations of a vowel followed by two consonants such as in *find* or *cold*.

Document

Historically, spelling instruction has been dominated by workbooks and a single spelling list for the entire class. Parents learned to allocate time on Thursday evening to prepare students for a Friday final spelling list. Student scores on the final test become the main assessment tool. But, were the scores accurate assessments of student understanding? A group of teachers I worked with posed this question: Why do they get it on Friday and misspell it on Monday? This became the title for an article Hilal Gill and I published in *Language Arts* (Gill & Scharer, 1996). The teachers found the answer as they assessed

students using Ganske’s Developmental Spelling Analysis (2013) and discovered the wide range of conceptual knowledge held by students in their classrooms. Teachers were amazed that students’ achievement on Friday tests were quite different from their actual knowledge about letters, sounds, and how words work if asked to spell words of increasing difficulty. They concluded that the spelling basal focused more on memorization than understanding English orthography conceptually and the basal was at the instruction level of only a small portion of their class — for some, lists were too hard and for others, lists were too easy. This has also been documented by research. For example, Stetson & Boutin (1980) assessed 25 second-grade classes and found that the children already knew 68% of the words in the spelling book. Similarly, Wilde (1988) found that students in Grades 3 and 4 who did a great deal of reading and writing could spell as well as students who had lessons from a textbook.

Teachers who abandon the daily spelling workbook lessons have more time to spend documenting students’ conceptual understanding by analyzing their writing and periodic assessments to determine instructional goals and student progress. The advantage of using assessments found in *Word Journeys* and *Words Their Way* is that the words students spell are not studied on Thursday evening but are lists of progressively more difficult words employing spelling principles based on the developmental levels described above. Reading Recovery teachers who support classroom teachers may suggest parts of Clay’s Observation Survey (2013) such as Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words, Letter Identification, and Writing Vocabulary along with an analysis of text reading and writing to learn more about one or more students in the

classroom. Such assessments, when combined with analyzing student writing, provide a complete and much clearer picture of students’ conceptual knowledge of English orthography than Friday tests.

Diverse

When focusing on students’ needs and when working with individuals in a Reading Recovery lesson, teachers begin to question one-size-fits-all instruction and start to explore ways to tailor instruction to meet student needs. As they learn to analyze new assessments, teachers see their classrooms with a new sense of diversity which demands changes in their instruction. This may also lead to frustrations about time — how is it possible to organize classroom spelling instruction with such variation in spelling achievement? One possibility is to use the 20 minutes each day previously used for the spelling workbook and design an organization plan where the teacher meets with one group for instruction and the other groups are working independently using either personal spelling lists or lists matched to their spelling achievement. This will require a high level of organization and deep teaching of routines.

The chart below provides an illustration of how this might work (Steele, Scharer & Rowe, 2018). For 20 minutes each day, one group has a teacher-led minilesson and the other groups are working independently doing various sorts, activities, and independent assessments. Key to the effectiveness of this approach is teaching students the routines for each independent activity so the teacher is not interrupted. This may require several days of demonstration and practice before the rotation can begin. I once saw an excellent example of students who had learned routines

DAY	Student Names	Student Names	Student Names	Student Names
1	Teacher-Led Mini-lesson	Progress Monitor OR Assess	Blind Sort	Making Connections
2	Closed Sort and Write	Teacher-Led Mini-lesson	Progress Monitor OR Assess	Blind Sort
3	Making Connections	Closed Sort and Write	Teacher-Led Mini-lesson	Progress Monitor OR Assess
4	Blind Sort	Making Connections	Closed Sort and Write	Teacher-Led Mini-lesson
5	Progress Monitor OR Assess	Blind Sort	Making Connections	Closed Sort and Write

Designing an organization plan allows the teacher to allocate instruction time among groups of children at different levels of achievement. This example is a 5-week rotation plan for four groups of students.



Small group word study lesson



Interactive writing



Independent word study working on name puzzle

Photos courtesy of Scholastic, *Responsive Literacy: A Comprehensive Framework* (2018). Scharer, P. L. (Ed.).

when I visited a kindergarten classroom with a group of administrators. Each principal was assigned a 5-year-old to follow. I overheard one child talking with her adult when he indicated interest in what another group was doing. She looked him in the eye and quite clearly told him, “You can’t go there. It isn’t your day.”

Describe

Classroom teachers need to be able to describe how they are teaching phonics, spelling, and word study, and measuring student successes. This is particularly important to parents who may now be seeing their children come home with words to sort or a word study notebook where the student has gathered words for a particular spelling principle.

In kindergarten and first-grade classrooms, much learning about letters and sounds takes place during interactive writing, writing workshop, and word study during guided reading lessons.

Young children also learn about how words work as they learn a new poem each week which they paste in their poetry notebooks and illustrate. The poem may have rhyming words to note or many words beginning with the same letter or letter combination.

For our youngest literacy learners, nursery rhymes are important shared reading experiences which support phonological awareness and learning about how words work. For example, a child may be introduced to the *Itsy Bitsy Spider* during a shared reading and meaningful discussion followed by looking closely at the text to find words that rhyme (*spout, out*) or words with a P in them (*spider, up*). When the poem is well known, students can take home individual KEEP BOOKS (www.keepbooks.org) to read to their family.

Quality word study begins with developing an appreciation, curiosity, and a love of words. Opportunities for learning about phonics and word study are found in every instructional context in a responsive literacy classroom and must also include intentional teaching based on student needs. Parents want to know more about their students than a percentage on a Friday test. Is my child able to write increasingly more difficult words accurately? Does my child edit his or her work? Does my child fully participate in word study activities in the classroom? Answering these questions will contribute to describing how teachers provide quality, intentional instruction in phonics and word study.

Discuss

The final D word is Discuss, which is a charge to all education professionals to create opportunities to talk about research, critiques, and children. The debate as described in this article includes many significant misunderstandings about phonics and word study from the interpretation of research to the understanding of Reading Recovery. It's our responsibility to be knowledgeable and prepared to have thoughtful conversations with colleagues who may have been influenced by such critiques. The only way we can overcome these challenges is by being part of the conversation.

Consider submitting a proposal to the IDA's annual meeting to share clear information about Reading Recovery. I was part of a panel from The Ohio State University presenting at IDA and found the conference to be both insightful and challenging. It was my hope that my part of the presentation cleared up a few of the myths about Reading Recovery for the audience. Be part of the conversation. A colleague who was a certified Orton-Gillingham instructor once asked if she could sit in on my doctoral seminar on English orthography. We were amazed at the overlap between our two perspectives — the biggest difference being in terms of instruction. This was an important conversation to have. A special educator once told me that 30% of all children are dyslexic. This comment gave me a chance to talk about Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons.TM So, if Reading Recovery can bring over 70% of the lowest first graders up to the class average in 12–20 weeks, how can 30% be dyslexic? Or, perhaps Reading Recovery is truly the answer for most dyslexic students. This reinforces the importance of offering Reading Recovery to struggling first graders and Literacy Lessons to older struggling readers.

So, be part of the conversation by being both knowledgeable and professional (Doyle, 2018; Gabriel, 2018). I believe that creating opportunities to cross paths with colleagues from various perspectives will contribute to having fewer misunderstandings and more efforts placed on the important questions posed at the beginning of this article.

The Impact of Reading Recovery Ten Years After Intervention

Finally, it's important to celebrate some recent news coming out of England where a study of the economic impact of Reading Recovery over 10 years found that "...every £1 spent on Reading Recovery since 2005/6 will create a potential societal benefit of £3.30-4.30" (Hurry & Fridkin, 2018). The study also included the results of the Phonics Screening Check where researchers found that 75% of students who had Reading Recovery prior to taking the Phonics Screening Check passed. The percentage of all children nationally who passed the phonics check was 81% in both 2016 and 2017. Thus, the Reading Recovery pupils from the bottom 5-10% of the class when they were selected for Reading Recovery were performing only 6% below the national average after they completed their series of lessons. But, only 19% of the children who had not received Reading Recovery instruction prior to the testing passed the phonics test. Clearly, children learn a great deal about phonics during their Reading Recovery lessons and are nearly 4 times more likely to pass the Phonics Screening Check after a series of lessons.

Having a deep knowledge of how children learn about English orthography will help educators respond to critics who use 'authoritative discourse' in a professional, informed manner. I believe that these conversations are required to move the field away from either-or sound bites to focusing the field on how to support students as individuals in classroom, small group, and individual instructional contexts. Reading Recovery educators, working as members of their schools' literacy teams, are poised to engage in these important collaborative conversations on behalf of their students and to offer productive literacy support to classroom teachers.

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