

What Works Clearinghouse 2023 Reading Recovery Intervention Report: The Rest of the Story

Robert M. Schwartz, Oakland University

In July 2023, the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) completed their fourth Reading Recovery® Intervention Report. This report indicates potentially positive effects in four outcome domains: Literacy achievement, writing productivity, receptive communications, and writing conventions. The literacy achievement domain is given a Tier 2 rating, based on one study that meets WWC standards with 6,888 students and showing strong evidence of improvement. The other three domains are given a Tier 3 rating, based on one study that meets WWC standards with less than 350 students. But this is far from the whole story! In the sections below, I'll explain what administrators and teachers need to know about the available research evidence on the effectiveness of the Reading Recovery intervention.

ESSA Evidence Tiers

The ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) evidence tiers are a relatively new addition to WWC intervention reports. Tier 1 indicates strong evidence of effectiveness and is defined as a study that meets WWC standards without reservations and has at least one statistically significant positive effect, with at least 350 students from two or more educational sites (<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/essa>). "The WWC incorporates these evidence tier definitions into its effectiveness ratings to simplify the usability of ratings for education decision makers who often need to identify evidence that aligns with the U.S. Department of Education's definitions" (WWC, 2022, p. 131).

A search of the WWC's literacy intervention reports includes 131 programs listed by their evidence tier and within tiers by the date of the intervention report. I am surprised and disappointed that Reading Recovery was not given a Tier 1 rating. The evaluation of the Reading Recovery scale-up grant (May et al., 2016) provides the strongest possible evidence of the intervention's effec-

tiveness. Scale-up grants were only given to programs that had already demonstrated potentially positive effects. May et al.'s 2016 independent evaluation of Reading Recovery under scale-up conditions provides Tier 1 evidence of positive effects. So why doesn't the 2023 intervention report indicate this?

Why Not?

Reading Recovery's effect on literacy achievement was rated as Tier 1 in the recently revised (2023) WWC single study review of May et al. (2016) analysis of the Reading Recovery scale-up grant (<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Study/90698>). This evidence is considered Tier 1 because it is based on a well-conducted randomized controlled trial that meets WWC's design criteria without reservation. In addition, the findings on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Observation Survey; Clay, 2019) reading measures are significant, positive, and large.

However, for intervention reports, WWC adds to the ESSA evidence criteria the requirement that two studies show strong evidence to receive a Tier 1 rating. The Reading Recovery Intervention Report (2023) rates the literacy achievement evidence as Tier 2, since May et al. (2016) is considered only one study. With this additional criterion, both the definition of a study and the time limits for consideration of studies are critical.

Definition of a study

So, what qualifies as a study according to WWC?

The core of the WWC evidence review process is the assessment of eligible studies against WWC standards. The definition of a study is important, given how the WWC reports on and summarizes evidence. The WWC defines a study as an examination of the effect of an intervention on a group

of participants in which assignment to conditions was coordinated (*WWC Procedures and Standards Handbook*, 2022, p. 20).

This document further explains that a manuscript may contain a single study or multiple studies depending on sample overlap.

The requirement that at least two studies show positive results to receive WWC's highest rating is reasonable. The National Science Foundation and the Institute of Education Sciences (2018) agree "there is a need to increase the visibility and value of reproducibility and replication studies among education research stakeholders" (p. 1). Replication of findings in educational or psychological research is rare. They define direct replication as

studies that seek to replicate findings from a previous study using the same, or as similar as possible, research methods and procedures as a previous study. The goal of direct replication studies is to test whether the results found in the previous study were due to error or chance. This is done by collecting data with a new, but similar, sample and holding all the research methods and procedures constant. (2018, p. 2)

The May et al. (2016) evaluation of the Reading Recovery scale-up grant provides this type of direct replication and eliminates the possibility that the strong positive findings are due to error or chance. This research includes data from four randomized controlled trials with large samples that came from different schools, teachers, and students in each year of the scale-up. There is no sample overlap across years. WWC chose to treat this data as one study. Educational decision makers should realize that the replication of strong literacy achievement outcomes in May et al. provides Tier 1 evidence of Reading Recovery's effectiveness under scale-up conditions!

What about the Tier 3 ratings in the domains of writing productivity and receptive communications? This is based on one study (Burroughs-Lange & Douëttil, 2007) that met WWC standards with reservations and included less than 350 students. So, this rating seems appropriate.

Table 4 of the intervention report shows that the measures linked to these domains in Burroughs-Lange

& Douëttil (2007) were the Writing Vocabulary and Hearing and Recording Sounds in Word subscales of the Observation Survey. The WWC's single study review of May et al. (2016) also includes an analysis of these measures in the supplemental findings section (<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Study/90698>). Whether you consider the May et al. research one study or four, combining their findings with the Burroughs-Lange & Douëttil (2007) results would yield Tier 1 ratings for the writing productivity and receptive communications domains.

WWC has generated Reading Recovery Intervention Reports in 2003, 2007, 2013, and 2023. The first three intervention reports showed positive or potentially positive evidence in the domains of alphabets, reading fluency, comprehension, and general reading achievement. (ESSA tiers were not an aspect of these earlier reports.) Evidence related to these domains came partially from the subscales of the Observation Survey. The most recent version of WWC's (2022) *Procedures and Standards Handbook* reports subscales within supplemental findings of single study reviews and does not include them when reporting domain findings for intervention reports. This change makes it harder for decision makers to find relevant evidence.

For example, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills has a reading words subscale and a comprehension subscale. These scales relate to the WWC domains of alphabets and comprehension, but now can only be found in the supplemental section of the single study review. The analyses in May et al. (2016) and Schwartz & Lomax (2020) combined with the evidence in WWC's 2013 Reading Recovery Intervention Report support Tier 1 ratings in alphabetic, reading fluency, comprehension, and general reading achievement.

Subgroup analyses are also reported by WWC as supplemental findings and not included in the main intervention report. Both May et al. (2016) and Schwartz & Lomax (2020) report evidence of effectiveness for the subgroup of English learners. Again, the four large independent samples of this subgroup show that Reading Recovery is highly effective for English learners.

Time limits

The WWC's 2013 Reading Recovery Intervention Report was issued during the third year of the scale-up grant. The first-year results from this scale-up research

were reported by May et al. in 2013. This research was not included in the 2013 Reading Recovery Intervention Report. In fact, the 2013 intervention report included one less study than was included in the 2006 report.

Delaying the production of a new Reading Recovery Intervention Report to 2023 has distorted the effectiveness evidence in multiple ways. The WWC *Procedures and Standards Handbook* (2022, p. 23) limits the evidence review to the past 20 years. This eliminates all but one of the studies included in the 2006 intervention report that provided the research base for the i3 scale-up grant — Schwartz (2005). The WWC (2021) *Reading Language Arts Review Protocol* further restricts the timeframe for eligible studies to 15 years. As previously noted, the number of studies providing evidence is a critical component of WWC effectiveness ratings and is impacted by the timing of the review and the time limit on eligible studies.

What the Evidence Says

The delay in updating the Reading Recovery Intervention Report and the changes made to WWC procedures across this delay combine to limit and distort the evidence of effectiveness available to decision makers. Reading Recovery research provides Tier 1 evidence of effectiveness in multiple beginning reading domains. The ESSA Tier 1 criteria require one well-designed study showing positive effects with at least 350 students from two or more educational sites. The May et al. (2016) report far exceeds these criteria with four large independent samples, including a total of 6,888 students from 1,254 schools. Reading Recovery continues to provide teachers with the professional knowledge needed to support at-risk beginning readers and is effective for teachers and their students when brought to scale as designed. And now, as Paul Harvey might have said, you know the rest of the story.

References

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Expanding the Story

But, of course, this is only the part of the story told by experimental research. Marie Clay developed and refined Reading Recovery based on observational research. She provided a lesson framework, a set of procedures, and a learning community that enables teachers to observe and adjust their instruction based on the strengths and needs of individual students (Clay, 2016; <https://readingrecovery.org>). This is what makes Reading Recovery so effective.

The Journal of Reading Recovery has a multitude of articles designed to support Reading Recovery teachers. Across 30-plus years as a member of the Reading Recovery community, I have had the opportunity to expand and share my learning.

For teachers and administrators interested in learning more about the theory behind Reading Recovery instruction, the following articles provide a good start. Clay knew that, with a topic as complex as beginning reading, there is no end to the story.

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About the Author

Dr. Robert Schwartz is an emeritus professor in the Department of Reading and Language Arts at Oakland University in Rochester, MI. He is a past president of and former research consultant for the Reading Recovery Council of North America. His research interests include self-monitoring in beginning reading, early literacy intervention, research design, and professional development for literacy teachers. In the What Works Clearinghouse 2007 review of 887 studies from 153 beginning reading programs, Dr. Schwartz's Reading Recovery research was one of only 27 studies that met WWC's standards without reservations. He can be reached at rschwartz@oakland.edu.



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