

# Reading Recovery IS the Science(s) of Reading and the Art of Teaching

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Reading Recovery® is a supplemental reading and writing program for first-grade children who are at risk of reading failure. Developed by Marie Clay in New Zealand after years of research, it has been successfully implemented in the United States since 1984. Descubriendo la Lectura, the equivalent application of Reading Recovery in Spanish, was developed in 1988. Literacy Lessons®, an expansion of Reading Recovery, began in 2006 to serve multilingual learners and/or students identified for special education services throughout the grades. For ease of readability, the term Reading Recovery will be used throughout this article and is intended to be inclusive of all programs. The goal of Reading Recovery is to assist the most tangled children to read at or above the average levels of their first-grade peers in the least amount of time possible. This phenomenal rate of growth is described as *accelerated progress*.

Reading Recovery is a “teacher-dependent” program (Gaffney & Anderson, 1991) that relies on the ability of the teacher to design “a superbly sequenced series of lessons” (Clay, 2016, p. 20) and execute the

most powerful decisions throughout each lesson. Because Reading Recovery has no packaged kit of materials nor a script with a predetermined instructional sequence, no time is wasted teaching what the learner already knows (Clay, 2016). Responsive teaching is the key to successful student outcomes.

Data are collected on each student and reported by the International Data Evaluation Center (IDEC) at The Ohio State University. Annual national summary reports indicate that the lowest-performing students consistently achieve accelerated growth in literacy achievement since inception of the intervention (IDEC, 2023). Additionally, an external evaluation of Reading Recovery validated these results (May et al., 2016).

Despite Reading Recovery’s positive impact on literacy acquisition for millions of children for 4 decades, the Reading Recovery community faces substantial challenges from those hawking various scripted programs labeled “Structured Literacy,” touting these as THE science of reading (SOR). Claims are made that this way is the one and only “right” way to teach reading.

The purpose of this article is to compare and contrast the media version of the Science of Reading (SOR) Movement with the comprehensive, researched Sciences of Reading to which Reading Recovery ascribes. Important distinctions are made regarding the role of phonics instruction and student’s use of multiple sources of information to access print. An additional comparison is made between the tightly scripted programs touted by the media version of the SOR Movement with the highly qualified Reading Recovery teachers who make moment-to-moment diagnostic decisions in response to individual children during each lesson that can only be described as the “art” of teaching.

## A Challenge From the Science of Reading Movement: The Role of Phonics Instruction

It is interesting to note that the term Structured Literacy, which became cojoined with the SOR Movement, was coined as a marketing ploy to unify various phonics programs under an umbrella term, as described on the International

Dyslexia Association (IDA) website under the heading, *Structured Literacy: A New Term to Unify Us and Sell What We Do* (Malchow, n.d.). The website states,

If we want school districts to adopt our approach, we need a name that brings together our successes. We need one name that refers to the many programs that teach reading in the same way. A name is the first and essential step to building a brand. (para. 5)

Opportunities for profiteering off of struggling readers abound in local communities and on the internet. For example, with an investment of \$40–80K (\$5,000 veteran discount) and 2 weeks of training, you too can own a dyslexia clinic where you can realize a “Huge market! Nearly 20% of our population is dyslexic” since “clients average one and a half to three years” (Dyslexia Institutes of America, 2023; Franchise Gator, n.d.). If a sizable cash outlay is prohibitive, then one can become a dyslexia tutor and “start a thriving tutoring business” by following four simple steps, including the purchase of a “specialized” (a.k.a. “scripted phonics”) curriculum sold on a website (Pride Reading Program, 2019).

Promoting a phonics-first, phonics only message, the IDA and associated phonics programs embarked on a marketing campaign dubbed the “Science of Reading.” Amplified by newspapers (Mervosh, 2023), magazines (Luscombe, 2022; Winter, 2022), podcasts (Hanford, 2022; Nanton, 2022) and documentaries (Habib-Lowder et al., 2023) that engaged in biased reporting

(Aukerman, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c), these messages repeatedly made false claims that a particular method of teaching phonics was settled science (Thomas, 2022; Reinking et al., 2023).

### *Phonics only: Smoke and mirrors*

The IDA marketing campaign may be riding a wave of media attention, but this phonics-only view of reading instruction is flawed in many ways. Reviews of research on instruction that focused solely on decoding interventions showed either small to moderate effects, or the results varied so much that gains were not sustained over time. These studies also demonstrated that a phonics-only curriculum had no effects on global reading skills (International Literacy Association, ILA; 2016a, 2016b). Often cited for its support of phonics instruction, the National Reading Panel report (2000) explicitly stated,

It important to emphasize that systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced reading program. *Phonics instruction is never a total reading program ... Phonics should not become the dominant component in a reading program, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached.* (pp. 2–97, italics added for emphasis)

Gabriel (2020) reported that resources listed on the IDA website presented the organization as the authority, rather than citing studies, individuals, or researchers. Without rigorous studies, these phonics programs are ineligible for inclusion

in the United States Department of Education’s (USDE) What Works Clearinghouse (WWC).

Established in 2002, WWC is part of an initiative of the Institute of Education Sciences at the USDE. Recognizing that not all education research is equal, the purpose of the WWC is to review research, determine which studies meet rigorous standards, and summarize the findings. It is the national repository of scientific evidence on education programs, products, practices, and policies focused on high-quality research to answer the question, “What works in education?” For a study to be accepted, one of four designs must be employed: randomized controlled trial, quasi-experimental design, regression discontinuity design, or single-case design, and the results of the study must demonstrate significant positive outcomes (WWC, 2022).

In the case of one commonly used phonics program featured prominently on the IDA website (but not accepted by WWC), studies reported negative effects on comprehension and a negative impact on overall reading achievement (ILA, 2016b). In other words, using this particular scripted phonics program caused students to become *poorer* readers. The emperor has no clothes.

### *The MSV debate: Jargon gets in the way*

When a product has no independent research to support it, it is common practice for marketers to fabricate disinformation about the programs that do. To promote a phonics-only/phonics-first message, the SOR Movement attempted to discredit

“MSV” also known as the “three-cueing method” and falsely attributed this to Reading Recovery.

Seidenberg (2023), noted that “jargon gets in the way of understanding.” It is this superficial and incomplete understanding of MSV that is at issue here. For example, the The Five from Five Multi Lit Australian policy website (n.d.; also cited in Neuman et al., 2023) presents the following misleading definition:

Cueing systems in reading are the practices that aid in determining the meaning of unknown words. There are three cueing systems: grapho-phonemic cues (letters/sounds) (s; /s/); syntactic cues (grammar); and semantics (comprehension). The view is that if one system fails, such as letters and sounds, the other systems might compensate, often leading students to use context, or guessing of words. The research evidence has shown that the approach does not give children the systematic and explicit teaching necessary for them to be able to make the connection between the spoken and the printed word. (p. 8)

Students in Reading Recovery are never taught to guess. However, this false narrative continues to be repeated in the media.

To be clear, Reading Recovery teachers do teach phonics—explicitly and systematically for each student (see Doyle, 2023; Harmey & Bodman, 2019; Reinking & Reinking, 2022; Scharer, 2019). Reading Recovery

does positively impact the attainment of phonics skills (Harmey & Anders, 2023). However, Reading Recovery goes beyond what other phonics programs accomplish by teaching students to apply their phonics knowledge while writing and reading continuous texts. Blevins (2021) stated, “Phonics instruction involves talk. It involves observation. And it involves ongoing application, with lots of authentic reading and writing experiences. ... In short, *explicit* and *systematic* do not mean *skill* and *drill*, or *phonics out of context*” (p. 21). “In other words, there needs to be a text in front of the eyes before it is possible to have reading occur” (Clay, 2015, p. 261).

Briefly, MSV is not a teaching method. Rather it represents a coding shorthand teachers use when analyzing records of oral reading that represent four sources of information young readers and writers must learn to orchestrate: The “M” represents “meaning” (comprehension of the text), “S” represents “structure” (language syntax or grammar), and “V” represents “visual” information, the print on the page which includes both letter-to-sound and sound-to-letter relationships (phonics) (Clay, 2016). Clay (2015) elaborated on additional sources of information that must come under control as students develop visual perception while they learn to focus on print. These include but are not limited to, directionality, orientation, sequence of letters, and perceptual span. (For a more complete discussion of Reading Recovery and the “MSV myth,” see Williams, 2019).

In an effort to sensationalize a false narrative, Emily Hanford (2022) mischaracterized MSV and cited a flawed study (May et al., 2022) as “proof” that Reading Recovery is ineffective over the long term. Needless to say, the May et al. (2022) study was not peer-reviewed before it was presented and subsequently failed to meet the WWC standards (2023). It is important to note that a peer-reviewed study (Hurry et al., 2022) published in a United Kingdom research journal at the same time as the May et al. (2022) study found just the opposite effects. Reading Recovery students *did* sustain gains for up to 10 years beyond the intervention. Hanford acknowledged that Marie Clay never used the term “three-cueing,” but falsely attributed this term to Clay anyway, denouncing Reading Recovery in her nine-part podcast. Award-winning researcher, P. David Pearson (2022) responded to Hanford’s accusation of Clay as follows:

I was appalled and angered by this indictment for two reasons: (a) it is based on a limited portrayal of scientific reading research (dare I say, just plain wrong?), and (b) it was directed at a scholar who has left us a rich, perhaps unparalleled, legacy of understandings about the nature of reading acquisition, one to be celebrated not denigrated. (para. 2)

*Jumping on the bandwagon*  
Nevertheless, legislators eagerly jumped on the SOR Movement bandwagon utilizing a fill-in-the-blank “Science of Reading Act”

template provided by the American Legislative Exchange Council (2023.) Laws were created across the United States that limited the pedagogy teachers can implement when teaching reading (Peak, 2023). The Albert Shanker Institute (Neuman et al., 2023) recently completed a comprehensive review of state reading legislation in the United States enacted between 2019 to 2023 and found that 46 states passed at least one law that changed how literacy is instructed, with 18 states specifically prescribing the “science of reading.” Several states banned teaching the “three-cueing system.” Unfortunately, those spreading the phonics-only message conflate their association with the SOR Movement from the actual Sciences of Reading. Consequently, Reading Recovery has come under attack from these recent waves of state reading laws (Churchill, 2023).

### *Becoming literate is more complex*

A comprehensive view of literacy instruction was elaborated on in the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021, when *Reading Research Quarterly*, the International Literacy Association’s flagship research journal, published a 2-volume special issue devoted to the Science of Reading. While the 77 authors represented diverse perspectives and research interests, they “almost universally emphasize that narrow interpretations of the SOR (often taken up by the media to make its way into practice, policies, and schools) are problematic” (Goodwin & Jiménez, 2020, p. S8).

Specifically, the concern with a phonics-only reductionist approach to reading instruction is that it fails to acknowledge the complexity of

the reading process (Cervetti et al., 2020; Compton-Lilly et al., 2020; Doyle, 2019; Duke & Cartwright, 2019), nor does it value the role context plays in solving unknown words (Scanlon & Anderson, 2020). Sociocultural aspects of reading including race, culture (Tatum, 2019), and social justice (Burns et al., 2023) are overlooked. It neglects students’ assets such as oral language and vocabulary considerations for multilingual learners (Espinosa & Ascenzi-Moreno, 2021), and can lead to trauma when the student is left without access to any other source of information to gain meaning from print (Socol, 2022). In addition, the reciprocal relationship of the writing process is ignored (Graham, 2020). Clay (2016) emphasized that theories of psychological competencies including both language learning and perceptual learning, and that theories about the influence of social contexts on learning guide and inform the teaching in Reading Recovery.

The notion of literacy learning situated within the sociocultural aspects of a classroom community cannot be minimized. Moje & Lewis (2007) stated that learning is more than accumulating, assimilating, and accommodating knowledge structures coordinated by the brain. Learning can also be conceptualized as a shift in identity, agency, and aspects of power (Gee, 2008; Johnston, 2004), which enables students to obtain better access to resources. When students’ histories, assets, or funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) are valued as important and relevant components of their identities, they are more confident in their learning. Students demonstrate more flexibility in thinking;

they are more strategic. Therefore, they are better able to generalize or transfer learning from one context to another (Johnston, 2004). Flexibility in a student’s decision making is a key tenet of Reading Recovery and essential for accelerated progress to occur (Clay, 2015). Therefore, when the entirety of the Sciences of Reading is considered, the interdisciplinary research about reading-related skills, processes, student experiences, and outcomes, representing linguistic, cognitive, social, cultural, neurological, and psychological dimensions must also be acknowledged (Alexander, 2020) as students interact with a variety of text types and formats (Pugh et al., 2023).

### **Reading Recovery IS the Sciences of Reading**

The ILA *Literacy Glossary* (n.d.) considers a broader definition of the science of reading described as “a convergence of accumulated and evolving findings from research regarding reading processes and reading instruction (pedagogy) and how the two are implemented across contexts that interactively bridge cultural, social, biological, psychological, linguistic, and historical bases of learning.” In addition, Afflerbach (2022) suggests that the “Sciences of Reading” is a more appropriate term when discussing a comprehensive view of literacy research. He recommends that readers’ motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy must also be considered.

Reading Recovery meets the above Sciences of Reading definition. The research on Reading Recovery is backed by peer review, a process whereby experts in the same field

## Take Action

Many are asking what they can do in light of the SOR Movement. There are thousands of Reading Recovery teacher leaders and teachers across the United States and the world. You can make a difference!

**Bring your A+ game to every lesson.** Recognize and build on each child’s unique strengths. Execute astute teaching moves based on close observations of each child’s literacy behaviors. Reflect daily on teaching and seek support from colleagues as necessary.

**Analyze data daily.** Use the analysis of records of oral reading, student writing, and lesson records to inform instruction daily. Update predictions of progress regularly, and consult with colleagues if you observe a student’s growth is stalling.

**Be an advocate for children.** All politics are local. Start at the local level informing others about the complexity of the reading process and the expertise required to meet the needs of individual students.

**Read legislation carefully.** If you reside in a state or province with recent reading legislation, read the law carefully. Many assumptions are being made about some bills that are simply not true. Before jumping to conclusions, be informed.

**Make presentations to your local school board.** School board members make funding decisions on whether to continue supporting Reading Recovery. Share student data and success *before* detrimental decisions are made that limit teachers’ use of research-based pedagogy.

**Invite administrators and legislators to behind-the-glass professional development sessions.**

Describe the decisions that teachers are making at the moment to strengthen a child’s literacy processing and the expertise required to accelerate student learning. Decision makers who are informed make better-informed decisions.

**Share student assessment outcome data and growth.** In addition to the numbers, provide explanations of what the data mean. Share examples of texts students are reading at the beginning and end of their lesson series. Share examples of student writing. Disseminate site reports provided by IDEC and reflect on the results. Note that 12–20 weeks of instruction translates to 30–50 hours of instruction (that’s approximately 1–2 weeks of school).

**Network with the community.** There is strength in collaboration and support. Learn from sites where Reading Recovery implementation is strong.

Reading Recovery professionals do whatever it takes. Make each lesson count like a child’s life depends upon it—because it does!

anonymously review the researchers’ methods and findings to determine whether the work should be accepted for publication. In addition, Reading Recovery meets the rigorous requirements set forth by the WWC for research design and significant positive outcomes (WWC, 2023) as does *Descubriendo la Lectura* (Borman et al., 2019; Borman et al., 2020). Furthermore, Reading Recovery was also evaluated by Evidence for ESSA and qualified in the “strong” cat-

egory and for the “solid outcomes” rating (Evidence for ESSA, 2023).

In the 2-volume special issue of *Reading Research Quarterly* dedicated to the Science of Reading, Timothy Shanahan (2020) critiqued Reading Recovery and claimed there was a discrepancy between basic research findings and successful instructional approaches used in the intervention. Perpetuating a myth that phonics instruction is somehow

marginalized in Reading Recovery lessons, he cited inconsistencies in what is published about effective decoding instruction and the results obtained from a myriad of qualitative syntheses, meta-analyses, and high-quality studies that all concluded that Reading Recovery improves reading achievement for the most tangled students.

Shanahan (2020) compared Reading Recovery to a hummingbird, that

supposedly according to aeronautical research, could not fly. He wrote, “Although we know the program works, we cannot be certain about why it does” (p. 8). Shanahan called for a component analysis to answer his question. While this suggestion may yield insights, an expanded viewpoint may be worth considering. Could it be the synergistic effect of the comprehensive body of research that makes Reading Recovery, Literacy Lessons, and Descubriendo la Lectura so powerful? Could it be that teachers are highly trained diagnosticians whose acutely developed observation skills empower them to make effective in-the-moment decisions (not available in a scripted program) that can only be described as the art of teaching? Perhaps instead of drilling down to identify the bits of isolated phonemes and graphemes, it may behoove us to take a step back, as Clay did, and look at the Reading Recovery as a systemic whole.

## In Conclusion

The complexity of the Reading Recovery program is in sharp contrast to the simplistic phonics-only scripted programs promoted by the SOR Movement. While phonics is an essential source of information that students must draw upon to access print and produce written messages, the reading process is much more complex. When considering the complete Sciences of Reading, it is evident that Clay drew upon an extensive body of research when developing Reading Recovery. Teachers engage in the art of teaching when they apply this research to design and teach daily lessons. No scripted program can account for the variability in students’ unique

strengths and needs. Clay knew this. Reading Recovery professionals know this, too.

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