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# AJLD EMINENT RESEARCHER AWARD WINNER 2024: The rise and demise of reading recovery in New Zealand

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**ABSTRACT**

Reading Recovery (RR) was introduced throughout New Zealand during the 1980s, for children struggling the most with learning to read after 1 year of formal schooling. In May 2024, the Minister of Education decided the programme would no longer be funded beyond 2024. This decision was based on evidence that the programme was not as effective as claimed. We discuss the goals of RR, the theoretical framework of the programme, and research regarding its effectiveness. We present data that indicate that the perceptions of success of the programme in New Zealand appear to be based on inflated test scores, and we call into question the claims that RR works well for struggling readers. We conclude by commending the Minister of Education for defunding Reading Recovery in favour of new early literacy intervention programmes that draw from contemporary scientific research on literacy acquisition.

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## Introduction

Reading Recovery (RR) was developed during the mid-1970s by Marie Clay, Professor of Education at the University of Auckland, in collaboration with the then Department of Education. From field trials in 1977 to favourable results from a larger scale trial in 1979 (Clay, 1980), the programme expanded rapidly with significant department funding during the 1980s. In 1983, RR adopted a structure that facilitated delivery of the programme throughout New Zealand. And so, the rise of RR occurred during the 1980s.

Four decades later, following significant advances in the "science of reading" and mounting criticism of the overall effectiveness of RR, New Zealand Education Minister Erica Stanford announced on 3 May 2024 that funding for the programme would be discontinued from 2025 (Newshub, 3 May 2024). Instead, Stanford said, funds used for RR will be put into "targeted and additional supports that use structured literacy approaches" (Cabinet Paper, 28 May 2024). The day following the release of that Cabinet Paper, Stanford responded to a written question in Parliament about RR. She stated that RR funding will be diverted to "reinvest critical education funding into effective, efficient literacy interventions for children that need them". She added, "Reading Recovery has had tens of millions in taxpayer funding for years and ignored the evidence about the science

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of how the overwhelming majority of children best learn to read . . . We need to base our investment on evidence-based practice that is proven to be effective and equitable" (New Zealand Parliament, 29 May 2024). The weight of evidence against the effectiveness of RR has finally led to its demise.

## Goals of reading recovery

The underlying theoretical framework for the RR programme was developed by Clay during the 1960s, based on her observational research as a developmental psychologist. She designed RR during the 1970s as a preventative early intervention programme for the lowest achieving children who had been in school for 12 months, and who had not benefitted from formal reading instruction (Clay, 1985, 1991, 2007). Specifically, RR was for children whose reading progress was in the lowest 15% to 20% of the enrolment cohort *within each school offering the programme*. Clay defined these children as the "hardest to teach" (2005, p. i). She emphasised that only the lowest achievers should be placed in RR, "*not excluding any child in regular six year old classrooms for any reason*" (Clay, 1991, p. 360; italics in the original).

The primary goal of RR is to substantially reduce the incidence of reading failure by accelerating to average levels of performance the reading progress of children who show early signs of reading difficulty after 1 year of schooling. The process of acceleration involves 30 minutes of daily individual instruction for around 20 weeks by teachers specially trained in the RR approach. Decisions regarding successful completion, or *discontinuation*, from the programme are based on children reading at a level near their class average and attaining a reasonable degree of independence in their reading. Around 74% of New Zealand RR children in 2022 were successfully discontinued (Ministry of Education: Education Counts, 2023). A further 15% were "referred on" for further instructional support because of inadequate progress (i.e. *unrecovered*), and the remaining children did not complete the programme for a variety of other reasons. These completion rates have been fairly stable for decades (Ministry of Education: Education Counts, 2023) and are reasonably consistent with the data reported in other countries (Chapman & Tunmer, 2018).

Clay claimed that RR lessons are tailored according to the individual needs of each child, with special emphasis placed on children developing a "self-extending system of reading strategies" (Clay, 2002, p. 33). Children are taught to use multiple cues (syntactic, semantic, visual, graphophonic) to identify and correct errors while reading connected text. Clay downplayed the use of word-level information, asserting instead that meaning "is the most important source of information"; word-level information is used mainly for confirming language predictions (guesses): "The child checks language predictions by looking at some letters" and "can hear the sounds in a word he speaks and checks whether the expected letters are there" (Clay, 1993, p. 41). Clay specifically argued that children should not be taught to rely on word-level cues: "If a child has a bias towards letter detail the teacher's prompts will be directed toward the message and the language structure" (1993, p. 42).

Clay's approach to literacy instruction was consistent with New Zealand's strongly constructivist (whole language) teaching approach that has dominated junior primary

school literacy programmes for around 50 years (Tunmer et al., 2015). Although changes to literacy instruction have been introduced in many schools in recent years (Ministry of Education, 2024a), most New Zealand children have been taught, and many continue to be taught, what they need to know to learn to read "as the need arises" (i.e. incidentally) through frequent exposure to authentic, natural language reading materials. According to J. W. A. Smith and Elley (1994), two influential proponents of the whole language approach in New Zealand, "Children learn to read themselves; direct teaching plays only a minor role" (p. 87).

Reading Recovery's main goal was to close the relatively large gap in literacy scores that characterise reading achievement in New Zealand schools (Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). Clay (1987) confidently believed that RR would "clear out of the remedial education system all children who do not learn to read" (p. 169).

In accepting this claim, the Ministry of Education (formerly Department of Education) has supported and significantly funded RR since its inception in the late 1970s. The RR programme became an integral part of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, which emerged from the Literacy Taskforce (Ministry of Education, 1999). This Taskforce dismissed the importance of children developing effective word decoding skills in favour of a continuation of the dominant whole-language approach with only minor modifications; essentially, more of the same in the hope that literacy achievement levels in New Zealand would improve (Tunmer & Chapman, 2015).

Confident in the ability of RR to close the gap in literacy achievement levels between good and struggling readers, the RR organisation claimed on its New Zealand website for many years that the programme is "an effective prevention strategy against later literacy difficulties"; "Nationally, it may be characterised as an insurance against low literacy levels" (New Zealand Reading Recovery, 2018, p.1, as cited in Chapman & Tunmer, 2018, p. 3). There is no evidence that these claims have ever been substantiated (Chapman et al., 2015).

## Theoretical framework of reading recovery

Reading Recovery was developed to be a more intensive version of whole-language teaching in New Zealand classrooms. In this form of teaching, as Smith and Elley noted, "reading and writing are best acquired 'naturally' in the same way we learn to speak and listen" (1994, p. 81). To develop good reading skills, children should be immersed in a print-rich environment in which the focus is on the meaning of print. As these authors stated, children learn to read by reading, with relatively little attention given to the development of essential word-level skills and strategies. Instead, to identify unfamiliar words in text, beginning readers are taught to use preceding passage content, sentence context cues and picture cues as the primary strategies. In line with this approach, Clay (1991) described fluent reading as follows:

> In efficient rapid word perception, the reader relies mostly on the sentence and its meaning and some selected features of the forms of words. Awareness of the sentence context (and often the general context of the text as a whole) and a glance at the word enables the reader to respond instantly. (p. 8)

On the basis of this assumption, whole language proponents concluded that the development of reading ability is largely a matter of learning to rely increasingly on the syntactic and semantic redundancies of language to generate hypotheses about the text yet to be encountered. Children in whole language programmes and in RR are therefore urged to use context as the primary strategy for identifying words in text. They are taught to monitor for meaningfulness and to make corrections only when necessary to make sense. As Clay (1991) stated, "meaning is the most important source of information" and "the most important test for the child to make is 'Does it make sense?'" (p. 292).

Clay (1998) argued that beginning readers "need to use their knowledge of how the world works; the possible meanings of the text; the sentence structure; the importance of order of ideas, or words, or of letters; the size of words or letters; special features of sound, shape, and layout; and special knowledge from past literary experiences *before* they resort to left to right sounding out of chunks of letter clusters or, in the last resort, single letters" (p. 9, emphasis added). This instructional approach reflects Clay's strong top-down theoretical orientation to fluent reading, according to which only minimal sampling of word features is required to confirm text-based predictions about unfamiliar words. In essence, RR is based on a method of teaching that encourages children to use word identification strategies that poor readers use (Tunmer et al., 2015). She resisted making changes to the programme despite research showing the importance of children developing effective word-level identification strategies through explicit and systematic instruction (e.g. Chapman et al., 2015; Tunmer et al., 2015).

## Research on reading recovery

Even though RR was developed for use in New Zealand, no robust research has shown that the programme is effective in that country (Chapman & Tunmer, 2011; Chapman et al., 2015). Design flaws in Clay's 1979 research have been identified (e.g. Center et al., 1995; Iversen & Tunmer, 1993; Nicholson, 1989; Shanahan, 1987; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). The flaws included lack of an appropriate control group; use of multiple *t*-tests for analysing gain scores; including only RR children who successfully completed the programme rather than also including those who were unrecovered; and using only assessments developed by Clay for the programme rather than independent standardised tests.

Despite these flaws in Clay's RR research, which cast doubt on the validity of her findings and claims about RR, Soler and Openshaw (2006) reported that the decision to scale-up the programme for implementation across New Zealand was largely for political reasons. Politicians saw RR as a way of responding to increasing concerns about overall literacy standards and the increasing number of children experiencing reading difficulties. Similarly, politicians in England were persuaded that RR was a quick way to improve literacy achievement levels in that country. Two School Inspectors from England visited New Zealand in 1992 to meet with RR teachers and to observe RR lessons. Their official report stated that the programme had achieved "almost unmitigated success" (Soler & Openshaw, 2006, p. 105).

Claims about the success of RR led to its being adopted in a number of other countries. In addition to England, the programme was introduced in many schools in Australia, Canada, the United States, Wales, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Barbados, and

Denmark (McNaughton, 2007). Despite the programme's widespread use, the results are mixed and far from compelling (e.g. Buckingham, 2019; Chapman & Tunmer, 2018).

Numerous reviews of RR have argued that the programme is effective and beneficial for struggling readers, although differentially so, as we argue below (e.g. D'Agostino & Harmey, 2016; D'Agostino et al., 2017; May et al., 2015; Shanahan, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse, 2007, 2013, 2014). Shanahan (2017), for example, concluded that the evidence in support of RR was overwhelming: "its immediate impact on learning seems to be beyond question, given that it works under so many conditions" (p. 509). Similarly, Slavin (2016) asserted that RR is "One of the very, very few unquestioned success stories of evidence-based reform" (p. 61). Slavin's view in 2016 is in sharp contrast to his earlier conclusion following a review of intervention programmes that RR was no better than one-to-one tutoring programmes presented by paraprofessionals or volunteers (Slavin et al., 2011). And Shanahan's (2017) claim that the impact of RR "seems beyond question" is at variance with many studies reported in well-known peer review journals that were indeed questioning the effectiveness of the programme (Center et al., 1995; Chapman et al., 2001; Elbaum et al., 2000; Hiebert, 1994; Iversen & Tunmer, 1993; Shanahan & Barr, 1995; Tunmer et al., 2003).

Not surprisingly, given that Clay's initial RR research was flawed, many reviews of RR have found that claims made in support of the programme are largely without foundation (e.g. Buckingham, 2019; Chapman & Tunmer, 2016, 2018; Chapman et al., 2015; Cook et al., 2017; Elbaum et al., 2000; Hiebert, 1994; Shanahan & Barr, 1995; Slavin et al., 2011). Buckingham (2019) concluded on the basis of her review of RR studies in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States that RR was a "failed investment" (title page). She noted "The evidence for a sustained impact for Reading Recovery ... ranges from negative to null. Where positive impacts have been found in the immediate post-intervention studies, they are arguably not as large as might be expected ..." (p. 8). Buckingham added that when the extensive training of RR teachers is taken into account, along with the intensity and duration of the intervention (30 minutes per day over 20 weeks, i.e. around 50 hours of 1:1 tuition), the programme "should be able to accelerate the student's reading progress at a much higher rate than has been found in studies of Reading Recovery" (p. 8).

In one of the very few longitudinal New Zealand RR studies, Chapman et al. (2001) reported that children who successfully completed RR were on average 6 months behind their same-age peers when they finished the programme, and 12 months below their peers on standardised assessments of reading performance 1 year later. The successful RR children showed no signs of *accelerated* progress in reading, and performed no better than a group of poor readers who did not receive RR. The New Zealand Ministry of Education did not respond to those results.

Two more recent studies in New Zealand illustrate the very limited medium-to-longer-term impact of RR for children who *successfully* completed the programme. Nicholas and Parkhill (2013) examined data for 95 discontinued RR children 2–4 years following exit from the programme. Almost 45% of these children were performing below the 25$^{th}$ percentile on a widely used standardised test of reading comprehension. These authors concluded that the initial gains made by many children as a result of RR "are not sustained for almost half of the students" (p. 9). In a similar study, Jesson[1] and Limbrick (2014) found that 65% of children who had been successfully discontinued from RR were performing

below the 50th percentile on standardised tests of reading comprehension, with nearly 40% performing below the 25th percentile, 2–4 years following exit from the programme.

In our analysis of the continuing shortcomings of RR (Chapman & Tunmer, 2020), we made reference to Buckingham's (2019) review of the findings from a major UK study (Hurry & Fidkin, 2018). She compared the results in this published study with results reported on the same study in an unpublished paper by Hurry (2018). The unpublished paper included data from a comparison group which had been omitted from the published study. Referring to the unpublished paper, Buckingham noted that assessments taken 5 and 10 years following the initial study showed no difference between struggling readers in RR schools who did and did not participate in the RR programme. This significant finding was not reported in the published study, leading to the unsubstantiated conclusion that the UK study showed RR was successful over time.

Further evidence of initial gains made in the RR programme not being sustained were reported in a major study in the US. A Federally funded longitudinal study found that children who were initially successful in the programme performed worse than similar children who had not received RR, 3–4 years following the programme (Blackeney & May, 2022). The authors expressed being surprised by the negative results. Earlier data from the study were touted by RR as proof the programme was working (May et al., 2015, 2016). However, the study had major flaws from the outset, including not consistently selecting the lowest achieving children for placement in RR, control children received a variety of different learning experiences, unsupported claims that RR led to ongoing gains in literacy learning, very modest outcomes for children who successfully completed the programme (with only a 54% success rate and a 22% unrecovered rate), and significant issues with the assessments that were used (Chapman & Tunmer, 2016; Cook et al., 2017).

In Australia, an examination of RR in New South Wales (New South Wales Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2015) found that participation in the programme during Year 1 was associated with lower achievement in Year 3 for almost all participating RR children. The New South Wales state government announced in December 2017 that RR would no longer be funded (A. Smith, 2017).

## New Zealand RR success data inflated

Each year, data from the New Zealand National Monitoring Reports show for every 100 children who enter RR, around 75 are discontinued. Based on the two New Zealand studies referred to earlier, an average of 40–45% of those 75 children lose their gains in 2–4 years following completion of the programme. In other words, of this number (75) around 45 (60% of 75) may have sustained reasonable gains. It is not known how many children are withdrawn from RR because of inadequate progress, but a conservative estimate might be 5% of the total placed in RR each year. That estimate reduces the number of children who may achieve longer term gains from RR to 40 (i.e. 40% of those who enter RR each year).

There are no data on the number of struggling readers who are not placed in RR because schools do not think the programme will help. Despite Clay's (1991) strong view that no struggling 6-year-old readers in regular classrooms should be excluded from RR "for any reason" (p. 360), this appears to be a widespread practice in New Zealand and in other countries (Belgrave, 2009; Chapman & Tunmer, 2018; Clay, 2005; May et al., 2015;

McDowall et al., 2005; McLachlain, 2014; Serry et al., 2014). Accordingly, it is likely that the "success" rate would be even lower than the 40% estimate. At best, RR may provide longer term gains for around 40% of struggling readers. That is equivalent to a fail rate of around 60%. It appears that neither RR New Zealand nor the Ministry of Education (in the past) have properly analysed the annual RR data, and therefore have failed to understand the very limited success of the programme.

Given these data, it is not surprising that the percentage of schools in New Zealand with 6-year-old children offering RR has steadily declined from what appears to be a high of over 70% in 1998 (Kerslake, 1999), to 37% in 2022 (Ministry of Education: Education Counts, 2023). Schools seem to have lost confidence in the ability of the RR programme to deliver what it promised and have steadily withdrawn from offering RR since 2000.

## Changes to reading recovery in New Zealand

Following a review of RR initiated by the Ministry of Education in 2019, the programme was "refreshed" and changed to include early literacy support in 2021. Under this new model, some of the available teaching time was to be used to provide additional literacy "supports" to small groups of children in Year 1 and to provide "whole-school advice on literacy learning" (Ministry of Education: Education Counts, 2023). The programme's traditional 1:1 intensive literacy support was to continue, but changes to the RR teaching model were required.

The Ministry of Education required that RR includes Ministry published phonics readers (*Ready to Read Phonics Plus*) for use with children in the programme. In addition, the teaching, learning and assessment approaches developed by the Better Start Literacy team at the University of Canterbury (Child Wellbeing Research Institute, 2023) had to be used in the RR programme (Ministry of Education: Literacy Online, 2021). More specifically, the contract between the Ministry and RR providers included the requirement that a structured approach to literacy be used from the beginning of 2023, as well as teaching including "better tailoring" to meet the individual needs of all children (Ministry of Education, personal communication, 19 August 2024b). As indicated earlier, Clay (2002) claimed that RR *tailored* lessons for each individual child, but as data show later in this paper, the claim is without foundation. Hence, the Ministry's request for "better tailoring".

Ministry of Education: Literacy Online (2021) noted research that led to the decision to require RR to make changes included findings from the longitudinal Massey University Early Literacy Project (Chapman et al., 2018), as well as New Zealand data from the 2016 PIRLS and 2018 PISA surveys, and the New Zealand National Monitoring Survey of Student Achievement for 2019. These surveys showed no positive change in the ongoing relatively poor literacy achievement rate in New Zealand. Clearly, RR was significantly failing in its primary goal of improving literacy learning outcomes and reducing the relatively large gap between good and struggling readers. Ministry of Education officials were now more focused on the unacceptable levels of literacy achievement in New Zealand, and on the need for RR to make significant changes to its teaching model and delivery in order to significantly improve its effectiveness.

The RR "refresh" required by the Ministry of Education has been referred to by Jesson (2023) as an "AND + AND" approach. She argues for a rejection of the "oppositional" or "binary" approach to reading instruction. Instead, she says, "we are using the

expertise of phonics AND the expertise of Reading Recovery" (emphasis in original). Despite this claim, the Reading Recovery website currently presents a diagram of the RR teaching model for the use of teacher prompts to assist children in identifying unfamiliar words in text (Reading Recovery New Zealand, 2024). Included in the diagram are the following cues: meaning (does it makes sense?); sounds (can you hear it, say it?); visual information (does it look right?); structure/grammar (can we say it that way?); and letter sound relationships. The text accompanying the diagram states as follows: "The teacher's role in the Reading Recovery lesson is to guide the child to pay particular attention to *four kinds of information* the young readers must become aware of and learn to work with" (emphasis added). The "refresh" appears to be the usual multi-cueing approach but with phonics and phonemic awareness added in accordance with Ministry of Education requirements.

However, mixing the multi-cueing teaching model and other features of whole language with explicit attention to some foundational language skills is misguided (Kilpatrick, 2015). The two approaches are largely incompatible. Adoption of phonics and phonemic awareness are unlikely to be successful additions unless RR rejects the emphasis on multi-cueing. As Tunmer et al. (2003) and Tunmer and Hoover (2019) argued, the multi-cueing approach to reading is unsuitable for children struggling to read because it reinforces poor reading habits and fails to provide readers with the systematic and explicit teaching necessary for them to be able to make the connection between the spoken and the printed word.

The continued multi-cueing approach is not the only ongoing problem with the RR. As mentioned earlier, programme proponents have long claimed that RR "tailors" instruction to meet the needs of individual children (Clay, 2002), and this viewpoint exists currently (Jesson, 2023). Data from National Monitoring Reports consistently believe this claim. These data repeatedly show each year remarkably similar percentages of children being unrecovered from RR – that is, "referred on" children. Roughly 15% of the children placed in RR are "referred on" each year.

What is striking about the 15% of unrecovered children is that their RR entry and exit scores for the Burt Word Test, the Writing Vocabulary Test, and Reading Book Level have followed the same pattern for many years. These unrecovered children consistently have lower mean (or modal) scores on the assessments on entry to RR than discontinued children, and their exit scores are also consistently low, hence being "referred on" for further individualised support (Chapman & Tunmer, 2018).

If RR tailored lessons to meet the needs of each child, then the instructional approach should have been changed years ago on the basis of understanding what these patterns of entry scores mean for children who enter the programme. The patterns indicate that children with very low scores on entry to RR are highly likely to experience further failure in the programme and therefore to derive no benefit. The exit scores of these children, and their "referred on" status clearly show this to be the case. An abundance of research shows that children who enter RR would benefit most from explicit attention to the development of alphabetic coding skills and word-level identification strategies (e.g. Chapman & Tunmer, 2018; Chapman et al., 2001, 2015; Iversen & Tunmer, 1993; Iversen et al., 2005).

Reynolds and Wheldall (2007) found from their review of research on RR that the programme "has not demonstrated that it works for the students who are most at-risk for

failing to learn to read" (p. 213). They concluded that "the success of the programme appears to be inversely related to the severity of the reading problem" (p. 209), suggesting that RR is not tailored to meet the needs of those children struggling the most with reading.

A truly tailored approach would involve instruction to enhance these skills and strategies, at the very least for those children who enter RR with such low scores. Although, we contend that *all children* in RR would benefit from such an instructional approach.

The attempt to "refresh" RR with its "AND + AND" approach is misguided. Further, if this was a genuine effort to update the programme, we would expect honest acknowledgement that the original instructional model of RR, based on a strong whole-language approach to literacy instruction, was flawed from the outset, not suitable for struggling readers, and increasingly outdated as scientific research on reading increased from the 1980s onwards.

## Conclusion

Given the persistent failure of RR to meet its goals of reducing the number of children who need ongoing assistance with reading, and the failure to provide an "insurance against low literacy levels" (New Zealand Reading Recovery, 2018, p.1 as cited in Chapman & Tunmer, 2018, p. 3), it is appropriate that Education Minister Stanford has abandoned the attempt to improve the RR teaching model. She has done this for good reason and based on her own reading of research on literacy acquisition and on RR. Her commitment to following the research set the foundation for her policy decisions when she became Minister following the November 2023 general election in New Zealand. This preparation was referred to in a *Herald on Sunday* interview (Young, 18 August Young, 2024). The interviewer noted that Stanford "read every piece of education research she could get her hands on, studied what was happening overseas and engaged extensively with the sector … so when she arrived in Government she was ready" (pp. 10–11).

The demise of RR is due largely to the reluctance of programme leaders to acknowledge and redress shortcomings of the programme, its failure to improve literacy learning outcomes as promised, as well as to the significant decline in schools delivering the programme. RR has failed to correct inflated success rates, thereby allowing the false impression to persist that the programme is more successful than it really is. Moreover, RR has failed to modify the instructional approach in line with changes in literacy learning and instruction from the science of reading. As Buckingham aptly put it, RR is a "failed investment", with negative consequences for thousands of children for over 40+ years.

## Note

1. Jesson is currently the Academic & Research Director for the National Reading Recovery Centre in New Zealand.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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