

‘Clarity’ leaves school leaders in the dark on the science of reading

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The book *Clarity: What matters most in learning, teaching, and leading* (Sharratt, 2019) is on the desks of many principals around Australia and elsewhere in the world. It is a recommended text for leaders in a number of school systems. Published and sold by the Australian College of Educational Leaders, and with a foreword by John Hattie, one might reasonably assume that its contents and advice are based on rigorous research evidence. Author Lyn Sharratt is herself an advocate for the use of data to inform teaching practice.

Unfortunately, however, on the subject of literacy teaching, *Clarity* does not lead principals and teachers in the direction of evidence-based instruction. It endorses the use of practices such as levelled readers, running records, and Reading Recovery, which are not consistent with what research has shown to be the most effective methods of teaching and assessing reading.

Levelled readers: For a long time it was thought that matching students to a text level determined by their reading accuracy was the best way to encourage and develop reading skill. Schools invested thousands and thousands of dollars in sets of levelled readers, including [predictable texts](#). In recent years, this wisdom has been questioned by reading researchers and practitioners. Evidence is accumulating that the method of assigning text levels, calculating text difficulty, and making a text-to-student match has a low level of precision. This is, at least in part, because the [role of background knowledge](#) is becoming more well understood, and students may in fact make more progress and learn more if they are reading challenging texts. See [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

Running records: Running records assess students’ reading ability using a process called ‘miscue analysis’, which is based on the disproven three-cueing theory. Running records do not assess students’ development of the reading sub-skills that have been identified in scientific reading research, and therefore do not give teachers essential information about instruction or intervention. See [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

Reading Recovery: Like running records, Reading Recovery is based on what is now accepted to be a flawed theory of how children learn to read. Its methods do not reflect the current scientific evidence base. Large-scale studies of its efficacy have found it to be weak and, in some cases, to be associated with negative outcomes. Reading Recovery is described by Sharratt as her “intervention of choice” (p. 262) despite her later advice that all education interventions must be evidence-proven. Reading Recovery does not meet that criterion. See [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

The literacy section of *Clarity* contains the statement “Literacy learning is the foundation of all instruction” (p. 152). On this we can agree. Yet the literacy principles and practices expounded by Sharratt do not provide a good guide for educators to provide this foundation for all students. Most notably, there is no acknowledgement of the [scientific literature regarding reading development from novice to expert](#). The necessary fundamental step of accurate and efficient word reading is entirely overlooked.

School leaders who are finding the rest of *Clarity* valuable can use the table below to identify evidence-based alternatives to the literacy teaching advice in the book to achieve better outcomes for their students.

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Clarity advice	Evidence-based alternative
Parameter #9: Book rooms of levelled books and multi-modal resources (p. 20).	Decodable books and classroom libraries of age-appropriate fiction and non-fiction books (which can include books from levelled reading series). See Jocelyn Seamer; Reading Rockets
Use the three-cueing systems/miscue analysis (pp. 155–156).	Synthetic phonics instruction, high-frequency words, and morphology to achieve orthographic mapping. See Five from Five: Phonics
Provide texts that are levelled and start where the student is already proficient (p. 158).	Once students can decode, allow them to read a wide range of age-appropriate texts with support as needed. See Tim Shanahan (2020)
If you can read you can write, and if you can write you can read (p. 163).	Explicit and systematic instruction in the related, but distinct, skills of reading and writing. See Graham and Harris (2016)
Running records (p. 258).	Validated decoding and language assessments. See Primary Reading Pledge Appendix 1
Reading Recovery (pp. 262–266).	Evidence-based reading intervention based on Response to Intervention model. See Primary Reading Pledge Appendix 2

Table 1. Evidence-based alternatives to the literacy advice in *Clarity*