

Jan Richardson's Response to Triple R Teaching Episodes

Jan is responding to these three podcast episodes:

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Black text – Letter from Jan Richardson (February 2023)

Red text – Anna's response (March 2023)

Anna,

Thank you again for allowing me the opportunity to respond to your comments about my December 8, 2022, webinar [Getting the Facts Straight on Guided Reading](#). As I see it, these are the areas where we agree:

The Science of Reading (SOR) is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Children will need different kinds of instruction to meet the common goal of becoming proficient, engaged readers.

Since the research can't possibly dictate or confirm the hundreds of instructional decisions we need to make in a day, I agree – it's not a one-size fits all solution. But advocates of the research are not claiming this. A reading program based on the research will be driven by assessment and will lead teachers to adjust instruction based on students' response to instruction.

The SOR is an evolving body of research, not a reading program that can be purchased. Although many districts are searching for a "Science of Reading Program," there is no such thing.

Agree, 100%! What people are searching for is a program that is based on what we know from research. I agree that some people are confused on this.

There is a difference between obtaining information from the media and choosing to read the research ([Aukerman, 2022](#); [Shanahan, 2023](#)). Unfortunately, too many well-meaning reading enthusiasts simply repeat what they have heard on social media and don't consult the research.

Agreed.

Guided reading is used in a variety of contexts. It does not always have an agreed-upon definition ([Shanahan, 2023](#)). This is my definition: During guided reading, a teacher meets with a small group of students and differentiates instruction by targeting specific learning needs, providing appropriate scaffolding, and gradually reducing support to promote independence. My

lesson framework aligns with the basic tenets of effective reading instruction as described by [Structured Literacy](#). It also explicitly teaches the [key elements of reading](#) defined by the [National Reading Panel \(2000\)](#).

[I do not have a problem with this definition.](#)

Guided Reading is part of the basic format for a multicomponent intervention plan approved by structured literacy. [On page 221 of Structure Literacy Interventions, 2021, a sample intervention activity is described in this way: “Guided reading of instruction-level text with immediate teacher feedback to decoding errors; teaching comprehension strategies, such as summarization; question writing \(by students\); comprehension questions \(from teacher\) and discussion of texts students have read; turn-and-talk routine as part of explicit teaching of target vocabulary words.” This description aligns with the components of my Next Steps lesson.](#)

[I don't believe that quoting from that particular book proves your point, since there are other elements of your approach that concern people – particularly the use of leveled books with beginning readers and the lack of explicit phonics instruction leading the way \(and rather coming at the tail end of a lesson\).](#)

Reading Instruction should meet a student's needs and be based on formal and informal observations and assessments ([Ordetx, 2021](#)).

[Yes! I want to be clear, though, that running records do not provide useful information. They tell us what cue students are using, when the only “cue” for word identification should be reading the individual words. Using an assessment like Acadience gives much more helpful information. \(See the presentations on this page for evidence.\)](#)

Guessing words is not an acceptable reading strategy. Teachers should never encourage a student to guess at a word. Children should decode the word, attending to the visual information (letters) and sequence of sounds and confirm with meaning.

[I think we disagree on what “guessing” is. Certainly as a balanced literacy teacher I would never have thought that I was teaching guessing. However, the definition of guessing is to “estimate or suppose something without sufficient information to be sure of being correct.” When students use cues that do not include phonics \(picture, context, etc.\) or only use partial phonics, they have no way of being 100% sure of the word – which means that they are, indeed, guessing. I think it's helpful to remember that Ken Goodman, whose ideas are found within balanced literacy, called reading a psycholinguistic guessing game. \(Goodman, 1976\).](#)

Phonics is essential, but not sufficient. There are several key elements that children need to learn to become proficient readers. In addition to phonics, children need instruction in decoding

(the application of phonics), encoding, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing.

Science of reading advocates agree.

Phonics should be taught explicitly and systematically. All the books I have written include a [phonics scope and sequence](#) aligned with the developmental stages supported by decades of research ([Bear et al., 2019](#); [Ehri, 2022](#); [Ganske, 2013](#)) and a variety of effective, engaging, and research-based procedures that explicitly teach phonics using analogic, analytic and synthetic approaches ([Flannigan, 2022](#)) to support students in learning letters, sounds, sight words, high-frequency words, orthographic mapping, spelling patterns, inflectional endings, and morphemic units.

Decodable texts can be useful for helping students practice phonics skills.

Readers must attend to the orthography of a word for it to become part of their sight word vocabulary.

Small-group instruction should be based on diagnostic assessment, a critical element of [structured literacy](#) and a basic tenet of my books.

We seem to disagree on two major areas: decodable texts and the three-cueing model. In the following paragraphs, I clarify my position as supported by research, and I identify ways we might find common ground.

Decodable books

I have personally taught thousands of small-group reading lessons and used a variety of instructional texts, including decodable texts, leveled books, basal stories, newspaper articles, chapters from novels, and sections from textbooks. I've even taught guided reading to advanced middle school readers using a chapter from a physics textbook! One of my favorite genres for guided reading is poetry. My point is that you can use my [small group lesson framework](#) with any text. My framework is simply a way to integrate reading, writing, and phonics to bring about greater acceleration. It does not mandate or exclude any type of text.

The current debate about whether to use decodable texts or leveled books centers on emergent readers (reading levels A-C). Books published for emergent readers differ significantly according to the publishing company. Some beginning books are highly patterned and repetitive; some are highly decodable. Moreover, others use multi-criteria, which include high-frequency words, decodable words, and meaning.

Despite the enthusiasm for using highly decodable texts, the research on using them is inconclusive ([Lindsey, 2022](#); [Mesmer, 2000](#); [Shanahan, 2023](#)). Some studies favor decodable

texts ([Cheatham and Allor, 2012](#); [Compton, 2005](#); [Mesmer, 2005](#)), while others favor multi-criteria texts ([Juel and Roper/Schneider, 1985](#); [Jenkins, Peyton, Sanders, and Vadasy, 2004](#); [Menon & Hiebert, 2005](#); [Mesmer, 2020](#); [Price-Mohr and Price, 2019](#)).

My position is similar to [Shanahan's, 2019](#). He writes, "I think it's okay to use decodable texts as part of phonics instruction, but such practice should be severely limited, and even beginning readers should be reading more than decodable texts." In another blog by [Shanahan \(2019\)](#), he says it is reasonable to use decodable texts to practice a phonics skill, but "kids are likely to be best off in classrooms that provide them with a mix of these text types rather than a steady diet of any one of them." He goes on to say, "Personally – based on my own experiences as a primary grade teacher—I would use all of these kinds of text."

Shanahan is critical of using predictable texts, and so am I. Predictable, patterned books offer emergent readers an opportunity to learn print concepts and simple English language structures, which supports the development of phonological and decoding skills ([Mesmer & Williams, 2015](#); [Scanlon & Anderson, 2020](#)); however, once children control early print concepts and know the letter sounds, teachers should avoid patterned text and use decodable texts along with multi-criteria texts so the students can develop a "mental set for diversity" ([Shanahan, 2019](#)).

I think that the use of predictable texts for individual students is dangerous and confusing. When we teach them that this is what reading is – predicting words using the pictures – we are giving them a false definition. For some children, it's confusing and leads to bad habits. We can teach concepts of print in other ways.

Although we might disagree on some aspects of decodable texts, I hope we can agree on these points presented by ([Mesmer, 2020](#)):

Use them (decodable texts) at the right developmental window, which Mesmer defines as when children are solid with the concept of a word, know all letter sounds, and are ready to decode words. She states, "I suggest that children be able to decode a simple c-v-c word prior to using decodables."

I think most people would agree – although a decodable text could include only the consonants and vowels that have been taught, which may not include the whole alphabet.

Use after a phonics lesson to practice a target word family or sound. In my recent reading intervention program ([RISE](#)), I wrote decodable texts for each lesson so children could practice the sight words and phonics skills that were taught in the lesson.

Yes.

Do not use decodable texts exclusively. Children benefit from also using multi-criteria texts that target high-frequency words, decodability, and meaningfulness.

I think that we have to be careful here. How are children reading the non-decodable words in the other texts? If they are far enough along to use set for variability to read the words, it doesn't need to be a problem. If they have to use the picture or context to "read" many of the words, we have a problem.

Pay attention to the level of decodability. There are times when highly decodable texts may be appropriate, but if the reader is having to sound out every third word, the book probably contains too many decodable words.

I disagree.

Know when to stop using decodable texts. Mesmer recommends ending the use of decodable texts after children can easily blend c-v-c and c-c-v-c words. Most children master this skill in the spring of kindergarten or fall/winter of first grade.

I disagree with Mesmer on this; I think children should have some knowledge of the advanced code (long vowels, r-controlled, etc.).

Three-cueing system (MSV)

I think we can agree that readers use multiple sources of information to make sense of print – semantics (Meaning), syntax (Structure), and graphophonics/letter-sound relationships (Visual).

If by "make sense of print" you mean "read the word," I disagree. We know from brain science that proficient readers are processing the entire word, not using context or syntax to read it. ([Stanislas Dehaene](#))

Many teachers, myself included, use the sources of information as a tool for analyzing student errors, self-corrections and self-monitoring. The coding helps teachers decide which sources of information students are using (and which they are ignoring) so the teachers know how to prompt the student during reading. When a reader makes an error that ignores phonics, teachers should prompt the student to look more closely at the word, sound it out, or break it into parts. If the reader tries to sound out the word but ignores meaning, then teachers should prompt them to crosscheck the visual (phonics) with meaning. You used all the sounds, but what word would make sense? ([Bates, McBride, & Richardson, 2020](#); [Shanahan, 2021](#)).

We absolutely want students to make sense of what they read. We help them do this by teaching them to sound out unfamiliar words and, if needed, flex the vowel or other parts of the

word to land on the correct word. They can use context and prior knowledge to confirm their reading, but they should never use context or picture clues to initially identify the word.

Research has shown that teachers who prompt students to attend to cues the students are ignoring tend to be more effective ([Scanlon & Anderson, 2020](#)).

Thank you for sharing this article. The authors write that “because the English orthography is not entirely reliable, the decoding skills that students are taught often result in only approximate pronunciations of some words. If those pronunciations are not checked against context for goodness of fit, inaccurate pronunciations will go uncorrected, and word learning will be impaired (Share, 2008).” They go on to explain set for variability. This, I would agree, is an appropriate use of context when reading.

They write that “the use of partial decoding, along with context to check decoding attempts and a set for variability, increases the proportion of words that are accurately identified while reading, thus enabling the orthographic mapping that is necessary for word learning to occur” (emphasis mine). I want to be very clear that what they are describing here is NOT the same thing that students are doing when reading a leveled book and using just the first letter of a word combined with the picture.

Later in the article, the authors do indeed promote three-cueing, as they had students read predictable books and “encouraged students to rely on the pattern, the picture, and beginning letter of the word, thus encouraging them to employ all the sources of information to which they had access.” They go on to explain that once students had phonics knowledge, they were expected to use that information. This was my approach as a balanced literacy teacher who believed in three cueing. For some students, it worked. (This is no surprise; see [Nancy Young's Ladder of Reading and Writing](#) and the research that supports it.) Other students needed a more structured approach, which balanced literacy did not provide.

Students only need to use these other “cues” if they are reading text with words they many words they can't yet decode. Beginning readers should not be reading leveled books, or they must resort to these cues, which are actually what poor readers use. I have looked into the studies shared within this study, and with the help of a professor I trust and respect, I understand that they did not isolate the components of ISA and therefore can't support the effectiveness of ISA (an approach that uses three-cueing prompts).

The goals are for the reader to integrate multiple sources of information to read the exact words in the text, and for the teacher to teach children to use the sources as part of their active self-regulation and self-monitoring ([Duke & Cartwright, 2021](#)).

This article talks about self-regulation and self-monitoring, but I don't see anything in it related to “integrating multiple sources of information.”

The current controversy surrounding the three-cues is fueled by an assumption that if children are prompted to use meaning-based strategies, they will learn to guess at unfamiliar words (Hanford, [2019](#), [2022](#)). [Ehri \(2014\)](#) has shown that children with partial alphabetic word knowledge often use initial letters plus pictures to anticipate what a word might be. I don't consider that guessing. It is part of the developmental process of word solving and learning. The goal, of course, is for these children to acquire more letter sound knowledge so the teacher can direct the student's attention to using all the letters in the word for accurate word identification.

As I stated above, we disagree on this. I consider this guessing. Also, Ehri states that the children with alphabetic knowledge use initial letters and pictures to anticipate what the word might be, but she doesn't say to teach them to do this. Instead, when students are in that stage, she writes that moving them to the next phase "requires teaching the major GP relations and how to use them to decode words by transforming graphemes into blended phonemes. Reading words in decodable books provides decoding practice and builds students' sight vocabularies." ([Ehri, 2022](#)).

I agree with [Scanlon and Anderson \(2020\)](#) that children can use both meaning and visual information right from the start: "We do not view the use of context and decoding within an either/or framework, but rather encourage the interactive and confirmatory use of both code-and meaning-based strategies during word solving, within an instructional approach that is also responsive to the needs of students as they develop skill with the alphabetic code" (p. S20).

I used to teach this way, but I now see that it was teaching bad habits to some of my students. I would check out the research cited in this article by Timothy Shanahan.

By the way, in your podcast you challenged my comment that some people misunderstand what the "V" is in MSV. I know you understand that the V stands for the letters and sounds, but I also know that there is widespread misunderstanding among SOR proponents that the V means pictures. See [Hunts Institute Virginia Education Summit](#), 2:50:16. The speaker clearly states that the V is for picture clues. That is totally false – yet I have heard it presented numerous times.

Thanks for clarifying that.

Page 31 of the [Science of Reading Defining Guide](#) says that in order to be good citizens of a science and practice community, educators should fairly evaluate all evidence "regardless of whether the conclusions are inconsistent with your beliefs." I would love to show the education community that regardless of whether we agree or disagree, we can still be respectful and kind.

Agreed!

Thank you, Anna, for your willingness to share my side of the story.

And thank you so much for sharing yours, Jan! We can only move forward when both sides are willing to talk.