

IDA's Multisensory Research Grant Program: A Bold and Challenging Initiative

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How many times have you uttered the words *multisensory structured-language reading instruction*? If you are a long-time member of IDA or a seasoned reading and learning-disabilities practitioner, that mantra, or a version thereof, has rolled off your tongue countless times. If you had a dollar for every time you spoke or wrote those words, you would be rich. In fact, those words and the principles and practices they represent are so ingrained in the IDA community, they have earned an acronym—MSL reading instruction.

Meanwhile, you probably cheered over the years as scientific evidence mounted in support of reading instruction that explicitly addresses oral and written language components in an integrated, systematic, and cumulative manner. Very likely, phrases like *evidence-based instruction* also have become part of your lexicon, along with nearly everyone else's in this era of No Child Left Behind.

Most members of IDA's rank and file probably espouse *both* multisensory structured-language instruction and evidence-based education, particularly for students with dyslexia. Steeped in venerable MSL traditions, IDA and its members played a role in advancing reading research and in linking it to educational policy. As you probably know, however, there is no substantial body of scientific research supporting the efficacy of the multisensory component in structured-language reading instruction.

MSL and Evidence-Based: An Oxymoron?

Can we have it both ways? Can we raise the banner of evidence-based education in a campaign to promote structured-language reading instruction, yet overlook the inconvenient truth that our multisensory tenet lacks scientific evidence?

Many of us reconcile this apparent conflict by (a) citing clinical support dating back to the pioneering work of Orton, Gillingham, Montessori, and others; (b) pointing to research in domains such as psychology of learning and physical therapy; and (c) adopting a stance along the lines of Carl Sagan's quote—"Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." In other words, lack of scientific evidence reflects lack of scientific study, the absence of which does not refute the contribution of multisensory teaching and learning to structured-language reading instruction. Finally, many veteran practitioners feel with the unshakable conviction acquired through years of first-hand experience that multisensory teaching and learning is *vital* to effective reading instruction for students with dyslexia.

Even so, we find ourselves in an ironic, if not dicey, position.

In this era of evidence-based instruction, citing clinical intuition and testimony may not suffice, even when authoritative and compelling. We risk criticism of the sort directed at whole-language and other unfounded or discredited approaches. Worse, without evidence of efficacy, we risk the wellbeing of students with dyslexia who might not receive instruction they need (a point that rests on the premise that the multisensory component is indeed vital for these students). Lack of

scientific evidence can be misconstrued, particularly as public-education policy makers, leaders, and teachers struggle to implement daunting federal regulations while juggling formidable competing priorities. In this pressure-cooker climate, unsubstantiated practices risk being overlooked, if not dismissed outright.

Launching an Initiative: A First Step

It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. — Carl Sagan

For these reasons and in the spirit of another Sagan quote, IDA has launched a bold and challenging research initiative. Its purpose is to shed light—via vigorous scientific investigation—on the value of the multisensory component in MSL reading instruction, particularly for students with dyslexia. The immediate goal of this competitive grant program is to fund replicable studies with promise for stimulating research on a larger scale.

The strategy is classic think-big-but-start-small, beginning with manageable steps. Even so, the challenge inherent in this research cannot be overstated. It will be difficult to isolate the effects of the multisensory component (make that components), the primary reason this research has yet to be conducted. Lack of funding has been another obstacle. On this score, there is great news.

To stimulate and support this research, a coalition of leading schools, programs, and individuals already has raised almost **\$35,000**, enabling IDA to establish the Multisensory Research Grant Program (appointing past-president Gordon Sherman, Ph.D., its chair) and to initiate calls for proposals for grants of up to **\$20,000**. Meanwhile, IDA is seeking additional funding from foundations.

Just as research on efficacy needs to inform instruction, educators' insights can and should inform research. That IDA's new grant program began as a grassroots-practitioner funding initiative, attests to a conviction among many educators and educational groups that investigating the efficacy of the multisensory component of MSL reading instruction belongs on the research agenda.

How to Get Involved

If you agree and want to support this important research, you can make a donation and join the ranks of the distinguished people and organizations listed below. The next funding target is **\$50,000 - \$75,000**. Gifts in any amount will be appreciated deeply. Donations can be made by calling or emailing Rob Hott, IDA Director of Development at 410-296-0232 x402 or rhott@interdys.org

You also can help promote the Multisensory Research Grant Program among the research community, steering interested parties to the guidelines on IDA's website: www.interdys.org. (Note: the grant program will not fund studies that investigate multisensory components of a particular program or approach, commercial or otherwise.)

Plenty of challenges lie ahead. Time, effort, and additional funding are needed to attract a pool of quality proposals that target the central research question of this grant program. Also, we are subjecting our beliefs and practices to the dispassionate lens of scientific scrutiny. This final quote from Sagan captures why we should embrace these challenges.

*We make our world significant by the courage of our questions
and by the depth of our answers.*

Kudos to IDA and the funding coalition for their vision and courage in taking the steps to launch IDA's Multisensory Research Grant Program!

Multisensory Research Funding Coalition

Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners & Educators
Alliance for Accreditation and Certification
ASHA
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Camperdown Academy
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