

Build on Best Practices in Teaching Reading

Ask Questions Before Any Program Adoption

A red flag should go up whenever you hear “research-based.” Watch out for language and exaggerated claims like “innovative research-based program,” “accelerates learning,” “failure free.” Make sure the claims and evidence are credible and valid. Respected researcher Richard Allington cautions us to be on the lookout for research that is unsupported by the claims being made for it:

In other words, virtually every proponent of any method, material, or program can find some sort of evidence that what they have to offer works somewhere, some of the time. By selectively reviewing the evidence, by creating magazines to publish your own supportive data (because no peer-reviewed journal would accept it as unbiased), and by controlling the design of the evaluation and the implementation of your favorite method, material, or program, almost anyone can create the impression that “research shows” positive effects for their product or pedagogy.

There are some big questions about research to ask *before* you change your practices or support a new program.

Is the research relevant for my students?

Find out whom the test population includes. Have low-performing students been excluded? Is the student retention rate high, artificially raising scores because students are older? For example, the phonics studies in the National Reading Panel report are based on studies of children in kindergarten or grade 1 at risk for developing reading problems, low-achieving readers, and older disabled readers. However, the results were generalized to include normally achieving and high-achieving readers. Generalizing research across populations not examined is not permissible.

Always ask, “What assessments were used, and what were they designed to measure?” And, “Are these results relevant for my instructional program and students?” As a knowledgeable professional, resist subscribing to a program for all your students based on results that apply only to a small group. We need to remain skeptical until we are solidly convinced that the research claims are, in fact, valid and applicable to our students and teaching contexts.

Who are the researchers?

Do the researchers or those interpreting the research fairly represent the audience for which the research is intended? Keep in mind that teachers and teacher research are routinely bypassed and ignored. For example, the National Reading Panel included no teachers from the

elementary grades (and only one teacher of reading—from middle school—and one principal). Most of the panel members were scientists and educational psychologists, who chose to consider only empirical research based on a medical model and control groups. No doubt their backgrounds led them to emphasize phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency as these are easy to quantify.

Had the panel had a fair representation of teachers, the research considered would also have included descriptive, classroom-based data relative to topics teachers deem important (those listed on the chart on page 190, for example). That would have greatly altered the results and recommendations for teaching practice and changed the message disseminated by the media.

Do the researchers or interpreters of research fairly and broadly represent the evidence available? Are the questions being posed significant ones? Has all the research on a subject been considered? If qualitative research or case studies using rich descriptions of complex behavior and interaction exist, have they been included in an effort to examine all facets of a question? If only quantitative studies using a medical model are considered, then important information has been excluded.

The NRP reportedly considered only scientifically based (quantitative) research, as I've already mentioned. The same problem exists with the influential 1998 report *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. That report, for example, examines research cited in several hundred journal articles, less than 5 percent of them published in journals teachers rely on, such as *The Reading Teacher* and *Educational Leadership*. The journals and other resources cited are primarily medical, scientific, and special education—*Journal of Educational Psychology* and *Journal of Memory and Language*, for example. Also of note, of the nineteen PRD panel members, only one was a classroom teacher. (Current talk heard coming from the Department of Education stresses local control and the value of teachers, but these teachers are often excluded from policy-making projects like PRD and NRP.)

How current is the data researchers are relying on?

Some direct instruction programs rely on outdated research to make current claims for success.

What views do the researchers hold? Can they be objective?

While we want to believe researchers and interpreters of research are free from bias, all of us, if we're not vigilante, can be guilty of only seeing what you're looking for. That is why independent evaluations are so critical—peer reviews by respected researchers with no possible personal or financial gain, published in reputable journals such as *Reading Research Quarterly* and *Educational Researcher*, not the program developer's in-house newsletter.

Whether the researchers stand to profit from the program's success is a critical question. Sometimes the researchers or those paying for the study are the very people who created the program or who analyze the results or write the conclusions. If that is the case, objectivity is not possible.

Research can be twisted to support particular views. As an example of such bias, note how two prominent educators are quoted in an article in *The New York Times* entitled "Voucher Study Indicates No Steady Gains in Learning." Jeanne Allen, director of the Center for Education Reform, a group that supports vouchers, says, "The report appeared to confirm some positive effects in certain instances." Jack Jennings, director of the Washington-based Center on Education Policy, a group that opposes vouchers, says, "No substantial body of research shows a significant benefit for student achievement." We often

explain findings based on the worldviews we already hold. Keep this bias in mind when reading research findings such as those reported by developers of commercial programs or members of the National Reading Panel.

Is the evidence compelling? Does it fit with what we already know?

In order to be considered truly “scientific,” the evidence from a study must be so convincing that someone with an open mind would be persuaded to reconsider his views. This is perhaps most important to us as teachers. We need not abandon our common sense, lose our confidence, and change our practices based on the latest study when that research contradicts what we solidly know from our teaching experiences.

For example, because of the findings of the NRP report, many kindergarten teachers who have successfully integrated phonemic awareness into their rich literacy program now believe they must treat phonemic awareness as a discrete skill. There is no compelling evidence that systematic training in phonemic awareness or any other narrow skills makes students better readers and increases their comprehension in the long run. In the short run, students get better on the discrete skills we teach them but do not necessarily transfer these skills to reading.

What are the long-term results?

It is not unusual, especially when discrete skills are being measured in isolation, to have impressive short-term reading gains that do not hold up over time. Be sure to ask questions like, “What are the effects of early intervention on later, fifth-grade, reading achievement?”

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE ADOPTING A WRITING PROGRAM

- What's the research base? How current is the data?
- Who are the authors of the research? (Make sure they're not the program developers.)
- Is the research relevant for your students?
- Is the evidence compelling?
- Have districts that have used this program seen increased writing competency in everyday writing? on high-stakes tests?
- How is writing taught with this program?
- Does the program develop teacher expertise for teaching writing?
- Is the required time and management for program implementation realistic?

Writing Essentials by Regie Routman (Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH); © 2005