

The Research That We Need

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Over the past 50 years or more there have been a plethora of studies of instructional innovation that were theoretically-derived, technically sound in design, implemented with a high degree of fidelity and control of instructional innovations, and reported in top notch peer reviewed educational research journals that have produced, in some cases, phenomenal results in terms of student learning and engagement. Yet despite these remarkable findings, student achievement levels in the United States have hardly budged. Take for example Reading First, President George W. Bush's reading initiative that was supposed to raise reading achievement of third grade students in the United States. Reading First was based on state of the art knowledge of effective reading instruction as reported by the National Reading Panel. The results of Reading First were hardly encouraging. Reading achievement among American students has largely been stagnant over the past twenty years. Reading First produced no statistically noticeable effects on reading achievement when compared with non-Reading First schools. How can this be?

There are, of course, many reasons that may be offered for the lack of a positive effect for Reading First or other instructional programs "proven" to work through empirical studies. I am of the opinion that one of the reasons for this ineffectiveness of proven research is that the studies often take place in instructional environments that do not reflect the realities of real classrooms. I have often heard from teachers and school principals who have been mandated to implement the latest "new thing" in literacy instruction. They are instructed to use the program precisely as prescribed by the author(s) of the program and in some cases have been observed and evaluated in terms of their fidelity of implementation. Despite such implementation I rarely hear of the ground-breaking results that were reported in the scientific research journals. When the research-based instruction does not manifest the external validity (Stanovich & Stanovich, 2003) that is as important as the internal validity that is demanded of traditional scientific research the results are likely to be disappointing. The original research does not resemble the real day-to-day lives of teachers and students; and so when that research is implemented in environments that do not resemble the environment in which the research was conducted the results will likely not be the same as the original research and usually disappointing.

In addition to the scientific top-down instructional research that we regard so highly in our field, we need use-inspired research that comes from the grass-roots, research that is theoretically sound, but adapted by real teachers and principals for real classrooms. Indeed, nearly all of the research I do nowadays is in collaboration with real teachers and principals. Interestingly, because this research often lacks the qualities (e.g. internal validity, control groups, etc.) demanded of the top tier research journals it is often rejected when submitted for publication consideration. This is why I am so excited by the birth of the Journal of Teacher Action Research, a journal of research by and for teachers, principals, and children. This journal will give teachers (often in collaboration with instructional scientists and scholars) the opportunity to tell their own stories of effective instruction. The research will be rooted in the real lives of teachers and students. I applaud the originators of JTAR for their willingness to give teachers respect and a respected voice in the development of education to provide more effective instruction for students.

REFERENCES

Stanovich, P., & Stanovich, K. E. (2003). *Using research and reason in education: How teachers can use scientifically based research to make curricular and instructional decisions*. Washington, DC: U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services.

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Dr. Timothy Rasinski is a professor of literacy education in the Department of Teaching, Leadership, and Curriculum Studies. Dr. Rasinski teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in literacy education. His major interests include working with children who find reading difficult, phonics and reading fluency instruction, and teacher development in literacy education. He has published over 200 articles and 20 books on various aspects of reading education. A past editor of *The Reading Teacher*, the most widely read journal in reading education in the world, Dr. Rasinski has also served as editor for the Journal of Literacy Research. Rasinski has served as president of the College Reading Association as well as on the Board of Directors of the International Reading Association. Dr. Rasinski was elected to the International Reading Hall of Fame in 2010.