

Understanding Literacy Research

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Nell Duke (Michigan State University) and Nicole Martin (University of North Carolina/Greensboro) take note of the way the phrases “research-based”, “research-proven”, and “scientifically based” have been misused in recent years. “In fact,” they say, “we are encountering a growing number of literacy educators who are dismissing research altogether, based on the belief that research is simply a propaganda tool for those trying to push a particular approach to reading and writing instruction.”

But research can be a valuable tool, say Duke and Martin, provided that we understand it well. Here are their guidelines:

- *What research can do* – It can help us avoid acting on beliefs that our gut tells us are correct but are not the best ways to teach children (for example, that looking up words in the dictionary and copying the definitions is a good way to learn vocabulary). Research can also help us identify blind spots – sometimes we don’t know what we don’t know (for example, for years, elementary reading texts were overwhelmingly comprised of stories, neglecting informational texts). In addition, research can show us long-term trends, take us to far-off places, and fill in gaps in our knowledge about students with rare disorders.

- *What research is* – It’s the systematic collection and analysis of data to address a question and improve teaching and learning. Researchers have the same aims as classroom teachers, but communication between the two worlds is rare. That’s because research follows specific protocols: a statement of the research question and/or purpose; a rationale for the study; a description of the methods used to collect data and address the question; a description of the methods used to analyze the data; results of the analysis; conclusions; implications; limitations of the study; directions for future research. Duke and Martin believe that the often-used terms *scientific research* and *scientifically based research* are redundant: all good research is scientific, they say.

- *What research is not* – Just because an article is written by a researcher or a university professor, or published in a research journal, doesn’t mean it’s research, and just because a program or practice is endorsed by a researcher doesn’t make it research-based.

- *The difference between research-based and research-tested* – Research-tested means that one or more studies have tested the impact of a product or practice; research-based means the product or practice has been designed to be consistent with research findings, but it hasn’t been tested yet. When we hear these terms, we need to ask some skeptical questions: What exactly did the research test? What did the research find? Did the research test the practice, approach, or product against something else, and if so, what? What were the samples? How many studies were conducted?

- *Many kinds of research can help improve teaching and learning.* Duke and Martin don’t think randomized, controlled trials are the “gold standard” for educational research. “We believe that this way of thinking is mistaken and misleading,” they say. “Instead, many kinds of research

have valuable contributions to make” – including studies of the reliability and validity of an assessment, surveys on the motivation of students, and the study of a single struggling reader over a period of years. “The educational enterprise is far too complex for one type of research to answer all of our questions or meet all of our needs,” they say.

- *Different kinds of research are good for different questions.* The type of research design depends on the research question being addressed.

- *High-quality research has a logic of inquiry* – In other words, the value of research depends on the research question – for example, what do highly effective literacy teachers do during small-group reading instruction? – the research design, and conclusions that flow from the data.

- *Conclusions drawn from research are only as sound as the research itself.*

“Conclusions based on a seriously flawed study may be seriously flawed,” say the authors.

- *Where and how research is published or presented is vital.* Articles in *The Reading Teacher*, for example, don’t go into depth on methodology, while peer-reviewed articles in *Reading Research Quarterly* don’t spend as much time on implementation details. In addition, eloquent writing isn’t always correlated with the quality of the research.

- *Educational research is a slow accumulation of knowledge.* We should be cautious about basing policy or practice on one study, no matter how good. We should look for what the research says over time.

“10 Things Every Literacy Educator Should Know About Research” by Nell Duke and Nicole Martin in *The Reading Teacher*, September 2011 (Vol. 65, #1, p. 9-22), no free e-link; the authors can be reached at nkduke@msu.edu and nmartin779@gmail.com.